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so might some persons bet on which castaway will be eliminated at the next Tribal Council. As both of these events progress, the number of unresolved possibilities decreases and becomes manageable. Both *Survivor* and the NCAA have a Final Four, the basketball variant admitting $2^3 = 8$ possible outcomes, and the *Survivor* variant admitting $4! = 24$ possible outcomes.

17. In the *Survivor* board game, players roll a die, draw cards, answer trivia questions, and solve puzzles. Curiously, the game does not involve negotiations between players, as in Monopoly. Both Monopoly and the *Survivor* show emphasize negotiating strategies, and both involve strategic concepts like immunity and alliances. Trading in immunity and forming partnerships are strategies suggested by Jay Walker and Jeff Lehman, *One Thousand Ways to Win Monopoly Games* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1975).

18. Burnett, *Survivor II*, 13.

19. "Play Along Pool" insert, in Burnett, *Survivor II*.

20. Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 136.

21. Butler, *Television*, 64; Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 11; and Burnett, *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 204–5.

22. Burnett, *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 78.

23. *Ibid.*, 45; and Burnett, *Survivor II*, 74–85, 120–30.

24. "A Listing of L.A.'s Biggest Players in Reality TV Game," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, 11 September 2000, 37; and Burnett, *Survivor II*, 28. For clips from the interviews, see the *Survivor* DVD.

25. Butler, *Television*, 83, 66.

26. Burnett, *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 183–84.

27. Commentary by Burnett and Probst, *Survivor: Inside the Phenomenon*. See also Burnett, "Day Thirty-Four," in *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 197–202. *Survivor* has seen an increasing commercialization of the rewards that undercuts the constructed reality of the show. The challenges were far more compelling (that is, the dramality was more intense) when the castaways competed for the pleasure of a piece of fruit than for branded vacations and SUVs.

28. Burnett, *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 109. For a description of Greg's relationship with other tribe members, see especially 50, 113.

29. *Ibid.*, 50–51, 57.

30. Burnett, *Dare to Succeed*, 151.

31. Burnett, *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 53–54, 57, and *Dare to Succeed*, 152; and commentary by Probst, *Survivor: Inside the Phenomenon*.

32. Burnett, *Dare to Succeed*, 154–55.

33. Burnett, *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 14, *Dare to Succeed*, 185, and *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 54.

34. Burnett, *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 208, 79.

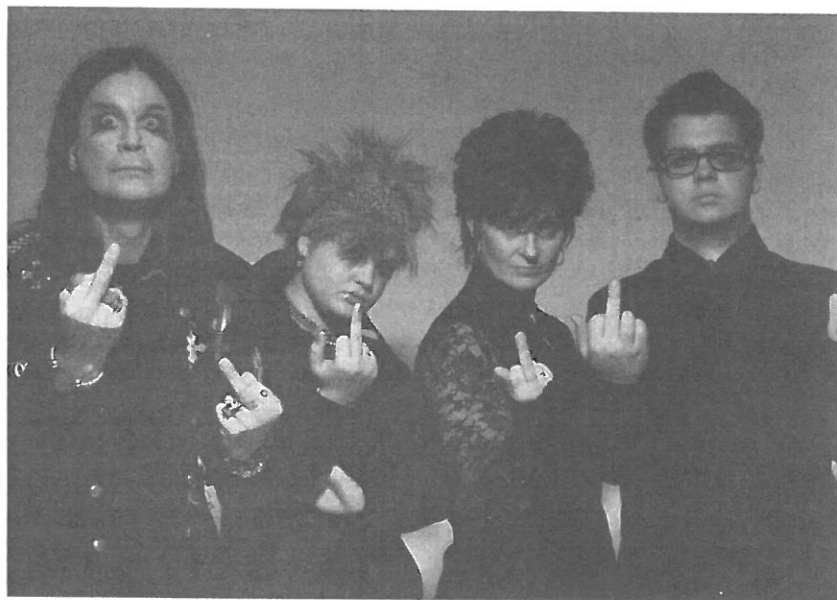
35. *Ibid.*, 179.

Extraordinarily Ordinary The Osbournes as "An American Family"

Derek Kompare

On 5 March 2002, on MTV, a voice-over invited us to "meet the perfect American family." A teenage girl is seen throwing a ball at her brother's crotch; their mother tells the camera that she's not Mother Theresa, and then tells the children to "shut the fuck up and go to bed." We see "the son" making annoying noises, and "the daughter" dismissing other people's opinions about her hair. Finally, we're introduced to "the dad," who screams "rock and roll!" at the camera, and is shown in a quick montage of onstage and offstage behavior: gyrating onstage, getting out of airplanes, watching TV, walking the dog. The opening sequence ends with a shirtless dad telling his family, "I love you all . . . I love you more than life itself . . . but you're all fucking mad!"

