

THE ELECTRICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: HOME VIDEO, THE
FAMILY, AND THE LIMITS OF PRIVACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

By

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ABSTRACT

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One of the constituent features of the digital age has been the redrawing of the line between private and public. Millions of social media users willingly discuss intimate behavior and post private photographs and videos on the internet. Meanwhile, state and corporate bodies routinely violate individual privacy in the name of security and sophisticated marketing techniques. While these occurrences represent something new and different, they are unsurprising given the history of home and amateur media.

In this dissertation, I argue that contemporary shifts in the nature of the public/private divide have historical roots in the aesthetics and style found in home movies and videos. In other words, long before Facebook and YouTube enabled users to publicly document their private lives, home movies and videos generated patterns of representation that were already shifting the unstable constitution of the “private” and the “public” spheres.

Using critical theory and archival research, I demonstrate how home moviemakers represented their families and experiences in communal and liminal spaces, expanding the meaning of “home.” When video became the predominant medium for domestic usage, home mode artifacts became imbricated with television, granting them a form of phantasmagoric publicity that found fulfillment in the digital era. Finally, I analyze select films, including *Rachel Getting Married* (Jonathan Demme, 2008) and *Family Viewing* (Atom Egoyan, 1988), to understand the implications of home video for the narration of family history and the depiction of the family home. In these analyses I pay particular attention to the scope and the limits of

video's power to narrate family history, and the colonizing power of video's representations over our intimate family and national spaces.

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INTRODUCTION:

THE NOT-SO PRIVATE REC-ORD

The video opens with a shot of a bouquet and the date – July 28, 1991 – superimposed over it. It fades to a title card with the names of the bride and groom, Sherry and Mark. “Leather and Lace” by Stevie Nicks plays in the background, a love song emphasizing give and take, a gendered play of strength and fragility common to the genre - not be an unusual sentiment for a wedding. Abruptly we cut to a long shot of the church ceremony’s conclusion, with Mark lifting Sherry’s veil to kiss her. Another cut brings us outside the church, where the couple walks down the steps to the waiting limousine. Mark seems particularly stiff, perhaps unused to the attention. Once in the limo, the couple is framed in close up, with Mark closer to the lens.

“Congratulations guys,” says the videographer. “The scary part is over, right, now its time to party.” Sherry has a huge grin on her face, but Mark responds unenthusiastically, “I don’t know.” Sherry and the videographer laugh uncomfortably. The next shot frames the “just married” tag on the back of the limousine, and we then move to the wedding reception, where guests toast the (un?)happy couple. One woman, centered in the video camera’s spotlight, wishes “the best of health and happiness to both of you, have millions of children, and congratulations.”

So far this video resembles a number of similar artifacts residing in the homes of thousands of married (and divorced) couples, albeit compressed by a YouTube editor. After this lengthy prelude, the song “I Was a Lover” by TV on the Radio begins, and we shift genres from a wedding video to an unofficial music video. The music’s electronic, stuttering beat is echoed in the temporal jump cuts of the images, repeating moments and juxtaposing them as Sherry

performs an elaborate, theatrical dance for the wedding guests to the clear embarrassment of her new husband. Shots of the earlier ceremony are intercut with Sherry, alone, on the dance floor, and as the song enters its bridge, shots of wedding guests dancing join the conglomeration of images. Mark appears expressionless and uncomfortable throughout, perhaps even angry, just as he did in the limousine.¹

A combination of performance and repetition seems to comment on the nature of wedding videos. Both song and video utilize repetition as a stylistic device, accomplished with digital technologies like synthesizers and video editing software. Meanwhile, the behavior of the participants suggests the ingrained performance and repetition of a ritual, with the ceremony, dancing at the reception, and well wishing the newly married couple. Looping the clips suggests the rituality of the participants' movements, like re-enactments of actions they've witnessed other couples perform, or have seen on television, or in other home videos. Sherry's theatrical dance, which has obviously been choreographed and practiced, further emphasizes the ritualistic, performative factor of the wedding reception. One wonders, aided by the accomplished editing of the YouTube artist, the extent to which many of the expected "events" during a traditional wedding – anything from the introduction of the wedding party to the first dance to the toss of the bouquet – are nowadays performed as much for the family's benefit as for the benefit of cameras, so that the family can return to the recordings later, point to those ritual events, and create from them an individual narrative of "a wedding." Weddings and their videography become a closed circuit – events recorded and later reviewed, and the family recognizes its own iteration of a social ritual, which in turn enforces the notion that further weddings should not take place unless properly documented with a video recording. Repetition is the perfect stylistic

