

# “Big Sissy”: The Queer Construction of Lance Loud

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The continued popularity of reality television, and the release of the recent HBO film *Cinema Verite*—about the production of the first “reality show,” *An American Family* (1973)—has resulted in renewed interest in the series and tangentially its other distinction—its portrayal of the first openly gay character on prime time television. Lance, the oldest of the Loud family children, is on film both flamboyant and effusive, but at the same time—through judicious editing—an asexual creature with no romantic or sexual relationships. This paper considers Lance in the context of Gay representation in media of the 1970s, and then explores the struggle of the filmmakers—and the Loud family themselves—to control and contain the public perception of Lance. The often vague and allusive comments by Lance’s parents and even Lance himself suggest a character that is at once charming, witty, and vibrantly alive, yet also pretentious and deceitful. The final argument is that these complicit efforts to avoid controversy actually engender it, turning Lance Loud into a figure of mystery and conjecture ... and the undisputed star of the series.

*Keywords:* *Cinema Verite*, *An American Family*, Lance Loud, Gay

## Introduction

While in mainstream contemporary society—as evidenced by the continuing struggle over same-sex marriage—homosexuality remains a “hot button issue,” in popular media it is no longer a taboo subject. Since the early 2000s LGBTQ characters and their lifestyles are prevalently portrayed as “normal” and their storylines are integrated into those of “accepting” heterosexual characters. They are free to openly show affection and sexual desire in even the most conservative of prime time television, such as ABC’s popular “family” sitcom *Modern Family* (2009-Present), and as a result there is rarely the need to self-identify as “gay.” However, even as late as the 1980s, homosexuals remained “closeted” in both reality and the media. As no sexual behaviors were tolerated (i.e. sexual activity, lingering looks or touches), a homosexual was identified by what were determined be “effeminate”—or “sissy”—mannerisms alone. “Queers” wore bright and colorful clothing. They had lilting voices and hips (i.e. being “light in the loafers”). They used words like “cute” and “precious.” They liked Joan Crawford movies and show tunes. In other words the exhibition of the slightest conventionally female behavior alone identified a man as a “fag”. However from the perspective of 2016, the criteria have changed. Effeminate behavior is no longer an indicator of sexual identity. This study deals with looking at a television character from 1973 through the lens of 2016. Taking the “sissy” behaviors out of the equation, can a character who does not engage in any homosexual behaviors be interpreted as being “homosexual?”

### ***An American Family*—The First Reality Show**

The continued popularity of reality television, and the release of the HBO film *Cinema Verite* (2011)—about the production of the first “reality show,” *An American Family* (1973)—has resulted in renewed interest in the series and tangentially its other distinction—its portrayal of the first openly gay character on prime time television. Lance, the oldest of the Loud family children, is on film both flamboyant and effusive, but at the same time—through judicious editing—an asexual creature with no romantic or sexual relationships.

*An American Family* debuted as a much-anticipated twelve-part series on public television from January through March of 1973. Focusing on the seven-member William Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, the series attempted to illuminate the day-to-day struggles of a “typical” American family over seven months of filming in 1971. Over the course of the series we witnessed a mother coming to terms with her son’s openly homosexual lifestyle, a father nearly losing his business, and the family splitting up due to divorce.

And the series was a hit. *An American Family* earned unprecedented ratings for public television—with estimated ten million viewers for each episode (Ruoff, 2002, p. xi). The Nielson rating for one evening’s broadcast in Boston claimed 74% of all TV audiences were tuned into *An American Family* (*Vedio Verite*, 2011).

But after the first episode was shown, the reviews came in ... The January 22, 1973 issue of *Newsweek* featured the Louds on the cover, and referred to the series as “a genuine American tragedy, a glimpse into the pit” (1973, pp. 48-49). Abigail McCarthy in the *Atlantic* wrote “What was thought of as a symbol of unity, is, in *An American Family*” a symbol of disintegration and purposelessness in American life (1973, p. 73). Roger Rosenblatt of *The New Republic*, added, “Once a week we all sit down to watch an organization of human beings deliberately set out to psychologically murder each other” (1974, p. 21).