Welcome to the Osbourne family, the "perfect American family" of MTV's *The Osbournes*. Dad (Ozzy) is a veteran heavy metal rocker in rehabilitation from years of excess; Mom (Sharon) is his longtime wife/manager and the unyielding household authority; Son (Jack) is an "oddball" at school and plays with knives; Daughter (Kelly) throws fits, teases her colorful hair, and strategizes about staying out past curfew without getting caught. Even in an age of constant media hype, the enormous notoriety of *The Osbournes* in spring 2002 was surprising. By its fifth episode, it was MTV's all-time highest-rated regular series, capturing more than six million viewers weekly—numbers that the long-running reality pioneer *The Real World* had never attained. Moreover, the Osbournes' fame spread well beyond MTV as the series and family were the subjects of numerous articles, analyses, and interviews in the media throughout spring 2002.¹ While



The unconventional Osbourne family star in the first reality sitcom.

such coverage is not unprecedented for television families, it had been almost thirty years since a TV series centering on an *actual* family garnered this much attention in the mainstream media. The 1973 PBS documentary series *An American Family* featured the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, who were subject to similar media and viewer interest as nearly a year of their lives unfolded in thirteen television episodes. Like the Osbournes, the Louds were featured on magazine covers and talk shows, quoted in reviews, and satirized in cartoons. As the title of their series indicated, they became an emblem for the “American family” of the early 1970s.

Both *An American Family* and *The Osbournes* were media phenomena. That is, they were idiosyncratic texts that commanded a sudden, high degree of attention during their initial runs, prompting discussions about family and television throughout the media and society. Although markedly “different” from regular television fare, however, both series still had to engage with established normative codes of genre and family in order to succeed. The operation of these normative codes reveals how much power they still hold, and how they are shrewdly used by newer techniques and approaches as a foundation of meanings from which to

construct new texts. In tracing these familiar codes in these otherwise unique texts, we can understand how the categories of the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” are deployed in the pursuit of textual coherence and cultural significance.

While *An American Family* and *The Osbournes* are similar in many respects, they also have crucial differences. Foremost among these is the fact that the scandalous reaction to *An American Family* in 1973 did not materialize in regard to *The Osbournes* in 2002. In the early 1970s, *An American Family* was considered primarily as a manipulative sociological experiment in perpetual surveillance. The Louds themselves were generally seen by critics as either ciphers (i.e., symbols of the fallout of the 1960s), or, conversely, the victims of unscrupulous producers.² By contrast, in the media-saturated early 2000s, *The Osbournes* is hailed as a pinnacle of innovative television comedy, and the Osbourne family is celebrated for their hip parenting and let-it-all-hang-out media savvy.³ The shifting mores of U.S. family life may explain part of this perception, but the changing parameters of media representation constitute a more decisive factor. That is, the question of how to represent a “real family” on television is answered quite differently in the 2000s than it was in the 1970s, as the normative boundaries of TV programming—particularly concerning the representation of “actualities”: actual people and events—have changed considerably in the intervening years.

The very concept of a real television family points squarely to questions of “genre” and “family.” Each category establishes limits within which programs, and depictions in general, must adhere to, or at least acknowledge, in order to succeed. Both *An American Family* and *The Osbournes* were conspicuously situated on the boundary between actuality and fiction, drawing established generic codes of reality from the former, and narrative and characterization from the latter. Each was widely touted as being the first of its particular hybrid genre: the “documentary soap opera” in the case of *An American Family*, and the “reality sitcom” for *The Osbournes*.⁴ In both instances, a joint claim to reality and narration was made, promising an explicit as well as engrossing experience. Both series also purported to represent the family. The family has arguably been the primary normative concept governing human interaction since the beginning of recorded history, and its media representations have always been a matter of contention.⁵ This has particularly been the case on television, perhaps the media form most suited to promoting and representing familial experience due to its domestic nature. Regardless of whether they are

fictional or real, television families are sites of cultural anxieties, where the work of social cohesion is ritually enacted.⁶ Despite differences between the series and in the families themselves, the Louds and Osbournes both performed the role of family on the national stage of television. It is important to note, however, that while the Louds achieved fame by becoming a TV family, the Osbournes had already gained some celebrity, via patriarch Ozzy's notorious career as a heavy metal performer.⁷ Ozzy Osbourne is colloquially known as "the prince of darkness" for his theatrical performances—conveying standard heavy metal themes of gothic horror and, on occasion, biting the heads off of live animals—and lifestyle, which has included the requisite rock star litany of outrageous behavior and substance abuse. His famous physical and emotional excesses formed the basis for the representation of his family on television. Unlike the Louds, who were meant to represent an "every family" whose surface contentment hides emotional distance, the Osbournes were promoted as a specific "anti-family" whose visible eccentricities hid a reservoir of intimacy and affection. In keeping with turn-of-the-century reality TV codes, which center on the display of ignominious bodies, the Osbournes themselves literally embody this dichotomy of ordinary and extraordinary codes.

In this chapter, I will explore how normative discourses of television genre and family shaped both *An American Family* and *The Osbournes*. I will first trace how the terms "genre" and "family" are linked through television, and how each has been used to shape the medium's normative codes. Next, I will examine the representation of actuality on television and describe how codes of "documentary" have largely ceded to "reality" via a concentration on what I call "ignominious bodies." I will then focus more directly on *The Osbournes* itself, where these normative categories of genre and family are enacted largely through the Osbournes' bodies. In the end, the success of *The Osbournes* indicates how contemporary reality TV, no matter how innovative, relies on established normative discourses.

Genre and Family

Both *The Osbournes* and *An American Family* were premised on an awareness of the categories of genre and family. That is, their representations of "real" families were informed by established television and cinematic genres along with a self-conscious sense of normative family life. Genre and

family are normative concepts that describe limited categories: a text or social grouping is only considered as an example of a particular genre or family if it meets certain expectations. While these expectations change over time and under various circumstances, the normative structure itself is constant. For instance, while there may be new or alternative conceptions of family (say, involving extended kinship, single parents, relationships of choice, and so forth), these are still separated from groupings that are somehow *not* family. Similarly, creators, users, and critics construct discursive boundaries between certain cultural artifacts organizing them into genres. While an artifact may represent multiple genres, it must also *not* represent others; otherwise the distinctions are meaningless.

