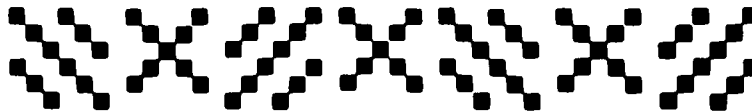


Middletown Revisited: Searching for the Heart of Mid-America

*Ralph Janis**



Peter Davis, producer. The *Middletown* films: *The Campaign* (90 min.); *The Big Game* (60 min.); *Community of Praise* (60 min.); *Family Business* (90 min.); *Second Time Around* (60 min.); *Seventeen* (90 min.).**

The search for the "real America" is as old as Crèvecoeur and as modern as Peter Davis. When conducted successfully, such expeditions into the American heart and mind yield conclusions and questions that long outlive their creators. That names like Crèvecoeur, Tocqueville, and Lynd are still familiar to students of America testifies to the quality and originality of their inquiries. Whether *Middletown Revisited*, Peter Davis's recent, widely publicized contribution to that search, will accede to similar stature remains to be seen. That Davis's career is devoted to carrying on that venerable search, there is no doubt.

Middletown Revisited, a documentary series based on life and culture in Muncie, Indiana, was aired nationally over P.B.S. in the spring of 1982. Each program in the series focused on a single aspect of Muncie life and on the experiences of selected individuals and families. Beginning with coverage of the local mayoralty race, the series continued with programs on basketball, religion, small business, and marriage. In each segment the cameras told the story. Narration and outside commentary on events, individuals, and situations were studiously avoided. References to Muncie or Indiana were rare. In-

* Ralph Janis is executive director of the Kentucky Humanities Council, Lexington, Kentucky.

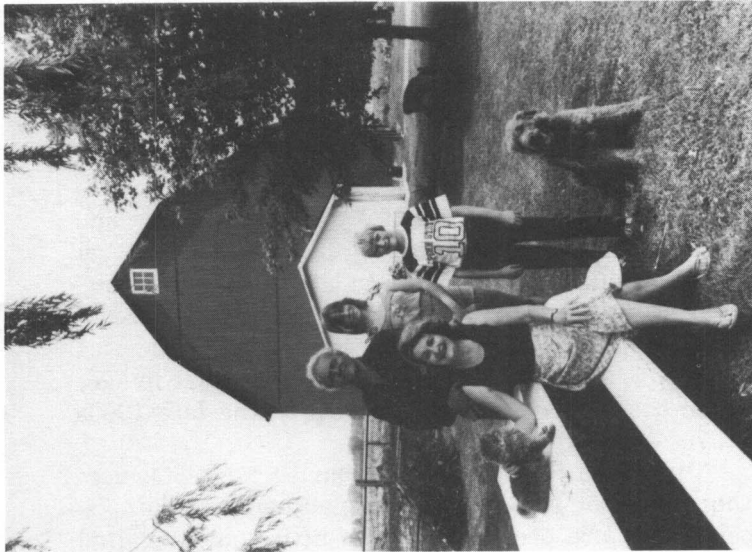
** These films are available from some instructional and commercial film libraries. Copies also are available for loan to Indiana borrowers, free of charge, through the Resource Center, Indiana Committee for the Humanities, 4200 North Michigan Road, Indianapolis, Indiana, 46208 (317/925-5316). A twelve-page pamphlet, "Middletown Teaching Notes," also is available free of charge from the Resource Center.

deed, were it not for Janos Starker's rendition of "My Indiana Home" at the beginning of each program, the Hoosier connection would not have been made by more than a handful of viewers. The series was, in content and structure, clearly designed to speak to America about America and to let the Americans portrayed do the speaking.

In major ways the approach worked. Each of the programs succeeded in giving viewers entry into the lives, concerns, moods, and humanness of the various protagonists. One could not help but be moved by the dilemmas of the pizza parlor owner and his family struggling to keep home and business afloat; by the gap between the hopes and the hard realities faced by the couple contemplating marriage the second time around; by the shyness of the Republican candidate and the past mistakes of the Democrat; by the quest for personal goodness and the hard rock of human nature as they shaped the lives of the family belonging to a fundamentalist church.

The lives portrayed were those of average people—the middle strata of middle America. Davis's America is 'just folks,' as the saying goes: neither black nor rich, neither fools nor genuises, neither heroes nor villains. One suspects that Robert and Helen Lynd, the authors of the original *Middletown* series, would have argued that the center of the series hit just below the middle of Muncie's classes on that hazy line where white collars show some blue. Thus, the series is not best seen as finding the heart of middle America—lower middle would be more accurate. Whether consciously or not, Davis focused mostly on an America that harks back to popular images of the 1930s or to the "Honeymooner" lifestyle of the Cramdens and the Nortons in the 1950s. These are good people who have yet to (or may never) make it, but who aren't out of the running, and whose portraits are further softened by the absence of stridency or bitterness. In this sense the lower-middle America portrayed here differs from the Archie Bunker, hardhat images that dominated the media's middle America in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The underlying sanity and frailty of Davis's Middletowners is the tie that binds the series. The personae here are quintessential copers. They are people who have little understanding of the economic, technological, and demographic forces impinging on their lives. In that, of course, they are us, no matter who we are. Virtually every sequence in the series examines one or another coping style or situation: the local politicians groping for popularity; the use of old-fashioned religion as a gyroscope