### **The Attack on Lance Loud**

In the face of this critical onslaught, the Louds rushed to defend themselves. “I think they have dealt badly with our honor and trust,” claimed Pat Loud, while husband Bill added, “if they filmed twenty-five normal scenes and five bizarre scenes a day, they picked the five bizarre scenes and only one of the normal ones for the finished piece” (Time, 1973 February, p. 51). And the latter seemed to be in reference to the scenes involving Lance.

Advance advertisements teased at Lance’s sexuality and his difference from the rest of his family:

He lives in the Chelsea Hotel on Manhattan’s lower West Side. And lives a lifestyle that might shock a lot of people back home in California.

He dyed his hair silver and his clothes purple. As a personal expression of ... something ... something he wasn’t fully aware of at the time. (Ruoff, 1996, p. 275)

Critics quickly took the bait and declared that Lance was Gay. On January 15, four days after the debut, *Newsweek* announced: “Even for a disintegrating family, however, the Louds depart from the norm in at least one respect: the eldest son, Lance, is a homosexual” (1973 May, p. 68). On Jan. 22, *Time* added, “Since no soap opera is complete without anguish, the Loud family has its troubles... eldest son Lance has migrated to New York to join the gay community” (p. 36). More specifically, on Feb. 26 *Time* observed: “The children are all different. Lance, for example, looks and acts effeminate” (p. 51).

This latter observation points out an interesting issue—and the focus of this paper—which is that Lance seems to be “guilty” of being gay by virtue of his effeminate behavior alone. While, as Sara Sanborn observed, Lance is “running through every theatrical gesture in the stereotyped homosexual repertoire” (1973, p. 79), he is *never* seen touching, *talking to*, or even *discussing* another man in a sexual—or even romantic—context. And *no one*, including Lance, ever even uses the words “homosexual” or “gay.” Lance is somehow determined to be homosexual by being effeminate alone as he is not acting in any way *sexual*—a being historically referred to as a “sissy.”

### Homosexuality in the Media

In classical Hollywood cinema, according to historian Vito Russo, homosexual men were rendered safely and sexlessly effeminate—emerging the “Sissy.” The opening line of his landmark 1987 work on the portrayal of queer images in film, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, announces:

Nobody likes a sissy ... there is something about a man who acts like a woman that people find fundamentally distasteful... After all it is supposed to be an insult to call a man effeminate, for it means he is like a woman and therefore not as valuable as a “real” man. The popular definition of gayness is rooted in sexism. Weakness in men rather than strength in women has consistently been seen as the connection between sex role behavior and deviant sexuality... Although at first there was no equation between sissyness and actual homosexuality, the danger of gayness as the consequence of such behavior lurked always in the background. (1987, p. 4)

Russo contends that by the late 1960s the increasing emphasis on social issues such as free love and abortion also pushed homosexuality into the forefront. Edward Alwood, in his *Straight News: Gays, Lesbians, and the News Media*, asserts that American television audiences received their first major exposure to the gay lifestyle in 1967, with the airing of the CBS Reports documentary “*The Homosexuals*,” which included interviews with a variety of homosexual men who were shown alternately on an analyst’s couch or ashamedly hiding their faces and commenting about their “sickness” (as cited in Kylo-Hart, 2000). In summing up the documentary, correspondent Mike Wallace concluded that:

The average homosexual, if there be such, is promiscuous. He is not interested in or capable of a lasting relationship like that of a heterosexual marriage. His sex life—his “love life”—consists of chance encounters at the clubs and bars he inhabits, and even on the streets of the city. The pickup—the one-night stand—these are characteristic of the homosexual relationship. (Wallace, 1967)

In his article “Representing Gay Men on American Television,” Patrick Kylo-Hart concludes, “With those words...gay men remained primarily as objects of ridicule for several years, until the impact of the gay liberation movement increased the visibility of gay men in various social positions nationwide and produced increased levels of social tolerance” (Kylo-Hart, 2000). Referencing the media studies of Alwood, Kylo-Hart adds

...during this stage stereotypes of gay men—as well as derogatory terms such as “homo,” “fag,” “fairy,” and “pansy”—soon became commonly encountered on U.S. television and no effort was made to change this perception as television producers of the time quite consciously avoided including anything in their programs that appeared to condone homosexuality, for fear of alienating both advertisers and viewers. (2000)

Alwood points out that NBC’s *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* was the first network television show to approach the subject of gay men and their lifestyles with some regularity. In 1970 they introduced the stereotypically effeminate character named “Bruce,” who was subjected to long strings of antigay jokes; within

a few years, the show was averaging one joke per program about gay men and gay liberation (as cited in Kylo-Hart, 2000).