¹ This video can be seen on YouTube under the title "I Was a Lover," posted by user estoydpaso.

device for the wedding video, because the wedding itself just “repeats” actions that have been performed (and recorded) countless times before.

However, there is a uniqueness of event in the video as well. Mark’s attitude of indifference and Sherry’s exaggerated dance performance lend the video a “punctum,” to use Roland Barthes’ phrase, wisely emphasized by the creator of the music video.² Barthes stresses that the punctum is an individual effect, but the video’s creator has isolated a possible one (Mark’s apparent displeasure) and emphasized it through montage. Sherry’s dance is particularly prominent in the last moments of the video, where her entrance into the reception hall repeats again, yet this time edited in an astonishing match on action (astonishing because it coheres so seamlessly without having been planned) with footage of the couple entering together. The lighting in her entrance is much brighter, lending those shots an optimistic tone compared to the dark shots of the pair. The separation of Sherry in shots where she is brightly lit and smiling bears a clear meaning: she is alone in the marriage, and the wedding is a sham allowing her a momentary spotlight. The last shot of the video accents this ironic and tragic point: a freeze frame of the couple together with a superimposition of the words “Congratulations! Sherry and Mark.” The video seems an omen of a failed marriage, appropriate to the song title, “I Was a Lover.”

The video relies on interplay between the ritualistic and the unique. The ritualistic is embodied in those elements recognizable from American weddings of the late 20th century. Those elements constitute the public culture of the wedding, the expected events whose absence elicits comment: the ceremony performed by a cleric, the vows, the reception dances, bouquet tosses and cake cutting, etc. The unique element, the punctum, is that which seems to offer a

² Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, defines the punctum as the element of a photograph that draws the attention, and thus distinguishes it from others of its type.

glimpse into Mark and Sherry's private lives.

In the tension between the ritualistic and the idiosyncratic, the "I Was a Lover" video suggests a complication of the divide between public and private spheres related to the dynamics of the videographic and the digital. As such, it is a paradigm for what I explore in this dissertation. Now a product of the digital age, the 1991 wedding video has been edited and integrated with a new soundtrack by a private individual, a feat almost impossible before computer software made such editing available to anyone with a laptop; but the final video is palimpsestic, containing within it signs of a prior media age, the videographic, which itself complicated a clean division between private and public. Also significant is its distribution through YouTube, which has enabled the public circulation of private moving imagery to an unprecedented degree. Never before, not even on the popular television show *America's Funniest Home Videos*, has private video footage had such a presence in the public mediascape. While I would argue that the digital technologies enabling us to publicly present our private lives represent something new and historically different, they are also not unprecedented. YouTube manifests a desire to establish one's place in relation to public culture through representation, offering a feeling of vindication for one's private life, which has slowly built over the course of a hundred or more years of media history, beginning with consumer photography and continuing through the home movie and home video. This is the point of departure for this project. I argue that the desire and willingness to spread our private selves through public media derives from habits and representations Americans became accustomed to as a result of home movies and videos, the latter in particular. Expounding on how, precisely, these media intervened in the continual transformation of the boundary between the public and private dimensions of our lives makes up the bulk of my argument.