Thus, the terms genre and family, while ultimately arbitrary, remain important across time, regardless of what they may describe in specific instances. Rick Altman refers to this temporal function of genre as "pseudo-memorial": "When trying to bring together spectators who actually share less and less, what better meeting place than the common past provided by genre itself?"⁸ That is, genre itself functions largely as a space of continuity, where particular texts are placed in a common history. The category of family has functioned in a similar manner, persisting for millennia despite frequent social challenges. The two terms come together in media representations, where representations of family must adhere to particular generic codes. In turn, this genre of family circulates normative representations—that is, models—for real individuals and families to identify with and (ostensibly) emulate.

This process has been fundamental to television, where ideals of both genre and family have systematically organized representations, programs, and audiences for decades. Television genres delimit narrative and representational parameters, facilitating audience (including advertiser) expectations. Programs have adhered to these boundaries, with few exceptions, throughout the history of TV.⁹ Similarly, an entrenched conception of the nuclear family continues to structure television's representational, generic, and financial economy: characters and situations are generally rendered in familial terms; channels, times, and programs are geared toward particular members of the family; and individuals and subgroups within the family are sought by advertisers as potential consumers. There are family channels, family programs, and family hours; soap opera families, sitcom families, and even TV news families. As Ella Taylor remarks in her introduction to *Prime-Time Families*, "[Television] is watched by a vast number of people in their homes; its advertising is geared to both the parts and the whole

of the family unit; its images, in both news and entertainment, are stamped with the familial."¹⁰

Thus, genre and family are not mere descriptive concepts; they have a normative function, and are conceived of and applied as social ideals on television and in other forms of media. While the question of whether they actually function as social ideals remains one of intense scrutiny, the *presumption* that they do governs most of the expectations of the medium. Television representations have always had to hold close to these established parameters in order to maintain these expectations.

The normative parameters of genre and family affected the conception, production, promotion, and reception of both *An American Family* and *The Osbournes*. Although both series dealt with real families, they had to engage with the dominant conceptions of genre and family so as to make the broadcast schedule, let alone reach an audience. Yet there have been few available models for representing "real" families on television. Daytime talk shows and prime-time newsmagazines have regularly focused on the travails of families for almost two decades, but the families on these programs have functioned as ciphers for the voyeuristic and therapeutic purposes of these genres. The polarized thematic range of these shows, tending toward the "tragic" in prime time (for example, diseased or injured family members) and the "excessive" in daytime (such as cheating spouses), has exacerbated this anonymity. In addition, these are only "one-off" families, forgotten as soon as the program has ended.¹¹ In the twenty-nine years between *An American Family* and *The Osbournes*, only a handful of prime-time documentary series—most on PBS—have explored the idea of family on a more extended basis. Although these programs all examined multiple families, thus diluting the effect of following one family for a sustained period, they still broadened the repertoire of representational codes for the family genre on television, and certainly informed the style of *The Osbournes*.¹²

Regardless, in the dominant discourses of TV, fictional families like the Cleavers, Bradys, Huxtables, and Simpsons have defined the television family. The normative television family is thus a fully *scripted* set of generic expectations. While these expectations have shaped fictional representations, they have also had an effect on representations of actual families.¹³ When the families in question are real, though, an additional set of normative expectations, based around the representation of actual people and events, also shapes the text and its reception.

Documentary and Reality

In *An American Family* and *The Osbournes*, discourses of genre and family are complicated by the fact that each series purports to capture not *normality*—the purview of fictional TV families—but *reality*—life as it "is." Over the past century, documentary has been the dominant cinematic genre of reality or, more accurately, "actuality": people, objects, and events from real life, not as it should be but, ostensibly, how it is.¹⁴ As John Corner has recently argued, however, documentary is now "unhelpful" in accounting for the style and sociological impact of contemporary reality TV. "Documentary" carries "too many assumptions . . . and idealizations," according to Corner, and he suggests a return to an older concept: "documentation."¹⁵ A broader practice, documentation entails the cataloging of documents—that is, productions of coded reality such as performances, writings, and recordings—and not necessarily an explicit rhetoric. While documentary has traditionally claimed to produce truth(s) about its subjects, documentation instead displays examples of actuality; the former functions explicitly as an *argument*, and the latter primarily as an *exhibition*.¹⁶

Documentation also allows for broader uses of cinematic actuality. Corner observes that whereas traditional documentary has followed the modernist truth-seeking functions of civic publicity, journalistic inquiry, and/or alternative exploration, it has historically not given much consideration for what he calls "diversion": the use of actuality for the production of entertainment rather than the pursuit of truth.¹⁷ Yet as the familiar codes of actuality from documentary film and television are now not only normative but clichéd—"reality should look and sound like *this*"—they are now regularly enlisted in support of entertainment, rather than for the more austere practices of edification that the word documentary typically conjures up. Accordingly, "documentary," in quotation marks, has become another style to emulate, rather than only a set of practices between producer and subject. Actualities are now regularly used in the "realist" genres of comedy, drama, and melodrama; have been used to bolster more "fantastic" genres like science fiction and horror; and are essential to pornography. A new term is therefore needed to distinguish both the documentaries of the past and the broader uses of actualities today. The contemporary term, appropriately enough, is reality. As a major weapon in the

pursuit of audience share, the current explosion of reality TV *depicts*, rather than *explains*, placing a premium on diversion over education. It dwells on the spectacle of the world for its own sake or in the service of narrative, rather than as proof of an extracinematic truth. Still, this does not necessarily negate the value of any particular reality text, nor of the endeavor of documentary in the traditional sense; I do not wish to revive the hoary argument that pits entertainment against education, as if the terms are mutually exclusive. Instead, I agree with Corner, who suggests that "documentary will need strategically to redevelop itself within the new economic and cultural contexts for engaging the popular audience, with an acknowledgment of the pattern of tastes that are newly established."¹⁸