### Not the All-American Boy

It is at this juncture that *An American Family*'s Lance Loud enters the fray. Beyond determining that Lance was gay, the critical discourse vacillated between ridicule and abuse. In an article in *Esquire*—published after the end of the series—columnist Merle Miller observes:

...Lance, the bright one, the wittiest of the louds, the eldest son ... has set Gay Liberation back by a generation...Lance is annoying, undulating his hips, experimenting with this and that lipstick, admiring his collection of scarves and his own image in the mirror, wheedling, camping, begging. Hardly what we've brought up to think is the All-American boy. (1973, p. 239)

Roger Rosenblatt, in the *New Republic* described Lance as a “clownish and miserable character” (1974, p. 23).<sup>1</sup> Things took a determinedly mean-spirited and homophobic turn in Ann Roiphe's *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* piece on the show in which she called Lance “a flamboyant leech-like homosexual” who is “camping and queening about like a pathetic court jester, a Goya-esque emotional dwarf” (1973, p. 8).

Of these criticisms, Pat Loud commented in her 1974 biography, the most difficult for her to understand was the idea that “Lance is a mutation—not human—not connected to life in the U.S” (Loud & Johnson, 1974, p. 298).

At the other end of the spectrum were friends and family who asserted the opposite—that Lance was *not* gay.

As late as the 2012 publication of *Lance Out Loud*, a tribute book published by Pat a decade after Lance's death. Lance's friend Christopher Makos claimed:

The last thing that Lance was not was “Gay” in the stereotypical sense. He was way too intuitive, way too self-aware to allow himself to be Gay. But unfortunately ... he was type-cast as the poster child for Gay, something I wouldn't wish on anybody, let alone Lance. (2012, p. 9)

Most striking, was Pat's assertion that Lance was a sexually active homosexual but *not* homosexual? “The thing is ... is that I'm not convinced he's homosexual. He's had lots of homosexual experiences, all right. But he's not finished” (Loud & Johnson, 1974, p. 97). Lance asserted the same idea in a 1974 *Newsweek* follow-up a year after the series end:

“The series pounded all my sex life out of me,” says Lance, who now wonders about the psychological wisdom of allowing himself to be revealed as a homosexual before a nationwide TV audience. “Besides, what if I was to change?” asks Lance, who points out that he no longer wears lipstick. (p. 16)

### Camping It up

If Lance was not “gay” in the traditional, stereotypical sense—in what sense was he “gay?”

The queer construction of Lance Loud begins in the way he is portrayed in the first episode of the series.

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<sup>1</sup> Lance himself observed, “It's a caricature ... I'm shown as a swish-on” (Time, 1973 Jan., p. 36). As a result he received many letters in the mail, “I got three Bibles from different religious factions; of course, they just burst into flames the second I opened the pages. And I got a lot of letters from gay guys, gay suburban kids, who thanked me for being a voice of outrage in a bland fucking normal middle-class world” (Ruoff, 1996, p. 289). In a 1991 article he wrote for *The Advocate*, Lance would later assert that the series “transformed me from a nobody to a homo Eddie Haskell in what seemed like sixty seconds” (Out, n.d.).

Shot on December 31, 1971—actually the last day of filming—a newly-divorced Pat Loud and her teenage children are preparing for a New Year’s Eve party when Lance calls from New York. Unseen, he is manifest only as a disembodied sing-songy voice at one of the phone line who seems too-quickly dismissed by his siblings who pass the phone to each other until he finds himself talking to his mother, whom he calls “cutie” and then obliquely speaks of his “unusual” lifestyle. While in actuality this was the last day of seven months of filming—and presumably finds the family more used to cameras and being filmed—Lance is *still* being vague. What is so *unusual* about his lifestyle? Again, his vocal mannerisms and dialogue suggest—in the context of the aforementioned stereotypes prevalent at the time—Lance was a “sissy”—but was he actually a *homosexual*?

