

SUMMARY

RITUALS OF DOMESTIC HAPPINESS

'History is not the prerogative of the historian', Raphael Samuel once wrote. Indeed, in the last century 'do-it-yourself' history became a common domestic activity. Film and photography offered people new opportunities to record their own history. These media have become so popular that by now it is hard to imagine that someone does not have a photograph, a home movie or a home video. This book is about recording one's own family on film with an amateur film camera. It explores the different meanings of home movie making as a new social and cultural practice of the twentieth century. It is a serious attempt to bring forward home movies as an important historical source.

At first sight, home movies give us plain and easily recognizable images of family life. They have great authentic value that can hardly be surpassed by any other source. Home movies are about the happy life of happy people. In his manual 'How to make your own movie', author Dick Boer writes: 'Making home movies is a hobby for people who want to experience the good moments of life and who wants to keep records of these moments'. Hobby, happy moments and the wish to preserve: these are three important elements of home movie making. In his book Dick Boer constructs an ideal image of an idyllic hobby. But home movie making is not quite as simple as it may appear. In fact, it is a rather complex practice. Consequently, this study explores the practice of home movie making on a historical as well as on a theoretical level. It makes clear that home movie making is not just about film, but also about fatherhood and motherhood, about the role of industry, about media technology and the emergence of a consumption culture, and about the relation between visual culture, cinema, memory and family history.

The first part of the book is about the history of amateur film. This history cannot be separated from the history of the family. As the film camera came to occupy an increasingly important place in the private sphere, amateur film-making quickly turned into a domestic activity]. It became a hobby that had meaning only within the family. Home movie making offered a person the opportunity to pursue his hobby and be part of family life at the

same time. In this process the father played an important role, because most of the time it was the man of the house that used the camera. Much of this had to do with the fact that at the time technology was a gendered affair: for a long time using a film camera remained a purely masculine practice. Buying a camera was also a man's business. Consumption in the twentieth century shows a strong differentiation between man and wife: she decides about the purchase of a flat-iron, a vacuum-cleaner and a washing-machine; he decides about the saw and the car.

But the gender divide in the field of consumerism and technology was not the only determining factor for the history of amateur film. It was also influenced by the rise of a new ideology of domesticity, which not only defined the role of the wife as mother but also a new role of the man as father. Masculine domesticity can be described as a desire of the twentieth-century man to spend time (together) with wife and children in an intimate sphere. Being together means time for leisure, for having fun and for consumption. A hobby like home movie making fitted well into this ideology: it practiced a kind of active and collective form of domesticity that suited every member of the family. One could even say that amateur-film apparatuses stimulated a new kind of fatherhood: one that was more involved – even if it was only on Sunday afternoons – with family life.

Home movie making was a masculine activity but one that could not be practiced without the cooperation of other family members. The results are remarkable, because in many films the father is not visible. He is behind the camera and not in front of it with his family. He is looking at the family. Still, the fact that the film is made presupposes his presence. But at the same time, the father's invisibility articulates his special position in the house. As John R. Gillis would remind us about twentieth-century fatherhood, '[t]hey became the missing presence, literally and figuratively'. Father is there, but at the same time he is not there at all. In the twentieth-century ideology of domesticity (which is based on different roles for man and wife), his presence can only be partial: after six o'clock and in the weekend. He is the man on the threshold, just leaving or just arriving. Filming his children and wife is his attempt to seek intimacy, or to produce a kind of closeness. Or, as Susan Sontag argues, he is 'giving an appearance of participation'.

A hobby like home movie making had its restrictions: it was not allowed to take up too much time of family life. Too much artistic ambition could disturb family peace. It was considered very important that someone filmed the family, but as soon as artistic endeavours became too prominent, that record could be at stake. In the history of amateur film there is a continuous tension between home movie making as a hobby or as a memory. To understand this potential conflict we must explore the specific cultural context of the rise of the amateur-film camera.