Although Corner is concerned with this transformation in television (from "documentary" to "reality"), which commenced in the late 1980s in conjunction with the shifting economics and technologies of media, the same generic issue also applied to *An American Family*, produced years earlier. As Jeffrey Ruoff contends in his retrospective on the series, the narrative structure, cinematic style, and promotional strategy of *An American Family* indicate how the documentary ideals of the filmmakers—and to an extent, even of the Louds themselves—were adjusted throughout the project to more closely adhere to the generic standards of television *drama*, and more specifically soap opera, rather than documentary.¹⁹ For example, the opening sequence of the series ended with the title literally exploding, suggesting at the very beginning that the titular family was going to go through traumatic, maybe even fatal events during the series.²⁰

Fictional and nonfictional codes were blurred in both *An American Family* and *The Osbournes* because of similar concerns about genre and audience expectations. Both series contained as many generic elements from classical Hollywood as from classical documentary: the construction of real people as identifiable characters; the sequencing of events into clear, causal narratives; and the use of visual and aural "stings" to punctuate actions and dialogue. They each had a narrow range of codes to draw from as expectations were limited, on the one side, by fictional television families, and on the other, by the established genres of documentary and reality, respectively. While *An American Family* initially signaled a defiance of these limits, striking out against conventional fictional depictions of family life, it ultimately foundered, imploding under the weight of expectations (and even accusations) and achieving a kind of infamy in television history. Conversely, *The Osbournes* has thus far (at least as of this

writing) succeeded in an environment in which "reality entertainment" thrives. The primary reason for its success is its embrace of the normative expectations of genre and family—the opposite of the strategy attempted by *An American Family*—and the primary vehicles for its expression are the bodies of the Osbournes themselves.

The Display of Ignominious Bodies

With an explicit goal of diversion, the reality TV of the 1990s and 2000s has utilized actualities differently than the documentary television of the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas *An American Family* proceeded from a concern with the "hidden truth" of its subjects, and attempted to reveal the "extraordinary" tensions beneath a veneer of "ordinariness," *The Osbournes* playfully depicts the very ordinariness of its otherwise extraordinary subjects. *An American Family* juxtaposes an archetypal family (for example, the middle-class dream of a comfortable southern California lifestyle) with representations of "deviant" behavior (son Lance's homosexuality, say, or the divorce) in pursuit of melodrama; *The Osbournes* contrasts a backdrop of "deviant" behavior (cursing or ostentation, to cite two) with displays of archetypal familial bonding (for instance, Ozzy's surprise birthday party) in the service of comedy.

As Ruoff describes it, the point of *An American Family* was to peek behind the screen of conformity, to get at "the truth" of the typical U.S. family.²¹ Producer Craig Gilbert wanted to examine how family life had changed in the 1960s. His background in news production and observational documentary technique, particularly the style of Drew Associates, furnished a sociological dimension to the project that led to its financing and distribution by PBS.²² Despite the ostensible pursuit of the truth, however, the producers stacked the deck in their choice of the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, as "an American family." According to Ruoff, Gilbert deliberately sought a family that resembled the normative ideal as presented in 1950s and 1960s sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* and *The Donna Reed Show*.²³ Similarly, the chosen family's class status, southern California location, and simmering discontent were all inspired from preconceived ideals drawn largely from fiction.²⁴ Thus, to a great degree, the Louds were mere players in a preconceived scenario. Despite the project's documentary pedigree, the calculated casting and use of the Louds is similar to current practices in reality TV. The major difference today is that

with a premium placed on entertainment, the reality genre has shifted even more toward self-conscious performance (that is, exhibition) rather than the revelation of "natural behavior."

The prevailing purpose of reality TV today, particularly on MTV, is to revel in public displays of ignominy, where actualities are used precisely for their violations of generic norms. Ignominy entails public shame or humiliation, and though this applies to the subjects of these programs, I believe it applies more directly to the genre and its viewers. That is, viewers should perceive these generic violations; a reaction of "you can't do that on television" is the goal of producers and participants.²⁵ Participants on these programs are regularly shown in various states of ignominy: exhausted, enraged, depressed, careless, undressed, asleep, inebriated, and sick. Indeed, MTV series like *The Real World*, *Road Rules*, and *Jackass* are premised on directly placing their subjects in potentially humiliating or even physically dangerous situations.²⁶ Reality in each series is conveyed as a series of explicit encounters between people, or between people and circumstances, generating an engrossing spectacle of actions and reactions. Importantly, while the people and events on these programs need to be demonstrably real—not acting—to satisfy generic requirements, they are cast and planned as carefully as in any fiction: the effect of the actualities is amplified if the subjects are more "telegenic"—closer to normative codes of televisual appearance and behavior.²⁷ Both the casting and limited scope of events allow for what might be called "maximum control of conditions of spontaneity": narrowing the likely range of actions to those with the greatest visual and/or narrative impact.