Evidence of a digitally enabled, self-inflicted invasion of privacy is everywhere. We post intimate details of our lives on Facebook and Twitter, along with the occasional incriminating photograph.³ YouTube videos are filled with personal confessions, and when such confessions are revealed as manufactured, outrage results, as in the famous “lonelygirl15” series of videos.⁴ Amateur pornography fills the internet, to the extent that sex columnist Dan Savage, in the wake of the Anthony Weiner scandal, predicted that in ten years, everyone in public life would have a nude picture somewhere on the web. Websites and blogs exist solely for readers to laugh and grow indignant at the tweets and status updates of others. In short, people from all over the world - but especially the young and affluent - willingly take part in a social networking system that exposes themselves and their peers to public scrutiny of their private thoughts, experiences, and parts. Many, I would hazard to guess, see a moral or ethical dilemma involved, but just as many likely give it no thought at all. How did we arrive at this state of affairs? Were people dying to offer themselves up publicly, and just never had the means until Facebook, and YouTube, and Twitter emerged to provide it for them?

The explosion of the private into public life that has accompanied digital and network technology is mirrored by a public intrusion into private life on the part of corporations and the state. Many of these invasions are enabled by the same technologies (digital imaging and storage, networked computer systems) that allow us to share baby pictures over Facebook. For

³ These details are often available to those outside our social media networks, for example, through openstatussearch.com, which enables users to search and read Facebook messages without “friending” that particular user.

⁴ In other words, it’s not only that we feel deceived, we are angry at *not* gaining actual insight into the private lives of others. For more on lonelygirl15, see “The Lonely Girl That Really Wasn’t” by Virginia Heffernan and Tom Zeller Jr. The documentary film *Catfish* deals with a similar situation, as a man falls in love with a woman over Facebook and the telephone, only to discover she is nothing like she claims. Ironically, many questioned the authenticity of *Catfish*’s events, claiming it was at least partially staged.

example, the field of marketing analytics attempts to anticipate consumer wants and needs, and advertises directly to them, usually by tracking coupon, credit card, or frequency card use. This is mostly reported as having benign consequences, like the story featured in numerous news outlets some months ago, where a father discovered his teenage daughter's pregnancy through coupons she was sent by Target (Duhigg). While this example was often cited as humorous by news sources, it indicates a potentially destructive invasion of privacy. It is a material example of the tendency identified by Stuart Ewen in *The Captains of Consciousness*, wherein marketers aim not merely to sell products, but to utilize social psychology to transform thinking, invading the most "private" of all spheres, the mind.

The parade of privacy destroying actions taken by the United States government in the decade after 9/11 is familiar to most, but it is worth reiterating a few: the inability to have a private conversation over the telephone or internet, given the Patriot Act's power of warrantless wiretap; the inability to travel without having one's bodily integrity challenged, as a result of various new TSA policies for air travel "security"; and the loss of any expectation of privacy in public spaces, due to the increased surveillance of such spaces by video camera and, in the likely near future, air drones. Moreover, these state intrusions into privacy are justified through the rhetoric of security and anti-terrorism, regardless of how much they threaten civil liberties.⁵ The success of that discourse reflects the influence of techniques perfected by the corporate entities that developed marketing analytics.

The invasion of privacy by outside forces, such as the state or corporations, and the privacy loss that is largely self-inflicted through social media and the production and sharing of

⁵ For a more thorough accounting of the many ways both states and corporations infringe on the privacy of citizens and the resultant threats to civil liberties, see David Lyon, *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*; Armand Mattelart, *The Globalization of Surveillance*; David H. Holtzman, *Privacy Lost*; and Simon Garfinkel, *Database Nation*, among many others.

self-representations may seem unconnected. However, I think there is some significance to the coincidence of the loss of privacy imposed by the actions of governing and economic institutions, and our willingness to freely diminish the extent of our own privacy. For one thing, as I mentioned, both are enabled by many of the same technologies; more to the point, they are mutually reinforcing: our acceptance of state and corporate surveillance of our private lives makes publicizing them “by choice” less of a significant concern, and in turn that display more readily inures us to outside invasions of our privacy. Understanding the tendency to display our private lives in public forums has a significant social component, and becomes part of the effort to retain our privacy and resist intrusions on our civil liberties.

This dissertation focuses heavily on the aesthetics of these processes, arguing that aesthetics are a major (though not the only) force in acclimating us to the current public/private shift. Visual representations figure heavily in the way that private individuals publicly display themselves, through objects like photographs posted on Facebook or videos uploaded to YouTube; and they also play a major part in the institutional invasion of privacy, given that surveillance videos and airport full body scanners are valuable precisely for their visual dimension. However, because these different sets of representations raise different questions I focus on one side of the equation – the desire by private individuals to create and then publicly disseminate (either in actuality or in the imagination) images of themselves and their families. The answers to the questions raised earlier may productively be found by examining the aesthetic history of such images.