Producer Craig Gilbert opens the sequence in voice-over by explaining that Lance had arrived in New York seven months earlier with hopes of getting a job with an underground magazine. Episode 2 accordingly flashes back to May when we see Lance “hanging out” in his room at the Chelsea Hotel with a man named “Soren” as they wait for Pat, who is coming to spend the week with Lance. Soren proves to be a thin older man who is implied to be Lance’s roommate. Throughout this episode—the only one in which we experience Soren—he remains physically apart from Lance and there is never any touching and even less looking at each other ... and no exchange of even verbal intimacies. Nothing in the way they act towards each other suggests *any* kind of intimacy.

Having not met Lance prior to this—the first day of filming—cameraman Alan Raymond didn’t know what to expect, “We were told by [producing station] WNET that [Lance] was ‘a little different.’ When we actually arrived to shoot, his roommate seemed like he was part of a couple. It was eminently clear early on” (A. Raymond & S. Raymond, 2002, p. 60).

In his “Reflections on *An American Family*—Part I,” written in 1988 producer Craig Gilbert would later recall:

At this meeting it became clear for the first time that Lance was a homosexual and was not in the slightest way ashamed of the fact. One of the more idiotic charges leveled against *American Family* was that, through some strange alchemy, the process of shooting the series induced Lance to reveal his hitherto hidden sexual preference to the American public. This is pure nonsense. Lance was homosexual before the shooting, during the shooting, and after the shooting. The fact that we didn’t find out about it until we did neither excited nor depressed me”. (1988a, p. 195)

However, he told *Newsweek* after the show’s premiere that “I knew then, that here was a read-made point of tension” (1973 Jan., p. 68).

Upon her arrival at the Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan, Lance escorts his mother to the room he’s arranged for her. En route he introduces her to another hotel denizen, the transgender actress (and Warhol film star with her then recent success in Warhol’s *Trash*) Holly Woodlawn. Lance then explains to his mother that he’s secured them tickets for that evening to attend transvestite writer/director/star Jackie Curtis’ controversial production of *Vain Victory* at the “off-off Broadway” LaMama theatre.

While we see a few bits of the show from their vantage point in the audience, we deduce that it seems to be some sort of drag show. Afterwards, as Lance, Soren and Pat talk in a café, Pat tells a delighted Lance that the show made her “uncomfortable and embarrassed ... and didn’t have much of a plot.” Pat would later recall, “We go to a drag show—and the one run on the film was about fifty times cleaner than the one we *really* saw—which had the intended effect of shocking mom to her shoelaces...” And, she adds “for the first time I knew what was going on with Lance in New York” (Loud & Johnson, 1974, pp. 96-97). As Pat does not elaborate, the question is what she *did* and *did not* know about Lance’s life in New York. As Lance had made

reference to Soren in prior phone calls, presumably Pat knew about him but did not know they were a couple? Or was the issue the simply the shows and other entertainments and people Lance was involved with? The producer's choice to film and show a different version of the drag show, suggests their shock, resulting in an attempt to edit Lance's lifestyle for television.

According to Pat, this experience, and the pressure of the first day of being filmed, resulted in her remaining “sphinx faced” throughout the trip (Loud & Johnson, 1974, p. 96). During the ensuing week, as Lance escorts his mother around New York he wears an array of attention grabbing outfits. Colored scarves and gaudy Hawaiian shirts were Lance's signature look ... often worn together in contrasting combinations. Throughout the experience, Lance acts as flamboyant in his gestures and movements as his mother remains restrained with the same. Pat would later explain, “My son is camping it up. What the hell am I supposed to say? Or do?” (Loud & Johnson, 1974, p. 97). However, again, while this could suggest an effeminate or “sissy” character, nothing here suggests a sexually active/transgressive character.

