

Home movies as personal archives in autobiographical documentaries

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to study the use of home movies in films made with an autobiographical approach, in which the film-makers employ domestic material as personal archives in their quest to build a narrative out of their lives and the lives of their families. I will propose three different ways in which home movies are recycled in this context: naturalization, contradiction and historicization. These three approaches show the diversity and richness of meanings that these personal archives acquire when they become public in autobiographical films. For this analysis, I will draw from the work of film-makers such as Ross McElwee, Lise Yasui, Alina Marazzi or Michal Aviad.

Keywords: home movies, autobiography, documentary, recycling, archives, family memoir

The use of archival material in documentary film-making, although a common practice in the field, has received little attention from researchers in past decades, with the exception of Jay Leyda’s highly regarded study of compilations films, *Films Beget Films* (1964). However, within the last few years there has been a growing interest in this topic, as can be seen, for instance, in the increasing number of related papers presented in the Visible Evidence conferences. This article aims to analyse a particular case of recycling archival material: the home movies employed as personal archives in autobiographical documentaries, exploring the different uses and values that they take when set up in the new context of public documentaries.

This interest in the recycling of archive material in documentaries can be situated within the growing attention given to the role of the archive in cultural practices. Contemporary scholars and archivists are moving away from an understanding of the archive as a stable source, an autonomous document of a historical fact, arriving at a more open understanding, conscious of the importance of its contexts of origin and its contemporary reception in order to fully grasp its meanings. As Terry Cook says, ‘the archive is now seen increasingly as the site where social memory has been (and is) constructed [...]. The record thus becomes a cultural signifier, a mediated and ever-

changing construction, not some empty template into which acts and facts are poured' (2001: 27). This does not mean, as Cook himself asserts, that 'everything is adrift in a sea of meaningless relativism. [...] It does mean that meaning is relative to the context of the creation of the record' (2001: 27).

This understanding of the archive as a place where social memory is constructed acquires a specific dimension when those materials are home movies, as scholars such as Patricia R Zimmermann, Rogin Odin or Julia J. Noordegraaf and Pouw have pointed out. At the introduction of the anthology she co-edited with Karen Ishizuka, Zimmermann states openly that home movies do not work as a unified discourse, but rather as 'complex, sedimentary, active and contradictory practices of imaginative and transformative historiography' (2008: 17). Noordegraaf and Elvira Pouw follow Zimmermann's position when studying the family films made available to the public by the Nederlands Filmmuseum. This change of status makes the attribution of meaning to family films 'an open and dynamic process, mediated by the various contexts through which the material travels' (Noordegraaf and Pouw 2009: 97). Odin, addressing specifically the appropriation of home movies by contemporary film-makers, defends the new values that come from this practice, rejecting a simple and stereotypical use of domestic footage. Odin refers to its different uses in contemporary film-making, from a visual document to illustrate past times to what he considers the most interesting case, the exploration of its contradictions as a document, coming from readings as different as documentarist, private, emotional, historical or fictional (2008: 265–66).

Incorporating home movies into personal documentaries

This general framework, although briefly outlined, helps situate the specific case of home movies recycled by autobiographical film-makers. The work of these film-makers shows how home movies, placed within autobiographical settings, offer first of all valuable traces for the identity search of the film-makers, who return to their origins as a necessary framework for understanding themselves, especially when those roots arise from the crossing of diverse ethnic, religious or national identities. At the same time, in their new setting, these home movies take on unexpected resonances, open themselves to new meanings and provide complementary visions to the macrohistorical narratives or to the social dominant frames provided by the media.

There is in fact an autobiographical dimension in the very nature of home movies, if we understand autobiography in a wider sense, as authors such as Elspeth Kydd have pointed out (2012: 187–88). Taking the classical autobiographical pact of Philippe Lejeune (1989) as the guiding theoretical framework, we can say that home moviemaking shows identification between the author and the subject, not in an individual sense, but taking the family as the identity unit. This idea is reinforced by observing the frequent

change of roles between filming and filmed subjects in this kind of film-making, a phenomenon accentuated with digital technologies. One might object that in home movies there is no explicit authorship – the ‘signature’ of Lejeune – to authenticate the link between the film-maker and the people filmed, but this leads to another essential characteristic of home movies: its unfinished nature until they are projected at home (Odin 1995: 31–32). That is when the ‘signature’ is spelled out, through the verbal commentary of their public, the members of the family.¹