Before moving on I want to clarify precisely what I mean by “public” and “private” spheres, spaces, and behaviors. The most well-known theory of public and private is that of Jürgen Habermas, who in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* argued that the

public sphere emerged alongside the rise of the bourgeois class in the 18th century. For Habermas, the public sphere was the area of life where the bourgeoisie conducted and, importantly, debated issues of political and economic concern – it consisted of both the arena of capitalist exchange that marked the bourgeois class, but also the lively discussion of policies and events that shaped exchange. This discussion marked the rise of “public opinion.” Habermas claimed that, with the rise of mass communication, the public sphere was essentially destroyed, as public opinion was no longer generated by the public itself but issued through powerful state and market institutions. Technological reproduction and the forms of communication thus engendered – the cinema, broadcasting - played a major role in the manufacture of consent, as Walter Lippmann called it, and spelled the end of the traditional public sphere. Although Habermas claims the public sphere has ended, his notion of it as the realm of labor, exchange, and political discourse still resonates in many contemporary conceptions of the public sphere, including my own. Moreover, transformations in the capabilities and quality of the media have restructured the public and private spheres in other ways. For example, some might argue that the decentering of media production concurrent with home and digital technology complicates Habermas’ vision of a clear end to the public sphere, as it no longer relies on a top down model of communication. To my thinking, this notion has some validity, though we must remember that many of the methods of dissemination for amateur media are still owned by major media companies.

Part of the legacy of Habermas’ ideas is that media technology plays a major role in many theories of the division between public and private spheres. Ali Madanipour offers an excellent basic definition of the difference between private and public in the contemporary era. The private sphere, he writes, “is a part of life that is under the control of the individual in a

personal capacity, outside public observation and knowledge and outside official or state control” (40-41). This seems relatively straightforward, but Madanipour notes that the boundary between private and public is highly permeable, and that the private especially is “a potentially fragile configuration” (104). Despite this fragility, the notion of a division persists because of the clear materialization of the private sphere in the form of private property, allowing the private to take on “spatial form; a concrete and relatively fixed representation of constantly changing social phenomena” (60). Having a private sphere fulfills significant psychological needs, serving as a bulwark against the intensity and impersonality of modern social and economic exchange. It is conceptualized and, indeed, felt as a place of safety from which the individual ventures into the public sphere, and then returns afterwards.

One of the major points of permeability between spheres is the technological – especially media technologies, as Habermas cues us to remember. New technologies force a reconsideration of the boundary between private and public, and often create brief moral panics as society attempts to reconcile the challenges posed by integrating technologies into existing social patterns.⁶ Representational media technologies seem particularly subject to these kinds of redefinitions and concurrent panics, largely because they are visual in nature and levels of visibility are a defining distinction between public and private. An important component of Madanipour’s definition of the private sphere places it outside “observation.” Jeffrey Weintraub, in an essay tracing the different meanings of private and public in discourse, argues that visibility is a major critical framework for theorizing the private/public distinction: the difference between

⁶ For examples of the ways technologies transform such boundaries and the ensuing moral panics, see Caroline Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*, on telephones and domestic electricity; James Flink, *The Automobile Age*, on, obviously, the automobile; and David Robinson (among many others), *From Peep Show to Palace*, on the cinema. Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” metaphor is apt here as well, given that it posits the elimination of distance and the impersonality that mark the public sphere through media technology.

them often hinges on “what is hidden or withdrawn versus what is open, revealed, or accessible” (5). Along similar lines, in *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes argues that photography “is read as the private appearance of its referent: the age of Photography corresponds precisely to...a new social value, which is the publicity of the private” (98). In other words, the private sphere exists as that dimension of life unseen by strangers, that which remains invisible to us in the lives of others. Thus, anything that renders it visible diminishes its scope, as Barthes observed, and therefore representational media inherently transform the nature of the private and public division.