In her book and in interviews, Pat Loud would later explain,

... it's not a cover-up. His attitude is 'here I am the way I am.' And he means it ... frankly, I'm proud of Lance, of his candor, his daring spirit and his frontal assault on life... Lance did the best and he came off the best. No secrets, no crap. Here I am take me as I am or get lost. (Loud & Johnson, 1974, pp. 99-100, 109)

Yet Pat—contradicting herself—also admitted “Lance camps it up and acts like a drag queen and turns himself inside out trying to shock people, and the mail pours in” (Loud & Johnson, 1974, p. 16).

Critics also seemed to feel, Lance was indeed “performing.” In the *Newsweek* cover story, “The Divorce of the Year,” the writers observe:

Lance, of course, has always been the family's problem child and semi-stardom seems only to have aggravated the situation. Lance claims that he is distressed by his publicity; he bitterly describes himself as “Homo of the Year”. Yet he continues to play that part in the most outrageous manner, right down to the roots of his dyed red hair. “I'll be anything anybody wants me to be,” he explains. (1973 Mar., p. 49)

Historian Jeffrey Ruoff observes:

Unlike the more naturalistic performances of his siblings and parents, Lance acts like a character from an Andy Warhol movie loose in a film by Frederick Wiseman. A fan of Warhol's work, Lance turns in one of the great camp performances in the history of television. (Ruoff, 1988, pp. 298-299)

Lance corroborated this observation in 1996 when he admitted

I was so influenced by him [Andy Warhol], in the idea of being outrageous...When the cameras were on me I was really thinking, you know, *Chelsea Girls* and *Bike Boy* and stuff like that when they were filming... I felt like I was in *Chelsea Girls II*, the sequel.<sup>2</sup>

So Lance was consciously *creating* a performance. When, after the series premiere, Lance was asked why he agreed to the project, he enthusiastically explained “Doesn't everyone want to star in his own TV series?” (*Newsweek*, 1973 Jan., p. 68). “The series was the fulfillment of the middle-class dream that you can become famous for being just what you are. This is actually the greatest thing I've done to date” (Woods, 1973, p. 23).

Years later, candidly, and somewhat bitterly Lance admitted,

<sup>2</sup> See from <http://www.pbs.org/lanceloud/lance/warhol.html>.

...you had to live up to the demands of being filmed. So yeah, we acted. And I was stupid enough to imagine that the way I acted—mischievous and a sprite—was unique. I didn’t know I was just a big fag. (New York Times, 1999)

However, explanations past and present aside, there is still nothing seen or heard in *An American Family* that suggests that Lance *actually* is a homosexual...

On the last day of her visit to New York, as Pat and Lance wait for the cab that will take her to the airport, Pat tells Lance,

“...this is really as good a place for you as I can think of—this is the sort of thing you’ve been interested in all your life and you might as well have a good look at it while you’re here.” Did Pat think Lance was just “looking” at it? And her words seemed to suggest that Lance would get “this sort of thing” out of his system, and come home. Could Lance ever “come home” again to Santa Barbara?

Just as we are never *certain* of Lance’s sexual orientation, onscreen Pat seems to react the same way. Again, Lance had mentioned Soren in prior phone conversations, but it was unclear as to whether Soren was simply Lance’s roommate or his lover. When she walks into the hotel room and finds them together, she does not question the situation. Throughout her visit, beyond her discomfort over the drag show, we do not observe *any* kind of upset. Perhaps she does *know*, but is simply in denial? Or perhaps she is extremely upset but refuses to acknowledge or question Lance’s behavior *on camera*. Pat’s stony “sphinx faced” expression—as she described it—throughout is impossible to decipher.

Did Pat know Lance was gay? Did the rest of the family know?

### Coming out

In reality, Lance had come out to his family three years prior to the filming. In A 1991 article entitled “Coming Out: It Separates the Men from the Boys,” Lance explains,

The trick is how to spring it on the world. Scrawling “I’m gay” in lipstick on your parents’ bedroom mirror may demonstrate a personal signature of the highest style, but is not particularly sensitive to their feelings. Upon hearing me utter those words almost twenty years ago, my own mother did what any self-respecting middle-class mom would do: went directly into a seizure. Unfortunately, she was behind the wheel of our family station wagon. As I was coming out of the closet, our car was hurtling over an embankment. The moment was terrifying—but exactly right. (Loud, 1991)