One might say, reformulating the autobiographical pact of Lejeune, that in order for home moviemaking to exist as such, we need to add a new element beyond the classical identity between author, narrator and characters into the pact: the public. Home movies can be defined therefore as an ‘autobiographical’ filmic mode defined by the identity between author, characters and public, taking the family as the unit of that identity.²

This autobiographical understanding is obviously reinforced when film-makers working within an autobiographical context employ their family snapshots and home movies in the explorations of their personal identities. Those cases – which Michael Renov defines as domestic ethnography (1999: 141–43) – show a distinctive quality in relation with the standard use of home movies as archive material. For those film-makers, home movies are not just visual illustrations of other times and people, populated by anonymous characters. In this latter case, home movies add a strong sense of authenticity by being a visual document not altered by commercial or corporate interests, reinforcing the indexical character of the images and their value as ‘documents’ from other times. But despite the truth value attached to them, they remained somehow mute, enclosed in their anonymity, preventing us from knowing their real stories, almost asking us for help in being saved from that world of obscurity. This is cleverly shown at the beginning of Alan Berliner’s film *The Sweetest Sound* (2001), his personal research about the meaning of his proper name and, by extension, of any proper name. Berliner talks there about his need to name the characters of the anonymous home movies he sometimes uses in his films, to fill the void posed by those unknown characters: ‘I’ve been collecting old home movies now for more than twenty years. Maybe because I’ve used them in a number of my films, I’ve come to know these people as old friends. But it’s always being a mystery who they really are and the fact I don’t know their names.’

In contrast, when autobiographical film-makers, like Berliner himself, use snapshots and home movies of their own families, different dynamics are generated, beginning with the fact of naming the people in those movies. That deictic act of recognizing those images as theirs, usually conveyed through the film-maker’s voice-over, testifies to their real existence in the historical world, placing them in a specific time and place, in the family narrative explored by the film-makers. The use of their home movies becomes ‘mediated memory objects’ – to use the term proposed by Jose

Van Dijck (2007: 21) – that help film-makers travel metaphorically to their origin, an almost necessary step for so many autobiographical endeavours. The home movie could be understood therefore as a paradigmatic example of that comprehension of the archive as the mediator for the impossible return to the places of origin, proposed by Derrida and so aptly commented by Carolyn Steedman: ‘In *Archive Fever*, desire for the archive is presented as part of the desire to find, or locate, or possess that moment of origin, as the beginning of things’ (2001: 3).

The autobiographical film-makers do not look at their domestic images primarily as historical or social documents; they look at them as members of the original audience of the films, their families, participating of the ‘affiliative look’ elicited by the familial images, ‘through which we [the members of the family] are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative’ (Hirsch 1997: 93). The contemporary recycling of their home movies can be understood then as an extension of the very process of home moviemaking, which is not finished until the films are projected and commented on by the family members, creating an ephemeral soundtrack missing in the filmstrip. Now the film-maker is usually adding those comments in the soundtrack, fixing them forever for anyone coming to see the film. This provides the audience with the guidelines to contextualize the images, enabling them to somehow share the ‘affiliative look’ of the original family. This new contextualization is nevertheless provoking a major change in the original domestic footage, which takes it away from the standard family experience: they cease being something that belongs to a limited audience of family and friends and become public documents. This change of status constitutes a major challenge for the film-makers when using family films. They need to provide enough reasons for that personal archive to be part of a public film, so that the spectator does not feel like an intruder, but rather part of that family, a welcome guest to the family screening.

Nevertheless, the incorporation of home movies into autobiographical narratives is not a fixed process, and can take different forms and meanings. In the second part of the article I will analyse these different meanings, following partially the taxonomy proposed by Rebecca Swender (2009) to examine the broader practice of inserting archival footage in documentaries. Swender sets up three basic strategies: naturalization, contradiction and underscoring of conventional specificity. I will not take into account the third one, since it seems quite improbable to find domestic images with a conventional specificity for the general public. I am adding instead a new one, historicization, to explore the social and historical implications brought about for this type of archival use.