The construction of meaning of machines is not something that is fixed or natural. It is a social process. Technology is therefore malleable and changeable: its meaning is a result of more than one development. In case of the amateur film camera, one can see its use as a result of the breakthrough of the amateur film camera as a luxurious consumption article for the middle and upper classes; the rise of the ideology of domestic life that defined leisure as a homely affair; the fact that the purchase of the film camera was presented and marketed as a masculine apparatus and as a result of the presence of amateur film club societies. All these different aspects shaped the sometimes contrasting uses of the film camera. The need to be artistic could impose constraints upon family life if the family was just some material to practise with. This ambiguity that surrounded home movie making was never completely dealt with.

To explore the different uses of home movies it is necessary to look more closely at film collections. In the second part of the book home movies are explored from five different perspectives. It includes film analyses of complete family collections, a single home movie, or in one instance, just one scene.

Home movies that deal with family life during the Second World War offer interesting ways of exploring the relation between the world inside and outside the house, between the private and the public sphere, between personal and national history. By looking at the way people construct their family history during these troubled times, it is possible to analyze the elasticity of the concept of home movies. Many amateur film-makers would continue filming during the war. They seem to focus on family life even more intensely, without too much attention for the outside world. 'It is never more than a hint, for in the album, when family and politics cross, it is always family which takes priority, as if the politics could be denied', Patricia Holland wrote. Perhaps it is a strategy: as long as you put the camera there, there is faith that life goes on; that future generations will look at this part of the family history.

The home movie genre can include professionally produced 16mm or 8mm films, especially when it comes to certain social events like weddings. This makes wedding movies into a special category. In the twenties and thirties film factories, and sometimes local studios, produced wedding movies on commission. As a result, this genre is different in style compared to many other home movies: it is much more formal and conventional. At the same time, a growing tension builds up between the need for more personal and informal filmmaking instead of the more formal traditions.

Most home movies are about fathers looking at their children. But what do they see? How do they want to record their children lives? In this book,

we follow a small child through the eyes of her father. One of his many films is a twenty-minute portrait of her first year when she grows up from a small and helpless baby into a young walking toddler. This film analysis is not just about the way a father looks at his child, but also about the way his passion for her affects the film form. From a film theoretical point of view it is interesting to analyze how much he is willing to let form prescribe the events that take place in front of the camera, or the other way round: does he accept that events prescribe the form? Is home movie making about emotion or about film making?

In the chapter about a Catholic family we see many moments of catholic life in front of the camera. But there is more than that: the film maker is not just recording, but he shows a strong awareness of catholic iconographical and filmic traditions. We can see how working in a tight catholic culture can turn a home movie into a propaganda-like film about the value of large catholic families.

Historical self-consciousness and the cultivation of iconographical traditions are very much present in a particular film scene that is the subject of the last chapter. In a film collection of an upper-class family we see how a member of the family tries to imitate a forty-year-old family photograph with a film camera. Because the film-maker fails to portray the family in one camera shot, it immediately brings up all kinds of questions about style, formal traditions, social conventions, and the difference between film and photography.

After more than hundred years of amateur film, it becomes interesting to explore how new forms of media technology and uses of media have influenced the tradition of home movie making. In the epilogue, more recent developments are outlined. Until well into the seventies, amateur film remained cinema, which means film being shown on the silver screen. To see one's family history on the television-set became only possible after the introduction of the video recording machine (VCR). It then took some time for consumers to be able to pay for an easily manageable video system. But when it did become available, it meant a change in the practice of watching television and watching one's family history. In some cases it made the recorded history easier to watch. Old collections that were severely damaged and sometimes hardly possible to be watched at all could be transferred to video to receive a second life. And with the arrival of the remote control, it became possible to play back and forth between present times and history.

These new developments meant the end of the monopoly of the man behind the camera. In some cases the wife, or widow, could now operate the video set. By the end of the twentieth century new digital technologies

made it even simpler to reproduce historical moving images. More than that: these images – who gain authentic value so easily – can be manipulated by younger generators. The children or grandchildren of the man behind the camera now recreate his family history.