Jeffrey Ruoff observes in his article “Can a Documentary Be Made out of Real Life? The Reception of *An American Family*” that

...reviewers typically stated that Lance “came out” during the filming, attributing Lance’s sexuality to narrative progression and, again, the influence of the camera. Lance, however made clear in statements to the press that he was gay before, during, and after *An American Family*. He mentioned on WLS-TV’s *Kennedy and Co.*, “The sexual preference has always been there. When I went thru puberty, I wanted to have sex with boys”. (Petersen, 1973, p. 1; Ruoff, 1996, p. 284)

According to Lance’s friend Kristian, Lance had been actively involved in homosexual behavior long before coming out to his friends, or even Kristian himself, who explained,

Lance was far more sexually advanced than I, and many were the times when I was told to “Wait in the car for a minute, okay?” while I wondered outside a variety of public restrooms, from Cabrillo Boulevard to Del Playa Drive, “Really, how can peeing take so long?” He also tells of Lance’s “dating an art history professor from UCSB” whom Lance talked into providing Kristian his first homosexual experience. (Hoffman, 2012, pp. 16-17)

While Lance never talks about coming out to the rest of his family, Merle Miller observed,

But is that the point, really? Isn't the point that he is their son and that they must accept him and love him? That's the way they appear to feel, and that is what they do. When the family appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show*, Kevin said, "We don't say "Homo."... That's what the newspapers say. We don't say it. (Miller, 1973, p. 240)<sup>3</sup>

As Jeff Ruoff sums it up, "Lance Loud did not come out on American TV; American television came out of the closet through *An American Family*" (2002, p. 127).

The question—never addressed by either the Louds or the filmmakers—is why the Louds never told the filmmakers of Lance's sexual orientation? Craig Gilbert recalled,

In my original talks with Bill and Pat in Santa Barbara it had been agreed that whatever happened would happen, whatever came up in the course of the filming should not be considered a good thing or a bad thing but simply another thing that occurred in their daily lives. (Reflections II, p. 95)

However, one would logically presume that even if the family was accepting of his lifestyle, they might fear the possibly exploitative way in which he would be portrayed on film for the world to see, and the results that might negatively affect their son.

Again, in the March, 1973 *Newsweek* cover story the writers assert:

When Pat isn't publicly defending her son as "a person who is willing to dare," she admits that Lance is the real tragedy of *An American Family*. "We are very concerned with him. Lance has suffered psychic damage from all of this," laments his mother. "The headlines have pushed him into a corner, and now he's determined to show people just how bad he is. I laugh at a lot of the things Lance does when I should really cry." (1973 Mar., p. 49)<sup>4</sup>

If Pat knew that Lance was openly Gay, and knew that he would not shy away from portraying it as openly as possible—why didn't she reconsider the project, or at the very least consult with the filmmakers as to how they would portray her son on national television?

In her autobiography, she recalls that Craig Gilbert asked her about this and she told him:

I believe in teaching kids responsibility for their own actions. He's been wanting to come here [New York] for a long, long, time. Lance is...well, gotten himself into a pretty weird scene. I can't keep bailing him out. I encourage him to stick it out so he can see I'm *not* going to swoop in and carry him back to the sterile and safe family hearth. I want him to grow up and that's a job he's got to do on his own. (Loud & Johnson, 1974, p. 99)

So protective Pat was administering a little "tough love" on national television?

However, in Episode 3, upon returning home from her New York visit, Pat has lunch bill and explains, "after the shock I don't think I would have had such a good time anywhere else." She adds that "Lance is so wonderful ...he really does have some spark of life that I've never seen in anybody ... he'd walk down the street and sing and dance and just so much love and so funny to talk to..." (Gilbert, 1973). Since Pat was "shocked," by the extremity of Lance's lifestyle, wouldn't she express this to her husband and discuss whether or not they should intervene, or allow Lance to continue to explore "this scene?" Again, her behavior begs questions as to whether Pat is truly "okay" with her son's behavior, or in denial about it, or simply refusing to show that upset for the cameras.