A primary recycling: naturalization

The first type of recycling home movies in an autobiographical documentary coincides with the standard use of so much archival footage in documentary practice, keeping its original set of values, the standard roles attached to it. Swender refers to that practice as naturalization, which happens, according to her, ‘when the capacity of instability of meaning is deemphasized’ (2009: 6). This is the case of many autobiographical documentaries in which home movies are mainly inserted to visually support the film-maker’s narrative.

The most literal cases of this type are found in the films composed – completely or in their most part – of home movies shot by some relative one or two generations older, with the contemporary film-maker serving as intermediary between the family footage and the viewing public. This is the case of films such as *Letter Without Words* (USA, Lewenz, 1998), *El misterio de los ojos escarlata/The Mystery of the Scarlet Eyes* (Venezuela, Anzola, 1993), or *La línea paterna/The Paternal Line* (México, Buil, 1994). In these three cases we are very close to what Paul John Eakin has defined in literature as ‘proximate collaborative autobiography’ (1999: 175–82), referring to narratives about some relative or close friend, with two people speaking in the first person, and the authors talking about their lives while recounting those of their loved ones. In *Letter Without Words*, this is taken to the point of Lisa Lewenz literally sharing the authorship of the film with her grandmother, Ella, an amateur film-maker in Germany during the 1930s. The film-maker is honouring the work of Ella, shot in the years before leaving Germany in 1938 and discovered almost by chance by the granddaughter in 1981. With this material, plus a diary and a collection of letters, Lisa Lewenz constructed a chronicle of Germany between the wars, shown largely through the home movies of Ella, blending the historical processes and the domestic affairs into a single narrative. In some ways, *A Letter Without Words* comes close to the compilation film, but the link between both film-makers, Lisa and Ella, gives this film a distinctive perspective, coming from that singular family encounter via the cinema.

Nevertheless, it is more usual that the home movies of the film-maker’s family become one of several visual sources in the film, short in duration, although quite often very relevant in the identity quest proposed by the film. I will briefly analyse here one specific case, as exemplary of this practice: the films of the American film-maker Ross McElwee, where one can see how home movies function as family documents of his personal narrative and how their meaning is amplified through editing and the voice-overs.³ This is observed with a special resonance in his film *Time Indefinite* (1993). While making this film, McElwee had to cope with the deaths of his grandmother and his father. He returns to the empty family house after the death of his father, and there he finds a previously undiscovered home movie of his parents’ wedding, shot by one of his uncles. He inserts it in his film, commenting in the voice-over: ‘Mother and dad looked so young

here... I wish I could believe my parents have gone home, as Lucille says, that they are in Heaven, looking down at me'. This footage reawakens in him an appreciation for those moments of happiness already past, bringing to the fore one of the most basic values of home movies when revisited after a long temporal span: their power to keep the ancestors 'alive' in celluloid for generations to come.

This fascination with home movies is also observed in another sequence of *Time Indefinite*, in his commentary on footage shot on the day of his baptism, which captivates him not only because it shows his mother, who has already passed away, but also because

there is something about the images themselves. It is the way everything seems to shimmer in the light of that particular, ordinary Sunday morning. The way everything is in movement, the shadows, the light, the handheld camera. And there is the slight camera shyness of my parents, shyness mixed with happiness and pride. Everything is sort of quivering with the kind of life that would be very difficult to reenact.

McElwee is underscoring here the disinterested authenticity associated with home movie making, coming also from its formal signs, such as the type of grain or the shooting defects.⁴ That perception is enhanced by the circumstances that lead to McElwee's viewing of the home movies, marked by the contrast between the physical absence of his loved ones and their vicarious presence in the archival footage. This contrast reappears in the final section of the film, when he combines domestic footage he has shot with his reflections in the voice-over:

Over the last fifteen years, I edited and reedited this footage I shot of my family, using it in various films I've made. But now I wonder if this just hasn't been a way of fondling the footage, trying to massage it back to life. Maybe I've been trying to preserve things in the present, somehow keep everyone alive in some sort of time indefinite.