At the time of its original broadcast, the "invasion" of the private realm of the Loud family home in *An American Family* was perceived as scandalous. Indeed, the presumed manipulation of the family by the producers became the most contentious issue of public discussion, even more than the depicted actions of the family members themselves. By the time *The Osbournes* was produced, there was little left of the private realm that had not been made public, in a wide variety of media forms. The thrill and ignominy of reality TV is based around the notion that while privacy is still the norm, it can pleasurably be violated by voyeurism and exhibitionism, as people clamor to see and show "it all." This is a major shift in the representation of reality from the era of *An American Family*. While the Louds' typicality—though not their onscreen behavior—was to a significant extent a setup, it was at least *presented* as a genuine encounter with a real family. Conversely, no 2000s reality program makes a similar claim, as

they are premised more on what Joel Black calls "reality effects" rather than an exploration of a "deeper" truth.²⁸ Media representation per se has become the so-called truth of contemporary genres of actuality, and ignominy is the most efficient means to attain it. It is crucial to note that while the observational technique of *An American Family* was the subject of scorn and ridicule throughout the 1970s, it has since become a standard style of reality TV and, in the form of Internet webcams and titillating videos like the *Backyard Wrestling* and *Girls Gone Wild* series, throughout society.²⁹

Accordingly, just as the crew of *An American Family* was largely drawn from and shaped by the cutting-edge documentaries of its time, *The Osbournes'* production team has worked on the most prominent reality TV programs of the late 1990s and early 2000s, including *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and *The Chris Rock Show*. Their professional experiences include not only the production of reality TV—and the now-codified ignominious bodies—but also the more specific use of the codes of reality for comedy.³⁰

"The First Reality Sitcom"

The normative range of television content has expanded in recent years, as long-standing broadcast taboos against coarse language, nudity, violence, and bodily functions have been eroded in the pursuit of young, affluent audiences. This process has been accelerated by the enormous critical and popular successes of pay-cable programs like HBO's *Sex and the City* and *The Sopranos*, which have flouted old content limits.³¹ While this trend has fueled the creation of new genres (such as reality TV itself), it has more profoundly affected established genres, which have had to adjust their traditional content with these broader limits in mind. Over the past decade, "old" genres have adapted to these demands and have shifted the level of their content while maintaining their basic generic codes. Given this, *The Osbournes*, in all its excessive glory, is more a *generic* product of its times than *An American Family* was of its era. *The Osbournes* was conceived of with these new limits in mind, coupled with MTV's simultaneous necessity for innovation. MTV has gone from strength to strength since the late 1990s by keeping its series fresh, overplaying an idea in the short term rather than extending it into the future. The network requires programming that appeals to the current exhibitionist sensibility, but also takes a new approach, or in the case of its most successful programs, provides a

new take on an old approach. Accordingly, a “real” situation comedy about an aging rocker and his unruly family seemed a likely fit for their needs.

The Osbournes first appeared on a popular 2000 segment of *Cribs*, a series that features celebrities showing off their homes. The segment augured the potential of an extended visit to the Osbourne mansion, which the family was willing to accommodate in exchange for the publicity they might accrue if the series were successful. As recorded in late 2001, audio and video material culled from over a dozen cameras and microphones merged the now-familiar “roving” observational technique pioneered on *An American Family* with a bank of stationary surveillance equipment located throughout the house.³² With a wide selection of material at their disposal and a relatively lengthy postproduction period (by reality TV standards), the producers were able to structure the episodes using familiar generic codes: problems are introduced, conflicts play out, and the end of the episode reaches a mild resolution. As such, MTV explicitly promoted *The Osbournes* as a sitcom. Brian Graden, the programming chief, appeared on *CNN Live Today* on the date of the premiere and claimed the series to be “the world’s first reality sitcom because, like a sitcom, you have outrageous characters, very, very funny moments, and . . . the love between the cast members nonetheless.”³³ Thus, both genre and family—via the sitcom—were identified up front as the key attributes of the new series.

The hook of *The Osbournes* is the fact that despite their apparent excesses of wealth and behavior, the family somehow still functions as a normative, loving unit. The primary generic marker of both excess and normativity on *The Osbournes* is the family’s conspicuous, unrepentant physicality. As explicitly documented in the series, the Osbournes—including their many pets—hug, kiss, wrestle, eat, drink, scratch, fart, burp, piss, and shit. They ruminate about vaginas, scrotums, and breasts, and deal with dog turds left on the carpet. They reveal their bodies in various states of dress and decorum. They yell at their neighbors, shout at each other, and most famously, say “fuck” more often than Tony Soprano. Theirs is a world of explicit bodily sights, sounds, smells, and sensations.

Though we are shown the Osbournes in this explicit, “real” detail, however, the series still functions predominantly as a family sitcom, drawing heavily from well-worn generic codes. The Osbournes are self-consciously represented in the vein of the Cleavers of *Leave It to Beaver*, the Bradys of *The Brady Bunch*, and the Nelsons of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*.³⁴ Their house is a divided space of public and private areas, presented as in any family sitcom. The problems encountered—difficult neighbors,

unruly pets, physical ailments, and an unwanted house guest—are clichéd sitcom staples and are conveyed in the standard stasis-disruption-resolution-stasis structure of TV narrative. Goofy musical bumpers even bridge scenes, as in any sitcom.