LOCAL RESIDENTS FEATURED IN TWO OF THE MIDDLETOWN FILMS: THE TOBEY FAMILY (LEFT), FROM "COMMUNITY OF PRAISE," AND HOWIE SNIDER, FROM "FAMILY BUSINESS"

Photos by Elliott Erwitt/Magnum, Courtesy of Indiana Committee for the Humanities, Indianapolis.

in dealing with family problems; the resort to informal group therapy in a family uncomfortable with religion as its guide; the transparent, peculiarly American need to transform the pleasant game of basketball into a semi-philosophical, quasi-religious creed.

Unfortunately, the sanity and humanness with which most Muncieites try to cope with vague but powerful forces are less apparent in the series because of the decision made at P.B.S. not to air a sixth program that focused on adolescent culture in Muncie. Containing language and behavior that appalled local residents and several series sponsors, the offending sequence was dropped. Had it been aired and taken in the context of the series as a whole, one suspects that it would simply have provided balance to the series as a variant on mainstream styles of coping in middle America. One can appreciate the local apprehension that led to protest against airing the sequence yet wish that those offended by it could understand that the value of the series was needlessly damaged by their actions.

Assessing *Middletown Revisited* as a contribution to our understanding of the nature, origins, and meaning of patterns of late-twentieth-century life is difficult. Despite the series' pedigrees, which include the involvement of fine scholars and the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Indiana Committee for the Humanities, it was clearly not designed to translate scholarly findings for the general public or to provide scholarly perspective on field research done with camera and tape. As a document, *Middletown Revisited* is perhaps better seen as a work in the Tocquevillian tradition, particularly in the branch of that tradition exemplified by modern popular literary and cinematic commentaries on American culture and life. It is an analytic piece only to the degree that its featured families and individuals are analytical; it is an artistic piece to the degree that Davis succeeds through cinema verité in making his subjects appear real and whole. Ironically, therefore, its artistic success is its analytical failure. In execution, if perhaps not in conceptualization, *Middletown Revisited* is in, but not of, the true Tocquevillian tradition. It is a portrait of, not a documentary on, America. It is cinematic art, not cinematic humanities.

The failure even to attempt to provide context or commentary on the views, feelings, and actions of the protagonists in *Middletown Revisited* is puzzling. Filmmakers are wont to remind academics that film works best as a portrayer of feeling, mood and action; that, cinematically, context must arise from

within the film itself, not as an arbitrary intrusion of scholarly words. Yet we can all think of cases where "talking heads" have, in fact, worked well—some of us may even admire the likes of Alistair Cooke and Carl Sagan. That contrary examples abound says nothing about the potential to use external as well as internal commentary in filmmaking. My suspicion is that filmmakers who abjure "talking heads" do so as artists alternately appalled at the thought of ruining perfectly good footage with stuffy academic postscripts or aggrieved at the possibility that the commentator might steal the show. It seems unlikely that a filmmaker of Davis's calibre would fall victim to the former problem; as to the latter, one need only remember that for all the exposure *Cosmos* gave to Sagan, it hardly hurt the reputation of the producer, Adrian Malone.

The fact that Davis was unwilling or unable to sense his subjects' inability to provide context themselves, and unwilling (*not* unable) to do anything to fill that vacuum was, in the end, doubly detrimental to the series. Lacking context, *Middletown Revisited* falls short as a truly exceptional inquiry into its subject, just as *Democracy in America* would have had Tocqueville, like most traveller-essayists, been content to describe what he saw. Moreover, its failure to provide context may well account for the success of the protests leading to cancellation of the controversial episode. Admittedly, this is an assertion, but it is an assertion premised on the critical role that interpretation plays in helping people decide what to make of controversial acts or works. Abjuration of that role has numerous risks. For *Middletown Revisited* and its audience, the price was paid twice.

To lament the ramifications of the producer's decision to ignore the value of context and assessment is not, however, to say that *Middletown Revisited* lacks quality or significance. Thinking about the meaning of behavior requires a body of texts that scholars and citizens can interpret, separately or together. *Middletown Revisited* is such a text, often a compelling and provocative one. So long as it is understood as an impressionistic, highly personal revelation of the hearts and minds of a special segment of America caught in the act of coping, its place in the American tradition of self-examination will be neither ignored nor exaggerated. While it does not deepen or amend the work of scholars like the Lynds, it verifies the experiential reality that, among other things, lures middle Americans to the tales of coping—comedic and melodramatic—that saturate late-century popular culture in America. Having

viewed this series, this reviewer feels no closer to understanding why modern times produce one response or another but better able to understand why many Americans relate so well to the likes of Laverne and Shirley.