Eric Hirsch made an important observation linking technology to the division between private and public spheres. He argues that consumer technologies have historically fallen into a pattern where the public resists them until they can be integrated into existing patterns of consumption and use, which they in turn transform according to their own capabilities and purpose, creating new patterns. A major element of this process of resistance and accommodation is the challenge technologies pose to the self-conscious separation of spheres. To illustrate this point, Hirsch conducted ethnographic research in London, and discovered one family where the addition of a modem (this was the early 1990s) enabled the father to perform some of his job duties at home, as well as allowing the son to conduct a courtship through email (167, 170). Drawing on Hirsch’s idea, I argue that home movies, videos, and digital media enact a similar transformation of use patterns and thereby challenge our definitions of private and public.

To summarize: the private sphere, as I am defining it here, is that sphere of our lives that is invisible to the vast majority of people. The public sphere, by contrast, is that realm where our

actions are fully visible, at least potentially.⁷ Madanipour reminds us that each of these spheres has a spatial dimension: the home is the location of the private sphere, where we experience the greatest degree of invisibility because we control access to the space, whereas everything outside the home has a large variation in privacy and invisibility, and constitutes the public sphere. Given the great importance of vision to our understanding of what is private and what is not, technologies that reproduce vision – photographs, television broadcasting, film, video, digital imagery – take on a particular importance in determining what remains private and what has become public.

As with much scholarship on snapshot photography, home movies, and home videos, I rely on Richard Chalfen's term "home mode," defined in his book *Snapshot Versions of Life*, to designate the body of media production produced by amateurs for the purpose of memorialization and family narration. The initial "I Was a Lover" video, before its transformation into a music video, bears all the hallmarks of the "home mode," which Chalfen defines as "a pattern of interpersonal and small group communication centered around the home" including "snapshots, home movies and home video" (8). "Centered around the home" should mean, and I think Chalfen means it this way, not just set in the home and its immediate surroundings (e.g. the yard, the street) but just about anything dealing with the private life of the family, those who inhabit the home. Thus it can include vacations and weddings, which often take place apart from the space of the home. The home mode is *mostly* an amateur endeavor, undertaken by those connected to the represented family, and who expect no remuneration,

⁷ It should be said that the public sphere does have spaces of varying visibility, where one's expectation of being seen depends on social expectations and the functions of various spaces. For example, one expects a high degree of privacy and invisibility in a public restroom, even though that privacy is still many degrees removed from a bathroom in a private home. Working in an office has greater visibility, but one still only expects to be seen by colleagues or clients; sitting in a public park, one has very little expectation of privacy or invisibility.

though occasionally it is a professional genre. The superimposed titles in Sherry and Mark's original wedding video suggest professional work.⁸ Chalfen's category leaves out amateur narrative films and documentaries, and therefore remains largely a matter of definition at the moment of production, coupled to a set of largely recognizable formal traits.⁹ Three things distinguish the home mode from other modes of media making: first, it is intended for small audiences who personally know the individuals depicted; second, home mode media is generally watched in the home, and has non-paying audiences; and third, it is made foremost as an adjunct to fallible and fading human memory.¹⁰ Chalfen generally understands the home mode as a private form of media: made and consumed by intimates. I use Chalfen's term to refer to the whole of media production that meets this definition, and will use the more specific terms "home movie" or "home video" to refer to medium-specific productions.

At the same time that I employ Chalfen's useful term, I also call its easy applicability into question. My argument envisions the home mode as a discrete form of media production, but also sees the "home" in expansive terms. Rather than understand the home in simple opposition to what lies outside of it, the home must be considered a fluctuating node, a site where individual

⁸ Wedding videos seem a prominent form of the "professional home mode." Documentarian Doug Block, whose film *51 Birch Street* is discussed in chapter three, moonlights as a wedding videographer. James Moran's book *There's No Place Like Home Video* spends much of the third chapter problematizing the distinction between amateur and professional videography, and uses as a primary example the wedding video.