This 'time indefinite', which gives the film its title, can be understood as the sort of time that exists in home movies – in an extended sense, the time inherent in autobiographical cinema – which provides a kind of eternity to the fleeting moments of our lives, 'mummifying' changes - as André Bazin would say (2005: 11-12) - and releasing them from the corruption of time.

Nevertheless, McElwee's scrutiny of home movies becomes more sceptical in his film *Bright Leaves* (2003). The passing of time makes more evident that the reality presented by home movies is a limited one, as he says in the voice-over:

In these images, as time goes by, my father is beginning to seem less and less real to me, almost a fictional character. I want so much to reverse this shift, the way in

which the reality of him is slipping away. Having this footage doesn't help very much, or at least not as much as I thought it would.

The images that we see are the same ones he used in *Time Indefinite* when he was commenting on the struggle to preserve his family in that 'indefinite time'. The re-evaluation now proposed in *Bright Leaves* does not invalidate his first interpretation; rather it wraps it in a nostalgic glow, adding new perspectives to its mythical force, anchoring it in a more existentialist experience of the ephemeral nature of time.

A different type of resonance, related but not so clearly present in McElwee's films, is visible in the film *Family Gathering* (USA, 1998), by Lise Yasui, where the compelling force of home movies as preserving the past comes to the fore in suggestive ways. The film-maker made a film about the incarceration of her family during the Second World War because of being Japanese American, focusing on the story of her grandfather (and by extension, of the rest of the family). She uses public archival footage on a few occasions to give a minimum of historical framing of that persecution of the Japanese American community in the United States, but her main sources are domestic: interviews with her relatives, family letters, photographs and home movies. Yasui's research was prompted not so much by the exploration of the traumas left by the internment of her family, but out of curiosity about her grandparents, who featured in the home movies that her father regularly screened for her family. As she says in the voice-over, whenever the grandparents appeared, "my father went long into a family tale about the early years, ending with some morals about hard work and study. Or else, he said nothing at all. The less he said, the more curious I became." That urge to know about her family's past took shape in her making of this film, which finally brought into the open the real cost of that period: her grandfather, a community leader before the war, never really recovered from the incarceration and committed suicide when he was 71 years old. It took 28 years for her father to tell her this, during the making of the film.

In Yasui's search, her father's home movies play a fundamental role as both the route to knowledge of her family past as well as the barrier blocking her from trespassing into that past, as she says later in the film:

I expected that one day, my dad would tell me about the traumas of his past, but he never did. Instead he showed home movies [...]. For me, they represented the boundary between the father I knew and the father whose real feelings about his past might always remain hidden from me.

These home movies, along with the narration given by her father during the family projections, provided Lise Yasui with a cohesive framework for understanding family events. Some of them acquire in the film a strong factuality, emphasized by the film-maker's voice-over, as, for example, when we see a child and she says: 'This is me in 1959'. But others lose that supposed factuality, to the extent of serving as the source of

invented memories, as we can see in the beginning and end of *Family Gathering*. Here, in one of the most suggestive scenes, Yasui shows a home movie of the grandparents visiting her family, while she tells us about her favourite memory of one day when she met her grandparents and stayed up late at night listening to them. The meeting never happened, but for Yasui it is a vivid part of her memories, of a family past articulated from the home movie sessions of her father. Yasui does not seem to trouble herself about that made-up memory, as if she is vindicating the oft-quoted reflection of Chris Marker in his film *Sans Soleil*: ‘We do not remember. We rewrite memory much as history is rewritten’. No matter that the data contradict Yasui’s memory (as the home movie confirms: she is not in the image). Because in some, more symbolic way, she belongs to that scene, since her memory of the event comes from watching the home movie, a communal experience in which that invented memory took shape long time ago.

Home movies’ contrasting and contradictory values

A second type of recycling home movies happens when their standard meanings are contested or contradicted. It coincides with the second strategy – contradiction – that Swender proposes for recycling archival footage. As she explains, it happens when the main text destabilizes the meaning of the original archive incorporated, exposing its supposed truth claim or adding new context that fills it out with supplementary meanings (2009: 7–8). Autobiographical film-makers resort to this strategy quite often when using home movies while narrating traumatic events in their family past, forcing the contrast between the standard happy portraits of domestic footage and the harsh events of their family past, usually conveyed by the voice-over of the film-maker or interviews with family members.

