
CREATIVE ARTICLE

More than Memories: Studying Home Movies and the Families Who Made Them

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At the 2005 Home Movie Day in Chicago, a woman in her late twenties introduced a home movie that her parents made 25 years earlier by stating she had never seen the film before, but it was of her and her siblings playing. That's how the film started, with the children running around in the front yard, performing somersaults, and showing off for the camera. The audience members laughed along to the exuberance of the kids, the kitschy clothes and the father preening in front of his muscle car—enjoyable but fairly common portrayals of family life found in home movies. Then there was a cut to just after the children had gone inside. The parents were still outside in the front lawn. The mother was filming the father close up when he looked right into the camera and gave the mother a look and a facial movement that in no uncertain terms expressed a level of sexual intimacy and closeness between the two. The woman whose film it was

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turned red with embarrassment and the audience laughed; it was a laughter that empathetically recognized the woman's discomfort with witnessing this private expression of her parents, not meant for her and her sibling's viewing. The camera captured a privileged moment of marriage and family life in ways rarely seen in narrative Hollywood films or television.

Unfairly viewed as poorly made and unwatchable, home movies actually constitute a wide variety of events and images that make them an invaluable and largely unexplored resource for scholars and researchers. The images captured in home movies—first birthdays, parades, vacations, family gatherings, etc.—were originally made by family members to preserve memories of joyous events. Outside of the private sphere, home movies become records of cultural heritage and memory, visual evidence of early childhood development, documents of family rituals and gender roles, and in the context of Home Movie Day screenings, among the most enjoyable and moving cinematic events one can attend. While over the last decade or so film scholars and moving image archivists have begun to examine the value, history, and meaning of home movies, they remain a body of primary evidence wide open to study from fields such as social work, anthropology, sociology, and history.

One of the best ways to begin exploring the riches offered by home movies is to attend Home Movie Day, which is an annual event held in cities across the world. Home Movie Day was started in 2002 by a group of film archivists for the twin purposes of highlighting the preservation needs of old home movies shot on small gauge film and creating a venue where people can screen and watch them, often for the first time in decades.

People bring in their old home movies and a staff of volunteer archivists inspects their films and offers recommendations for proper storage and care. The act of winding through reels of film together allows the archivist to inspect the film and show any damage to the owner, but it also acts as an impetus for the owner to reminisce about their life, family, and friends when the film was made. Later that day there is a screening culled from the films gathered together, usually designed so everyone that brought films gets to screen at least one. Since most of these films are silent, people can narrate over their film, informing the audience on the people and places documented, often in a mixture of oral history and performance.

In all of my years of cinephilia and movie watching, I have never had as much fun or as large an emotional reaction to viewing moving images as I do at Home Movie Day. Perhaps due to the friendly spirit in which the event is organized, mixed with immediately identifiable events of family life on screen, there is a palpable sense of intimacy created amongst the audience unlike any other film screening. In some way, the home movies playing on screen imbue a familial atmosphere to the proceedings that takes the ordinary and quotidian and makes them fascinating, hilarious, affecting, and celebratory.

In 2005, the archivists that created Home Movie Day started the Center for Home Movies to “to collect, preserve, provide access to, and promote understanding of home movies” and encourage “the use of home movies in multidisciplinary research and study”. Last year they released a DVD of films brought in to various Home Movie Day organizers called *Living Room Cinema: Films from Home Movie Day, Vol. 1*. The DVD is a great example of the range of home movies from the subjects recorded—high school life, weddings, potty training, vacation, burial of a child’s placenta, the documenting of the end of a subway line—to the demographic and ethnic background of the families who made the films. Further, the films collected reveal the similarities and variety between these disparate families, e.g., footage of Christmas in Thailand in 1920 and an African-American family’s Christmas in New York in 1967. Most of the films on the DVD include commentary by the people involved or their descendants, showing the value these films have as a catalyst for discussing family histories, often using the events shown as a springboard for remembering other unseen family members and stories. For example, in the commentary of a marriage of a deaf couple in Chicago in 1945, their son is able to read their signing and understand his parent’s conversation, a gift that a son in another commentary wishes he could have during the spoken exchanges between his parents in their silent film. (The Center for Home Movies can be reached at info@centerforhomemovies.org and for more information on the DVD, go to <http://www.homemovieday.com/livingroomcinema/index.html>.)

Not on the DVD, but shown at the 2006 Home Movie Day in New Orleans and subsequently added to the National Film Registry, is *Think of Me First as a Person*. Shot between 1960 and 1975, the film is the portrayal of a father dealing with his son’s Down Syndrome. The film deals honestly and openly with the hardships and struggles the family goes through in a way that refuses to make the son a victim

or object of pity, but instead depicts him in a humanizing way that expresses his likes and dislikes, joys, and sorrows. A particularly searing moment occurs when the family decides to send the son to an institution with the father's narration of the event still evincing its raw hurt. For the father, filmmaking was a creative and therapeutic outlet for processing complicated emotions in a way that remains powerful and insightful.

Inspired by Home Movie Day, Professor Jacqueline Stewart of Northwestern University started the South Side Home Project as a way of preserving the films, and therefore the stories and images, of the often neglected communities in Chicago's South Side. In addition to collecting and transferring the films to digital video, the South Side Home Movie Project interviews the family who made the films with the goal of eventually making the films and oral histories available to the community and researcher. Additionally, the project works to collect images and stories that counteract the commonly held stereotypes about life on Chicago's South Side—stereotypes that ignore the diversity between ethnic groups and within the African-American community. According to Professor Stewart, descendants of the filmmakers express pride at their parents' achievements in business and raising a family in spite of the racism and segregation experienced by Blacks in Chicago. The home movies their parents shot become an emblem of their successes and show a multi-faceted African-American home and civic life. Further, the project was created with the premise that films stored in family's basements and garages across the South Side constitute an archive of knowledge as valuable and important as that coming from academia. Therefore, the interview process with the families is considered a collaborative process in assigning meaning to the films and stories collected and in determining the direction the project takes. (For more information on the South Side Home Project, go to www.southsidehome-movies.org.)

On the other spectrum of utilizing home movies in research, there is "Autism and Family Home Movies: A Comprehensive Review" by Ruben Palemo, Mercedes Belinchon, and Sally Ozonoff (*Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 27, April 2006, S59–S68). The paper is a meta-analysis of studies that use home movies to diagnose and document autism in early childhood development. The authors compare disparate studies along common methodological lines and find that the behavior documented in these home movies confirms

theoretical models and prospective studies regarding developmental differences at 12 months and the difficulties in social orienting. For all of the difficulties in using home movies—small sample size and no experimental control—one major advantage the authors describe is the “ecological validity” found in home movies that allow for observation untainted by the artificiality of the laboratory.

These projects and studies point to the wide range of research and disciplines that can utilize home movies. These films afford scholars a unique entry into the private and domestic lives of families and communities. Therefore, it is crucial that we repay the hospitality of the filmmakers as we take their intimate moments into the public worlds of science, public health, academia, and film studies by being respectful, ethical, and collaborative.

This year Home Movie Day will be on Saturday, October 18. For more information and to find nearby locations, go to www.homemovie.com.

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