⁹ For more on amateur narrative cinema, see Alan D. Kattelle, "The Amateur Cinema League and its Films" and Mark Neumann, "Home Movies on Freud's Couch." For an example, watch *Tarzan and the Rocky Gorge* on the Internet Archive (archive.org).

¹⁰ This final idea perhaps ontologically distinguishes the home mode to the greatest degree. Home mode documents do not exist for the sake of personal expression, entertainment, or information, as other media texts do, though they may sometimes function in such a way. They are wholly subordinate to the material human condition. Moreover, they are perhaps the final kind of media text still subject to a kind of naïve indexicality, that is, the assumption on the part of viewers that everything they see is exactly "as it was" in reality.

media makers define themselves in relation to other people and places. In other words, the home enables amateur filmmakers and videographers a safe and recognizable, if not necessarily stable, site from which to narrate their family history and place that narration in relation to the public sphere.

I am not alone in complicating Chalfen's initial foray; reacting to it forms a significant undercurrent in critical literature on home movies and video. The most significant long works on this body of media, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* by Patricia R. Zimmermann, *There's No Place Like Home Video* by James M. Moran, and *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, edited by Karen L. Ishizuka and Zimmermann, all question the distinction between amateur/home media and professional/commercial media. In *Reel Families*, Zimmermann presents a rise-and-fall narrative of how "amateur-film discourse incrementally relocated amateur filmmaking within a romanticized vision of the bourgeois nuclear family, thereby amputating its more resistant economic and political potential for critique" (x). She repeats a standard narrative for consumer technologies, where the interests of capital slowly tamper down an initial period of excitement and potential.¹¹ By the 1950s, Zimmermann argues, the "force of familialism" and a discourse where classical narrative construction was presented as the normative standard relegated amateur filmmaking to home movies, which expressed, more often than not, a "patriarchal prerogative" (112-135).¹²

¹¹ Related arguments often center on radio. Bertolt Brecht famously critiqued radio's "one-sided [function] when it should be two sided...radio must be transformed from a distribution apparatus into a communications apparatus...it could be so, if it understood how to receive as well as transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear" (42). See also Jesse Walker, *Rebels on the Air*, especially chapter 2; and William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination*, also chapter 2.

¹² Laurie Ouellette makes a similar argument in her article "Camcorder Dos and Don'ts," claiming that "advertising and promotional discourses surrounding the camcorder have

For Zimmermann, the tendency towards the reproduction of dominant ideology and the denigration of amateur media production continues in the home video era. She argues that home video has a “production aesthetic” typically read as an unmediated record of reality: “the technology itself champions production over editing and structure...home editing is anything but simple...[this] propels the home videomaker toward replicating the sequences of events rather than toward structure or analysis” (152). Home videos, in her formulation, are unable to comment on the events depicted because they lack formal and purposeful editing. As Ryan Shand notes, “[t]he adoption of this pessimistic political model blinds her to the variety of film production that actually took place among post-war amateurs” (45). I would add to his critique that Zimmermann fails to account for the actual meanings postwar amateur production, especially home video, offered its creators. For Zimmermann, a home video must forcefully or explicitly utilize editing as its rhetorical method to offer significant critique. As an example, she discusses a video made by a “film student at an upstate New York film school [who] videotaped his dentist father lifting weights in a gym and talking at the kitchen table; he then intercut these images with scenes, nearly therapeutic, of television dads’ idealized interactions with their kids from family-oriented television shows” (153). Zimmerman reifies a theoretical model that posits editing as the definitive property of filmmaking and thus its source of meaning, ironically providing just as much a prescription for amateur production as the guidebook authors she critiques earlier in the study. The worth of the video in question is tied to its commentary on the student’s family life and the idealized representation of such life on television through montage, criticizing the ideological reproduction of bourgeois family life seen in so many home movies/videos and on television.

privileged domestic uses above all others” thus closing down the democratic potential of the device (34-35).

In Zimmermann's analysis, the relationship between amateur and professional media parallels the distinction between the private and public. Professionals, who represent "public" media that has exchange value, seek to keep private, amateur-produced media invisible and confined to the space of the home. The student's video of his father interests Zimmermann precisely because it upsets those categories, combining amateur with professional footage and private behavior with its public simulacrum on television shows.