The series’ opening sequence reproduces the archetypal family sitcom opening, as seen in the series listed above. An establishing shot of the family’s Beverly Hills mansion leads to a series of tracking shots throughout the house, revealing the Osbourne mansion to be both ostentatious and comfortably domestic as recognizable domestic spaces (kitchen, living room, bedroom, backyard) open up to the camera. A series of framed family photos slides past, indicating a family history and reiterating normative expectations of the genre. Similarly, each family member is introduced in turn with an animated freeze-frame and their name in a “space age” font reminiscent of 1950s advertising. The poses of the family members in this sequence establish their personas as both typical and unique, engaged in quirky, yet recognizably “normal” behavior: mom Sharon is shown seated with her hands to her head, as if exasperated yet again; son Jack wears combat fatigues, a helmet, and a knife, suggesting the weird brother; daughter Kelly pokes her head out of a closet door and sticks out her tongue, all teenage sass; and finally, Ozzy himself is introduced (as “The Dad”) while taunting one of the family’s many dogs with a “barking dog” toy, every bit the supposed madman of his heavy metal persona. The sequence ends with a quick dolly up to the family posed on their front step and looking into the camera, as the title *The Osbournes* slides in. The theme song that runs under this sequence—a swing version of Ozzy’s signature hit, “Crazy Train” (1980), sung by former 1950s pop star and Osbourne neighbor Pat Boone—underscores this mix of the clichéd codes of family sitcom and heavy metal chaos.

Despite these conspicuous sitcom trappings, the Osbournes of 2002 are not quite the Nelsons of 1959; this gap is precisely the point of the series. Although prior sitcoms have played with the idea of family normality, the relaxing content limits and ascendancy of reality TV have enabled further exploration (and exploitation) of aesthetic and social norms.³⁵ As conveyed through the bodies and behaviors of its principals, *The Osbournes* stretches the familiar sitcom representational codes to their limits while still remaining within recognizable normative constructions of dad, mom, son, and daughter.

In this case, dad is a veteran rock star notorious for his long hair, theatrical persona, and substance abuse. Ozzy’s fifty-something body displays

the legacy of his excessive life, as he shuffles around the house shirtless, bearing a tattooed, middle-aged paunch and an uncontrollable tremor in his hands.³⁶ Jack is overweight, wears trendy black-frame glasses, and sports several piercings and a modified Mohawk haircut. Kelly wears an explosive mix of thrift-store and haute couture, regularly changes the color of her unruly hair, and periodically unleashes her rage on her brother. Sharon appears to be a normative suburban mom, with short, stylish hair, sweats, and running shoes. Her behavior, though, reveals that she is the de facto ringleader of the household, taking charge of most situations, her sharp, profanity-laced voice cutting through the noise. She is also arguably the most ignominious member of the family, as she burps, farts, handles her breasts, and in one of the series' most infamous moments, apparently urinates in a houseguest's illicit bottle of whiskey.³⁷ The fact that the mom is in many ways the most excessive member of a family full of excessive characters indicates how shrewdly the series (and family) exploits normative expectations.

Ozzy's already-established celebrity as a heavy metal legend formed the rationale for the show and certainly ensured media attention. Yet the point of *The Osbournes* is to distinguish the "real" Ozzy (and his family) from that already-established celebrity. Accordingly, the series pushes Ozzy's star persona to the background. While he is frequently seen in typical tour settings (buses, hotel rooms, dressing rooms, and the like) as well as at home, his actual performances are only glimpsed. Instead, we are constantly shown a "backstage" Ozzy, one closer to the established codes of sitcom representation: a wealthy, somewhat addled, middle-aged dad who just happens to be a rock star. As the series' biggest star and least-normative body, Ozzy is most often the subject of comic sequences as he struggles with new technology (a state-of-the-art home theater system), animals (the unruly Osbourne pets), and the rest of the family (trying to restore order during an argument), all the while mumbling and stuttering in a near-incomprehensible Birmingham brogue, and enduring the bodily tremors associated with his rehabilitation treatments.

Significantly, unlike every other member of the family, Ozzy's body is not just on display (as it has been for nearly thirty years); it is quite literally out of control, bearing the visible signs of a lifetime of substance abuse. While Ozzy's body, the very medium of his notoriety and the family fortune, is frequently the subject of easy laughs, it is also a symbol of decay, a rather helpless condition of ignominy as opposed to the exuberant exhibitionism of younger reality show subjects. These scenes are

among the most ambivalent of the series, pushing the codes of the so-called reality sitcom near the outer limits of the representation of ignominious bodies. Ozzy's body, however, still remains just inside the generic sitcom requirements that dictate that dad must be somewhat eccentric and befuddled.³⁸ Those limits, and perhaps the entire *Osbournes* endeavor, promise to be tested even more in the second season, which is in production as of this writing, as Sharon, who was diagnosed with colon cancer in July 2002 (and had several inches of her colon surgically removed), undergoes cancer treatments.³⁹

*"We Argue, but at the End of the Day, We Love Each Other"*⁴⁰

The Louds' and Osbournes' family lives were further reproduced through press articles and interviews, appearances on radio and television talk shows, and particularly in the case of the Osbournes, merchandising.⁴¹ While space does not permit a more detailed investigation into each series' reception, it is clear that in expanding beyond their series, both families solidified their iconic status as archetypal U.S. families for their respective eras.