This is the case in films such as Alan Berliner’s *Nobody’s Business* (USA, 1996), Mary Trunk’s *The Watershed* (USA, 2004) or Dough Block’s *51 Birch Street* (USA, 2006). In these cases, the spectator can observe how the happy images of the home movies acquire different meanings depending on the scenes in which they are placed. While they describe an ordinary family, those home movies function as a visual complement to the soundtrack. But the spectators are forced to revise that understanding as the films advance and they learn more about the families. Of the three films mentioned above, this is most prominent in *The Watershed*. During the first minutes of the film, the film-maker Mary Trunk (one of the daughters) narrates the happy first years of her family, helped by her relatives, and illustrated by the typical home movies made by the family. But that happy story breaks down when her father abandons the family for another woman. Trunk reconstructs this rupture with the testimonies of both her father and her mother, but she resorts again to happy home movies to illustrate very different events. The contrast, though obvious, is strongly poignant in expressing the turmoil of the breakdown through the naive images of family happiness. The frozen past of those home

movies now acquire new meanings that were never originally intended when filmed, after suffering the double exposition to the passing of time and the opening to public viewing. They still keep their truth value as the visual testimony of a past time, but their new context provides them with a new set of meanings, stripping them down from their happy connotations, and laying them bare and isolated in the face of an uncertain future. In this sense, they become more like ruins of a better past, underlying the fragmentary recollection offered by home movies, in their selected remembrances of celebratory and happy moments.

This use of family archival footage can also be understood as a particular version of what Marianne Hirsch calls ‘postmemory’, which the author explains as the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right (1997: 22). Hirsch is talking of traumatic macrohistorical events, with a concrete focus on the Holocaust, but her emphasis on family photographs as key documents to fill the generational gap in this process of postmemory makes feasible a translation of her concept to the role played by home movies in this type of documentaries. This concept works very well for explaining films like the one already mentioned, *Family Gathering*, where the film-maker was trying to come to terms with historical traumatic events that struck her family deeply, using the home movies of her father to fill the gap separating her and the generation of her grandfather. In a broader sense, it can also be applied to other autobiographical films, when the traumatic memories do not refer to public events, nor belong strictly to a former generation since the children were part of those events. But since they were somehow outsiders in their parent’s crisis, passive victims of the breakdown, it will require reaching adulthood before they will be able to re-evaluate that traumatic past, resorting to the home movies as the memory linkage between generations.

An interesting case in this context is the Italian film *Un’ora sola ti vorrei/For One More Hour with You* (Marazzi, 2002), mainly made using the home movies of the film-maker’s mother shot by her grandfather.⁵ The film shows the effort of Alina Marazzi to come to terms with her mother, who spent many years in psychiatric centres and finally committed suicide, when the film-maker was 7 years old. When she was older, she decided to read her mother’s letters and watch her grandfather’s home movies, which provides a visual biography of her mother’s life. With this material Marazzi begins a process of personal recuperation of her family history, articulated in some ways along the two axis proposed by Hirsch for the work of postmemory: reconstruction and mourning. Once again the home movies – like the photographs for Hirsch – constitute an ambivalent link, with their capacity ‘to signal absence and loss and, at the same time, to make present, rebuild, reconnect, bring back to life’ (1997: 243). Formally, Marazzi contrasts the home movies and other visual records with the staged voice of her mother, who

addresses her daughter in first person from an extradiegetic present or reads fragments of her diaries, letters or even medical reports. These testimonies supply the film with a deep tragic feeling of loss, complicating our reading of the happy home movies. We may venture that the own home movies are charged with an intense sadness, as if announcing the tragic ending of Marazzi's mother. The close-ups of her mother's face, as seen for instance in the early scene of the wedding, show an elegiac elegance that condense visually the whole tension of the film. At the end, *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* stands out as a moving film, in which one of the possible saddest stories, the tragic life of a mother, is told with the support of one of the happiest visual materials one can think of, the family's home movies.