While I find the general historical trajectory of Zimmermann's argument about public discourse regarding amateur filmmaking convincing, I find her reading of home movies and videos somewhat reductive. It is true that many home movies and videos express a bourgeois and patriarchal perspective. At the same time, however, many are also active attempts at envisioning the private individual and family's relationship to a larger public sphere of labor and leisure, shared communal spaces, and community expectations and ritual behaviors.

Zimmermann offers a different appraisal of home movies in the introduction to the anthology *Mining the Home Movie*, which she co-edited with Karen L. Ishizuka. Keeping with trends in historiography, Zimmermann defends home movies as "microhistorical" documents, "incomplete fragments marking the practices and discourses of everyday lived relations" (3). Here, Zimmermann views home movies (and by extension, the home mode more broadly) as

an imaginary archive that is never completed, always fragmentary, vast, infinite. This imaginary archive is transnational in character, a depository of linkages among nations, communities, politics, identities, and families...[we can] conceptualize home movies as microgeographies and microhistories of minoritized and often invisible cultures...Home movies are fractured, always incomplete, historical memories. (18)

Home movies take on a more nuanced character than in *Reel Families*, serving as valuable historical documents that help illuminate the lives of individuals and communities overlooked by dominant historical narratives. In this respect, media artifacts chronicling moments in private

lives become part of a larger public record, one that seeks to rectify previous exclusions and generate a more holistic social history.

It certain respects, the position taken in *Mining the Home Movie* runs closer to my project. My aim is to produce an analysis that helps illuminate the transformations of privacy and publicity resulting from new media, and uses home movies and videos as the historical basis for that explanation. However, when Zimmermann discusses the microhistorical value of home movies, she refers primarily to their indexicality and status as transparent documents.¹³ My project takes a more macrohistorical view, looking at the ontology, aesthetics, and representational strategies of home movies and videos and arguing that these are historically situated and have their own set of consequences. In other words, I see home mode documents as indicators of particular class, ethnic/racial, or gendered experiences, but also as aesthetic objects whose stylistic conventions and place in a continuum of media representations forcefully contribute to our understanding of the difference between private and public and the limits of privacy.

One final book I must contend with is the only full-length study of home video, James Moran's *There's No Place Like Home Video*. Moran's goal is similar to Zimmermann's in *Reel Families*: he wants to establish home video production as a media form worthy of study and special attention, and does so by dismantling the hierarchy that draws strict distinctions between amateur and professional media production. He writes "all audiovisual media have always already been constituted in hybridity, by the fragments of representational practices that precede

¹³ Zimmermann's two positions on home movies reveal a subtle illustration of the ideological. While the home mode is indexical, showing things "as they were," and prized for that trait by those who make and view it, at the same time it is also suffused with particular cultural values and modes of representation. It reveals to us the everyday "as it is pervaded with belief" and thereby illustrates how ideology functions by appearing as the natural course of the everyday.

them” (17). Drawing on Raymond Williams, Moran differentiates between “residual” cultural practices, those “formed in the past but still active among the cultural processes of the present,” and “emergent” cultural practices, those that “create new meanings, values, and relationships that may or may not significantly transform the residual” (17). In other words, all media forms, regardless of how they later exist in discourse, are a combination of practices that have adhered in other media forms and those that arise due to technological or social factors accompanying a newly emergent media.

Let me use Moran’s own study as an example. Moran establishes that home video is a specific form of media practice, but that many practices associated with home movies are evident in it. Moreover, as he demonstrates in the fourth chapter, “home video and domestic TV representations [especially the family sitcom] both share and appropriate the cultural codes of the home mode” (105). Home video and television both adopt elements of prior home mode media (snapshots, home movies), culminating in such programs as *An American Family* and later in *America’s Funniest Home Videos*.¹⁴ It is not just the depiction of middle class families that these texts share, however, but a particular *kind* of depiction, where the “primary tensions linking these families...[are] the dialectical pull between past and present, image and reality, and split autobiographical subjectivity” (149). In other words, Moran reads the relationship between the home mode and domestic television representations in terms of shared tensions that manifest themselves across media practices.