Even though the genre is reality, and the actions of the subjects are real, the production and promotion of reality TV programs ensure that its subjects function in the end as *characters*: attractive constructions of personality. In the current environment, such normative expectations have hit the Osbournes to a degree the Louds never had to endure. The family has had to deal with constant crowds outside its Beverly Hills home, and insatiable public curiosity about (among other things) Ozzy's past substance abuse and violence toward Sharon, Jack's dangerous dive off a Santa Monica pier, and Kelly's weight.⁴² In addition, the protracted and secretive negotiations with MTV for the second season of the series indicated how this family's reality was now big business: the Osbournes are reportedly collecting \$20 million for the second season, plus licensing fees and outright ownership of the series and concept.

Significantly, the television version of the Osbournes is one member smaller than the actual family, as Ozzy and Sharon's eldest daughter, Aimee, declined to participate, citing a desire to maintain her privacy. While this action may reveal a rift within the actual family, it also indicates how the normative codes of genre and family can still be considered too restrictive.⁴³ Her decision to forego appearing on a reality TV series is

certainly uncharacteristic of our times. The genre continues to expand and has no lack of potential ignominious bodies. The success of *The Osbournes* has even inspired the development of other "celebrity reality" series as similar projects featuring celebrities like P. Diddy, Liza Minnelli, and Anna Nicole Smith are produced or at least considered.⁴⁴

While *An American Family* and *The Osbournes* are certainly unique television series, they both had to function under particular normative categories of genre and family in order to be comprehensible, let alone successful. The fact that they functioned in radically different ways indicates how the content of these terms—and in particular, the effective meaning of television reality—has shifted considerably over three decades. Thus, the key question for reality TV, now and for the foreseeable future, is not *whether* its reality is produced but *how* it is articulated with existing codes and expectations.

NOTES

1. In the space of one month alone, they were on the covers of *Entertainment Weekly*, *Interview*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Time*.

2. The relative novelty and reputation of PBS, the network that aired *An American Family*, also contributed to these reactions, as the new service was created (and perceived) in part to be a challenging alternative to the commercial imperatives of the established networks and stations.

3. See, for example, Michael J. Bradley, "Put 'em on the Couch," *Rolling Stone* 895, 9 May 2002, 36; Paul Farhi, "Make Room for Ozzy: *The Osbournes* Recalls TV's Uncomplicated, Unpierced Past," *Washington Post*, 16 April 2002, C1; and Melanie McFarland, "Ozzy Knows Best?" *Seattle Times*, 22 April 2002, E1.

4. See Jeffrey Ruoff, *An American Family: A Televised Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 23, 102; and Brian Graden, interview by Leon Harris, *CNN Live Today*, CNN, 5 March 2002. Alessandra Stanley of the *New York Times* also referred to *The Osbournes* as the first "docu-sitcom" ("No Rest for Family Values on Black Sabbath," *New York Times*, 2 April 2002, E1).

5. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); and Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

6. Whether the family is or even should be the fundamental unit of social cohesion is certainly a debatable point. I argue that the important point is not whether it is or not but rather that it is *treated as such* in virtually every society on the planet. Government policies, temporal and spatial organization, and commercial imperatives all center on conceptions of the family. The media's role in this is

to circulate representations of families—most normative, some (that is, "dysfunctional" ones) not—in order to facilitate this system.

7. Osbourne was the lead singer of heavy metal pioneers Black Sabbath in the 1970s, and became a superstar with a string of best-selling solo recordings in the early 1980s. During the 1990s, he parlayed his earlier successes into the annual Ozfest tour, which linked his celebrity to younger, similar artists.

8. Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 190.

9. As John Thornton Caldwell points out, despite periodic innovations in content, the situation comedy is, stylistically, arguably the most stable genre on U.S. television, remaining largely the same across several decades (*Televsuality: Style and Crisis in American Television* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995], 5).

10. Taylor, *Prime-Time Families*, 1.

11. On occasion, some of these programs have had "where-are-they-now" segments that update the stories of particular families who have been presented on the show, but these are most often as brief and functional as the earlier segment.

12. A significant variation on this approach has been the *Survivor*-like genre of isolation and survival, in which groups (including nuclear families) are followed as they adapt to an uncomfortable environment without the luxuries of twenty-first-century life, as in series like *Frontier House*, *1900 House*, and the British *Castaway*. While these series have a more earnest educational purpose than most reality series (for instance, in their display of long-outmoded homemaking skills), they also explore family relationships across the period of the show, which generally lasts for months or even, in the case of *Castaway*, an entire year. In the case of *Frontier House*, one married couple even endured a *Loud*-like emotional and eventually legal separation by the end of the series.

13. Indeed, as Stephanie Coontz observes in *The Way We Never Were*, representations of the archetypal "1950s" television family have even informed U.S. social policies, despite their disconnection from actual, lived family life (even in the 1950s).

14. Documentary's generic opposite is ostensibly fiction; hence the use of the broad term "nonfiction" as a synonym.

15. John Corner, "Documentary Values," in *Realism and "Reality" in Film and Media*, ed. Anne Jerslev (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002), 145–46.

16. Granted, the lines between documentary and documentation are blurry. Joseph Wiseman's often ambiguous films certainly *feel* more like an exhibition than an argument. Yet Wiseman's methodical technique and choice of subjects suggest an activist engagement with his material that exceeds the requirements of documentation.

17. Corner, "Documentary Values," 147–49.

18. *Ibid.*, 153.