Delving into history through the family archive

A third set of values in home movies recycled in autobiographical films is linked to their dimension as witnesses of historical events and times. It is not rare that sometimes home moviemakers look at public events happening in their environments or become unexpected witnesses to events of their times (the Zapruder film comes to mind inevitably in this context). But besides that, home movies by themselves become with the passing of time valuable visual witness of the ordinary life of past time and societies. As Odin says, 'family filmmakers are involuntary endotic anthropologists: they film those moments of life that professionals ignore [...] Home movies are sometimes the only records of some racial, ethnographic, cultural, social communities marginalized by the official version of history' (2008: 263). The family archive becomes then another source of historical documentation, providing a microhistorical perspective often absent from the standard public histories. This approach has found a significant place in contemporary documentaries – somehow paralleling the historiographical trends that promote a history of the ordinary life or a microhistory⁶ – as can be seen, for instance, in the well-known films of the Hungarian film-maker Péter Forgács (working in his case in a non-autobiographical context).

This historical relevance of home movies comes to the front most literally in some films where the film-makers are mostly compiling material shot by their ancestors with a more amateurish look,⁷ as happens in the films already mentioned *A Letter without Words*, *El misterio de los ojos escarlata* and *La línea paterna*. This amateur condition made them more aware of their role as witnesses of their time, particularly in connection to public events or local traditions shot in a more ethnographic style. This is mostly visible in *El misterio de los ojos escarlata*, where Alfredo J. Anzola brings together footage shot by his father Edgar in the early decades of the twentieth century, showing a rather unfamiliar portrait of the country, even for the Venezuelan people. *La línea paterna* becomes more intimate, but still maintains a powerful sense of the traditions and

social customs of Papantla, the region where José Buil, the grandfather of the actual film-maker, lived for many years.

Assuming a more personal approach, we encounter remarkable films where the socio-historical framework is a prominent factor in the way the film-makers recycle the home movies belonging to their families, usually because their personal quest leads necessarily to those social or historical contexts. This is the case of *Yidl in the Middle* (USA, 1999). Its film-maker, Marlene Booth, reviews what it was like to be a Jew from the 1940s onward in Iowa, in a community where Jewish people were a minority. She uses her family home movies in a naturalized way, showing their original meaning as visual support for her autobiographical narrative. But she goes further, since the home movies become a key visual proof of one of her main points: how her family struggled between identification with the community and fidelity to Jewish customs and traditions. Those home movies, in their naive and casual way of film-making, show both the eagerness for identification and the struggle coming from being a minority. The film-maker summarizes this struggle in the final minutes of the film, showing how her home movies become the site where the public and private, the historical and the personal mingle:

Watching these home movies, it could be any family, but it isn't. It's mine. And when I look at them, I see how eager we were to be just as Iowa as possible. Growing up with two distinct sides gave me a unique perspective. I bring my differences with me, wherever I go, myself a middle ground between extremes. I am at home with this tension. I am learning now to see difference and to seek common ground. Maybe that's what it means to be a yiddle in the middle.

Two other films – *For My Children* and *Following Sean* – could serve as more pristine examples of that historicized tension that arises in the autobiographical recycling of home movies. In *For My Children* (Israel, 2002), set in Israel at the time of the second intifada, film-maker Michal Aviad is motivated to make her film by a very personal and urgent question: what kind of country we are leaving for our children (she is mother of two)? She composes a portrait of Israel from a critical and personal perspective, mixing different modes of film-making with an ease that makes the blending very powerful in terms of rhetorical and historical representation. Aviad employs material typical of standard historical documentaries, such as historical archives, TV news reporting on public events, or interviews with the family's grandparents. She blends these materials with more autobiographical formats such as diary filming in the house she was living in at the time, home movies of both their time living in California in the early nineties as well as more recent family events, and even several e-mails between herself and her friends in California about the evolution of the events, their fears and anxieties.

With all these materials, Aviad offers a rich representation of everyday life, showing the potential of the different domestic formats to represent the quotidian,

especially through the interesting dialogue between her home movies of the past and her present diary shooting. Both modes share a content which could be termed private and sometimes clearly banal, but the diary shooting shows a self-consciousness which makes visible the professional film-maker preparing a film, in contrast with the home movies of California, where there was no public viewing in perspective. Nevertheless, both modes of film-making capture somehow that impressionistic style that Ben Highmore (2002: 24–26) points out as better fitting the representation of ‘everydayness’, since both subject matter and form reflect the improvised, unscripted and sketchy condition of the everyday. This portrait of her family quotidian life is mingled with the public material coming from the media and the public archives, sometimes in an expositive way, but more often meshing or clashing directly with their lives: as when the TV news report on the intifada, triggering a critical commentary by both she and her husband; or as when she interviews the grandparents, who played an important role in the construction of the State of Israel. Shifting between the personal and historical, private and public, *For My Children* offers, through a microhistorical perspective, a complex portrait of those people and events, so often stereotyped by their saturated presence in mainstream media.