<sup>3</sup> Lance's father was less shocked and surprisingly accepting. In a 1978 interview, Lance asserts, "He wasn't upset. When I told him, he said, 'Sexuality is one finger in the hands of 10.' He said, 'It doesn't really matter as long as you're happy'" (Musto, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> In the *Newsweek* cover story, "The Divorce of the Year", they observe: Lance, of course, has always been the family's problem child and semi-stardom seems only to have aggravated the situation. Lance claims that he is distressed by his publicity; he bitterly describes himself as "Homo of the Year". Yet he continues to play that part in the most outrageous manner, right down to the roots of his dyed red hair. "I'll be anything anybody wants me to be," he explains (1973 Mar., p. 49).



### A Non-sexual “Sissy”

However again, this was all “behind the scenes” as it were—on camera Lance was still portrayed as “sissy” but not sexual.

Episode 4 finds Lance no longer living with Soren and preparing to go to Europe to tour with a theatrical troupe. At one point we see Lance talking to a female friend. Though it is implied that he is talking *to* her, his speech comes across as more stream of consciousness rambling about his desires to become independent. He also alludes to his “relationships:”

... I like living alone more than I like living with people except [his friend] Kristian. I get along with [him] because even though we can do things together he can let me flow and I can let him flow...but I feel these involved relationships...I screw them up very easily ...I wish I was Peter Pan. (Gilbert, 1973)

While Lance has heretofore said nothing about any romantic/sexual relationships, his description of the “involved relationships” he tends to “screw up,” is likened to his relationship with Soren. While Lance believes Soren will be following him to Europe “which will just be hell,” at the same time he smiles coyly and adds “I mean it will be *heaven* and hell.” Lance’s tone and facial expressions as he delivers this line are also allusive. Perhaps the “heaven” refers to having access to Soren’s money and so stability, but the hell refers to having to be dependent upon him. However, these expressions could also suggest that Soren comes with money *and* a physical/sexual intimacy, but again with strings attached.<sup>5</sup>

Episode 11 finds Lance coming back to Santa Barbara after his sojourns in New York and Copenhagen. And after months of filming he seems to be fully uninhibited in front of the camera. He arrives at the airport wearing a black fedora, pink scarf, and multiple bracelets as he dances around the counter waiting for his flight. Once home he takes out all of his colorful Hawaiian shirts and begins putting on black lipstick.

### The Kindness of Strangers

Lance’s arrival home begs the question—what will he do now?

In Episode 12, the last of the series, Pat confronts Lance about the issue and that she is tired of waiting for him to *do* something beyond making demands on other people. He quickly and matter-of-factly answers that there is “no use in being tired”, and that

...sooner or later those demands are going to be blocked off ... and sooner or later I’m gonna be drowned in the rest of the people who have never done anything that are real sheer bores ... if I were you I’d enjoy me for while I’m going to last ... because honey I’m not gonna last forever ... I know what I’m doomed for ... at least I can laugh before I get into it... (Gilbert, 1973)

As with all of his communications, this one is equally vague. What *is* Lance talking about? What is he “doomed” for? Being “kept” by a series of wealthy lovers? Or is he alluding to possible suicide? When Pat balks at his nihilistic attitude, for perhaps the first time he seems totally honest:

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<sup>5</sup> This is followed by the slip that “there are so many people I want to get involved in”, and then repeated reference to someone named “Barry” whom he apparently met during the European trip. Years later Kristian will admit that in Copenhagen, “we arrived under the vague tutelage of Lance’s then boyfriend, Barry Bryant ... who planned so conceptual act of ‘art’ ... an act which didn’t seem to happen, and we didn’t care...” (Hoffman, 2012, p. 20).

... I just—I don’t know, I don’t care... I really can’t see how other people exist other than my way of life—just living off people ... because I really can’t do anything ... because really I can’t understand people—I can’t understand people that have drive ... I don’t understand people who go places ... I can’t understand people that feel the need to go to college ... I can’t understand people who feel real.

While Pat emerges more frustrated than ever, Lance seems oddly at peace ... he’s seemingly reconciled himself into accepting this “disability” ... and to forever be dependent upon “the kindness of strangers.”

### The Legacy of Lance Loud

So finally—who and what is Lance Loud? And what is his legacy?

