

Blu-ray Review: Diane Lane, James Gandolfini Shine in ‘Cinema Verite’

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on April 26, 2012 - 6:49am

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CHICAGO – HBO’s under-appreciated original movie recalls the moment when entertainment-seeking Americans averted their eyes from actors to their neighbors over the fence. Voyeurism had a new name, “cinema verite,” and one-time producer Craig Gilbert was determined to take it from art houses to small screens in homes across the country.

His target was the Loud family—a large and popular clan headed by the philandering Phil and the strong-willed Pat. Their son Lance was openly gay and his flamboyant exuberance was celebrated within the walls of his home but proved to alarm conservative viewers once it was broadcast on TV. The show resulted in the dissolution of Pat and Bill’s marriage, which was already ailing but wasn’t at all aided by Gilbert’s manipulative strategies to intensify their domestic conflict.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

The enormous timeliness of the subject matter makes “Cinema Verite” a fitting entry in HBO’s ever-impressive filmography. It marks a comeback of sorts both in front of and behind the camera. The career of directors Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini has floundered in the years following their ingenious 2003 biopic, “American Splendor,” but this assured drama functions as a considerable return to form for the duo. On the heels of her embarrassingly stilted work in the irritating “Secretariat,” Diane Lane delivers her best work in years by vanishing within the skin of a woman scarred by infidelity but stubbornly determined to keep her sense of family unity intact. Curious that her character’s abandonment of her family was depicted as noble in “Secretariat,” whereas the consistently absent Bill (Tim Robbins) is seen purely as a cad. Bill makes the monumentally dumb decision to have Gilbert (James Gandolfini) meet one of his mistresses with the hope that it will lead her to a career in the pictures. Under network pressure to “push the drama along,” Gilbert uses the encounter to fuel Pat’s desire to tell off her husband in front of America. You don’t need a zoom lens to figure out that Bill is a transparent sleaze, and it becomes increasingly clear that the Loud’s familial dysfunction appeals to Gilbert’s own pessimistic beliefs about human nature. His agenda is no more contrived than the idealistic bliss of “The Partridge Family.”



Cinema Verite was released on Blu-ray and DVD on April 24, 2012.

Photo credit: HBO Home Entertainment

This is a provocative and compulsively watchable film, but its 90-minute running time seems a trifle too brisk. Split into episodic segments with title cards like "Getting Some Distance" and "The Long Road Home," the picture has difficulty maintaining dramatic momentum for its first two-thirds. As in "American Splendor," Berman and Pulcini draw attention to their reenactments by featuring split-screen comparisons of the actors with their real-life counterparts. The juxtaposition made sense in "Splendor," but here it registers as a mere distraction. Thomas Dekker left an indelible impression as the bisexual protagonist in Gregg Araki's "Kaboom," but in the coveted role of Lance, he isn't afforded nearly enough screen time. Since Gilbert's final cut of "An American Family" clocked in around 12 hours when it aired in 1973, it would've made perfect sense to turn "Cinema Verite" into a miniseries. As it stands, the film is forced to glaze over some of its more intriguing issues. Gandolfini steals the show with his righteous monologues about the purity of his vision, while Patrick Fugit and Shanna Collins exude heroic defiance as his rebellious crew members, Alan and Susan Raymond. It's difficult to avoid wondering whether the Raymonds were truly as incorruptible as their scripted selves, especially since they served as consultants on the picture. Yet regardless of its questionable authenticity, there's no denying the power of the film's message.

"Cinema Verite" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French and Spanish audio tracks, and includes a frustratingly brief making-of featurette that plays more like the prologue for a long-form documentary. Dick Cavett pops in to praise Lance's star quality, but the mini-doc's 3-minute running time leaves no opportunity for him to elaborate. Lane joins the directors for an audio commentary track in which she reminisces about how she got her first acting job at New York's La MaMa Theatre around the same time as the performance staged in the film. Very little footage could be shot in Santa Barbara since it's hardly the sleepy town that it once was in 1971. Most of the young actors cast as the Loud children turned out to have stellar musical abilities. As Grant, Nick Eversman used his own voice to deliver a smashing rendition of Jerry Ragovoy's "Time Is On My Side." The only members of the Loud clan cut from the script was their enormous pet poodles, thus relieving the film of any cutesy canine reaction shots.

Lane says that the cast had the luxury of watching their real-life characters in hours upon hours of footage, but their goal was never to replicate reality. It's shocking to hear the brutal criticisms and homophobic comments that were launched at the Louds by liberal publications such as "The New York Times," yet it's arguable whether our society has become any more enlightened over the last 40 years. No matter

how many taboos are broken and hearts are bared, reality TV is ultimately as artificial as the squeaky-clean sitcoms that it had once hoped to subvert. The music cues and tight editing elicit the same manufactured emotional response earned by a laugh track. A camera with a network timetable on its head simply has no opportunity to wait for truth to arrive in front of its lens.

'Cinema Verite' is released by HBO Home Entertainment and stars Diane Lane, Tim Robbins, James Gandolfini, Patrick Fugit, Shanna Collins, Thomas Dekker, Nick Eversman and Kathleen Quinlan. It was written by David Seltzer and directed by Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini. It was released on April 24, 2012. It is rated TV-14.



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]

Staff Writer

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