Following Sean (USA, 2006) revolves around other events strongly fixed in the western imagination: the hippy movement of the 1960s. In 1969 film-maker Ralph Arlyck made a short film about a 4-year-old kid, Sean, who lived in San Francisco’s convulsive Haight Ashbury neighbourhood. Three decades after that film, Arlyck returns to San Francisco in search of the adult Sean, but also in search of himself, creating a double portrait – of Sean and himself – as the backbone of the film, with a structure close to the longitudinal documentary. The mingling of temporalities and visual sources is continuous in the film, creating a rich tapestry of images and memories that somehow offer a different portrait of those times, so exploited by the mainstream media. We are confronted with another example of a microhistorical approach to those times and places, seen through the eyes and recollections of two ordinary protagonists, Sean and Ralph, complemented by some of their relatives from different generations: parents, grandparents, wives and children.

As Aviad in *For My Children*, Arlyck employs a broad range of materials in *Following Sean*: the 1969 short about Sean, personal home movies and snapshots from all these years, home movies and amateur material from people living in Haight Ashbury in the 1960s and 1970s, footage from public archives, and contemporary footage shot by him for the film (spanning seven years). In a general overview of the film, there are not many scenes that incorporate his home movies, but they nevertheless become a crucial source for the narrative of his life, key ‘actors’ in his autobiographical retrospection. Confronted with the standard ‘historical’ images of the media, his home movies show – as happened in the films of Ross McElwee – an unspoiled authenticity, as a metaphorical shelter where Arlyck seems to take refuge from the social and personal turmoil of that

time. This comes to the fore in one of the most enduring scenes in the film: the one showing his young wife in the late 1960s shortly after their wedding, questioned by him about what she thinks would happen to them in five years. The truth of that intimate moment shines with a special light 40 years later, pervading the film with a personal perspective from which to judge and evaluate the social and historical episodes of that time.

The revision of the different uses of domestic footage in autobiographical documentaries has shown the wide gamut of values and meanings that home movies can acquire when recycled by the descendants of the original home moviemakers. Many will use the family archive to illustrate their own family and personal stories, naturalizing the home movies in their contemporary films. A sense of nostalgia manifests itself, together with a driving force coming from the indexical nature of the footage that manages somehow to keep the family members alive in the domestic footage. On other occasions, the home movies are played against their traditional happy chronicles, contrasting with the traumatic events lived by the families of the film-makers. Other times, these two strategies give way to or mix with a more historical approach, foregrounding the role of home movies as witnesses of events and times that are looked upon now with a microhistorical approach, revisited by the film-makers exploring their personal and family stories.

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Notes

¹ Obviously, there are other elements typical of the autobiographical mode, understood in a stricter sense, that are missing in home movies, mainly the public condition and the retrospective nature of autobiography.

² I do not consider the narrator here, because the translation of this figure to cinema involves theoretical problems that would distract us from our purpose. Its omission does not invalidate the main thesis.

³ For a more extended study of the films of McElwee, including an analysis of his use of home movies, see Efrén Cuevas and Alberto N. Garcia (2008)

⁴ For a further comparison and analysis of professional, amateur and home movie making, see J. M. Moran (2002).

⁵ For a broader context where to place the analysis of this film, see my chapter in E. Cuevas (2010).

⁶ See the work of historians such as Alf Lüdtke, Giovanni Levi or Carlo Ginzburg. For a good summary of this trend, see the chapter 'On microhistory' in Peter Burke (1992: 97–117).

⁷ Although home movies are sometimes categorized within amateur film practices, it seems more accurate to differentiate both. Usually we refer to amateur films when they are made by non-professional film-makers, but intending to make films following professional standards (including the editing, usually absent in home movies) and to be shown in public.