In a 1973 editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled “There goes the Case for Gay Liberation,” Jack Mabley complained that Lance’s outrageous behavior gave homosexuality a bad name (Mabley, 1973, p. 4). However, writing in *Esquire* in November 1987, Frank Rich singled out Lance’s television appearance as one of the defining images of a period Rich referred to as “The Gay Decade” (as cited in Ruoff, 1996, p. 289).

When all is said and done, on screen Lance Loud remains an enigma—the victim of a variety of agendas all struggling to construct and contain him. While in reality he was a sexually active gay man ... on screen he emerges a stereotypical “asexual” sissy. He lives with various men but does not look at them ... does not touch them ... does not *love* them?

On film he seems queer by virtue of stereotypical indicators of voice and body—a “swish on” in his own estimation. His mother knows he is gay but does not believe he *is* gay. The rest of his family know he is gay but do not use the word “homosexual.” They do not use any words—they don’t talk about “it.” He has friends who know he is gay but assert that he is not gay in the “traditional sense.”

In Lance’s viewpoint *An American Family* is not about family. After all, for the most part his siblings each “edit” their behavior to avoid being a focus of the filmmakers’ attention. His father strains for attention, and requests to be filmed, but emerges as little more than a marginalized Willy Loman character. Fearing too much scrutiny, even Lance’s “co-star,” his mother Pat, struggles to avoid the camera—the eye of half-truth (as she describes it)—though she cannot escape her featured role as the wronged wife and sturdy matriarch. Lance, however, is ready for his close-up. He is making his debut in his own Warholian drama.

Yet while he is ready, the filmmakers are not. After the Faustian pact of honesty had been struck with the family the producer learns that they have an openly gay son. It’s a point of tension. Its 1973 and while Lance’s teasing sissy persona might be a ratings hit, the hint of possible sexual behavior might also cause public television to yank the show for fear that supporters will withdraw their sponsorship. So they don’t seem to know what to do with him—not show him, or show him doing *normal* (i.e. “boring”) things such as walking to a movie theater, shaving, and riding his bicycle which by virtue of being mundane suggest his “normalcy.”

In reality in 1973, being “openly gay” *meant* being “openly sissy” as sexuality could not be shown on television. And even if a reality show version of *Queer as Folk* had existed in 1973, the portrayal of actual homosexual sex might involve a partner who would emerge more interesting than Lance. So he became the sissy character who throws out witticisms, and wears loud shirts, scarves, and makeup ... who talks incessantly and yet vaguely, at times poetically but also incoherently as the lack of coherence might give him even *more* attention. Lance seems to quite literally be dancing as fast as he can—taking advantage of his idol Warhol’s assertion that everyone will have their 15 minutes of fame.

Lance is a “natural”—meaning unnatural. Lance is active—moving, swishing, dancing, gesticulating wildly—he is consistently breaking the forth wall and almost grabbing the camera. Lance is cinematic. He is not *hiding* his homosexuality—he just uses it to tease and tantalize—parlaying the “difference” that has become his stock in trade to simply draw attention. So finally—is Lance a “sissy” and a homosexual? Was he “playing” one or the other? In the final analysis, Lance is a homosexual man who seems to be masquerading as a Sissy, not because his homosexuality alone might be too shocking but because it might not be shocking enough.

### Conclusion

In retrospect, Lance Loud was an anomaly. In 1971, he was an openly Gay man carrying on an active sex life. He is given the opportunity to play “himself” in the first reality show, about the life of his broken family. And while the filmmakers admit to no efforts to edit Lance’s behavior, Lance seems to “edit” himself. While he might have taken the opportunity to shatter negative stereotypes by showing the world what his life is like as a Gay man—the intimacy and tenderness of a romantic or even sexual relationship—instead he doggedly adheres to the “sissy” stereotype. But as outrageous and over the top his behavior, paradoxically, he is also “playing it safe” by “giving the audience what they want.” From the perspective of 2016 “Lance Loud” is not homosexual, because he is *not* sexual ... nothing is said or done to indicate a sexual preference at all. In the end, the flamboyant homosexual of 1971, emerges the closeted Gay man of 2016.

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