19. Ruoff, *An American Family*, 53–68, 109–11.

20. Ibid., 48–49.
21. Ibid., 11–15.
22. Gilbert's main collaborators, Alan and Susan Raymond, were also enthusiastic practitioners of the observational style and shot the entirety of the footage. A team of experienced news documentary editors, led by David Hanser, edited the series.
23. Ruoff, *An American Family*, 17.
24. Gilbert was particularly inspired by the detective fiction of Ross MacDonald, which portrayed the materially comfortable and morally bankrupt lives of the Santa Barbara upper crust. MacDonald was even personally consulted to help locate a suitable family in the area. See Ruoff, *An American Family*, 17–18.
25. For example, the *Naked News* website and television series feature attractive male and female newscasters who strip while they're reading the news, thus violating the boundary between professional TV journalism and pornography, producing the shock of ignominy. An early, long-running Nickelodeon series was actually titled *You Can't Do That on Television*; its trademark action was to "slime" its subjects with a load of green goo dropped from above, thereby humiliating them. Interestingly, yesterday's Nickelodeon viewers (born between the mid-1970s and 1980s) are precisely today's reality TV target audience.
26. Other prominent reality series, such as *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*, *Fear Factor*, *Dog Eat Dog*, and *American Idol*, function in a similar manner.
27. A list of telegenic qualities would include physical attractiveness, gregariousness, intelligibility, and physical activity; in other words, attributes that translate most easily to the medium's visual vocabulary, time limits, and perceived audiences.
28. Joel Black, *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15–20.
29. The entire endeavor of producing a film about a "real family" was mercilessly satirized in Albert Brooks's 1979 film *Real Life* and in a 1980 episode of the situation comedy *WKRP in Cincinnati* titled "Real Families."
30. *The Osbournes'* crew members worked widely on programs such as *Survivor: Africa* (Sound Supervisor Jenny Green), *Big Brother 2* (Editor Matthew Gossin), and *Bands on the Run* (Director Brendon Carter), and also in the "comedy reality" subgenre: Executive Producer Jeff Stilson was a producer for both *The Chris Rock Show* and *The Daily Show*, and a writer for Michael Moore's *TV Nation*.
31. Cable programming is not subject to the same legal content restrictions over-the-air broadcasters must abide by. Language barriers in particular are falling in basic cable and have increasingly been broken on broadcast television in recent years. For example, the FX original series *The Shield* regularly features once-taboo expletives; the Comedy Central series *South Park* had its animated characters say "shit" over 130 times in one episode; and a May 2002 episode of NBC's high-rated medical drama *ER* had the dying Mark Greene yell the familiar expletive.

32. Only the master bedroom and bathrooms were declared "off-limits" to surveillance. In addition, the now-standard use of video, rather than film, ensures that virtually everything that occurs in the house *will* be recorded and thus made available to structure episodes.

33. Brian Graden interview, *CNN Live Today*. Note that the Osbournes are referred to here as "cast members" rather than "family members."

34. Ozzie Nelson and Ozzy Osbourne obviously share first names, but that is only the most superficial comparison. Both families were actual families, their real personas sharing the same names and personalities as their TV counterparts. Both families were actively engaged in show business. While both families also had ultimate control over their television representations, the Nelsons' series was carefully scripted and produced; *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966) is perhaps the only series in television history in which the entire regular cast play themselves as scripted characters.

35. The "fantastic" family sitcoms of the mid-1960s such as *The Addams Family*, *Bewitched*, and *The Munsters* are indirect influences on *The Osbournes*. Indeed, in an *Entertainment Weekly* article covering the success of his series, Ozzy implicitly compared his family to the fictional TV monster family: "My one regret is that we used our real house. I mean, the Munsters didn't use their real house!" (cited in Nancy Miller, "American Goth," *Entertainment Weekly*, 19 April 2002, 22). For an examination of these 1960s sitcoms in their original context, see Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 107–40.

36. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the Osbourne family members by their first names only for the remainder of the chapter.

37. A scene in which Sharon stuck her hand down her pants, rubbed her vagina, and chased Kelly around the room was cut from an episode, though the two are shown talking about the incident immediately afterward; Kelly is disgusted, while Sharon is amused.

38. Ozzy's befuddlement is reminiscent in particular of earlier sitcom dads Tim Taylor (*Home Improvement*), Cliff Huxtable (*The Cosby Show*), Howard Cunningham (*Happy Days*), George Jetson (*The Jetsons*), and Danny Williams (*Make Room for Daddy*).

39. Still, even this frontier is not unheard-of for MTV as the network covered gross-out comedian Tom Green's surgery and recovery from testicular cancer in 1999.

40. Sharon Osbourne, cited in David Bauder, "Ozzie and Harriet It Isn't," *Associated Press*, 5 March 2002.

41. While a few books were published by and about the Louds in the early 1970s, the Osbournes have been featured on a wider array of products, including a CD sound track of the series, a DVD set of the first season, and even a collection of back-to-school supplies.

42. Although she has become a new icon of independent-minded teenage girlhood, Kelly has had to deal with public comments about her body. While her body is healthy and normal for her age and height, it does not meet the current stick-thin ideal as presented in most mainstream media. As is usually the case, real women are forced to bear the brunt of normative media codes. See Miller, "American Goth."

43. Given her famous father and industry connections, it is just as likely that she wishes to pursue other normative codes of celebrity than would be available were she to become a television Osbourne.

44. The series' success has also spawned the development of several series that place the focus back on noncelebrity ignominy. CBS is planning an updated *Beverly Hillbillies* as a reality series, this time with a real Appalachian family brought to live in luxury. Similarly, ABC Family is seeking real families for *My Life Is a Sitcom*, in which a real family plays itself in a four-camera, studio-shot situation comedy: a real, latter-day *Ozzie and Harriet*.

Part II

Industry