Moran’s book is obviously a significant touchstone for my project. I have the luxury of taking home videos as worthwhile objects of study for granted because of *There’s No Place Like*

¹⁴ And, of course, both in turn become examples of residual cultural practices, with *An American Family* serving as the model for the genre of reality television and *America’s Funniest Home Videos* one of the central influences on the viral videography of YouTube.

Home Video. Moreover, Moran's observation regarding the hybridity of media practices, of which home video plays a significant part, justifies my movement in this dissertation between home movies, home video, feature films, commercial television, documentary films, and online videos. Because of the hybrid nature of home video production, each of these genres illuminates a different facet of the place of home video in media culture.

However, Moran's project and my own differ in important ways. Moran's focus is primarily on locating home video within a topology of media, and interrogating the notion of medium specificity when hybrid practices shape media forms. I am less interested in video *qua* video and instead attempt to tease out the social implications of home video and its attendant aesthetic practices; specifically, I investigate aesthetics and style in home videos to determine their effect on the relationship between private and public spaces and behavior, and the implications that might have for the culture at large. The aesthetic used to depict the home and narrativize the family, as we shall see, bears directly on our understanding of those social constructs, and therefore on our understanding of their connection to the larger public sphere.

It is my contention in this dissertation that the effect of home mode media, video especially, is only partially understood if we consider its role as an appendage to memory or as a phenomenon of historical or anthropological documentation. One possible way of understanding the changes wrought by home mode media is through their reverberating historical effects, reflected in the amateur media of the digital age. The changes in privacy occurring during the digital age are, in many ways, a function of medium; they are enabled by their substrate. The self-disclosure of personal information that occurs on Facebook and Twitter could not exist without the framework of computer networks. Similarly, long takes that reveal idiosyncrasies of

private behavior would not be possible without the extended recording times of magnetic video, which had previously been impossible with film reels (more on this in chapters one and two).

The capabilities of a given medium thus affect its aesthetics and predominant style. In the case of home movies and videos, style is a function of both technological capability and memorial function, with that style having a significant effect on how private events are depicted and later received in viewing; examining style therefore grants us a better understanding of the nexus of memory, history, and social change embodied in home mode media. To pursue my argument, I use close readings of both archival holdings and commercially available films to argue that “home mode” media transformed thinking about the limits of privacy and where the line between public and private lies.

In chapter one, I focus on home movie production, ranging from 16mm to 8mm to Super8. Drawing on archival material from the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, and the Smithsonian Institute’s Museum of American History and Human Studies Film Archive, I argue that the representational strategies of home movies depicted the family not so much in the home as in the liminal spaces between the home and its outside. These spaces are as important to home movie representations as the family itself, and, as two case studies in the chapter make clear, charting time and family narrative through ritualistic cultural behavior (the celebration of holidays, for example) was often inseparable from documenting space. As a result, the home movie situated the family in relation to the passage of time but also in relation to private and communal spaces, in the process calling into question what spaces are truly private and how much the “private” bleeds into ostensibly public spaces.

The second chapter turns from home movies to home video, and features the crux of my argument. In this chapter, I outline a conventional home video style and chart home video’s

interconnections with broadcasting technology and concurrent ideals of private display in postwar America. In so doing, I claim that home videos grant the private events they depict a phantasmagoric “publicity,” explicitly paving the way for the publicity manifested in contemporary digital and social media. I conclude the chapter with a reading of the well-known television program *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, arguing that it provides a way to examine the consequences of home video publicity.

In the final two chapters, I present close readings of films where home video plays a significant aesthetic or narrative role. Chapter three focuses on three films where the central representational logic evokes that of home videos in order to more fully explore how home video has been deployed and understood by filmmakers in portraying families, their homes, and the larger public spheres that contain and constrain them. Through close readings of *Rachel Getting Married* (2008, Jonathan Demme), *51 Birch Street* (2005, Doug Block), and *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989, Steven Soderbergh), I analyze the limitations of home video in depicting the family within the home itself.

Finally, in chapter four, I turn to the films of Atom Egoyan, who has spent much of his career interrogating technologies of representation, video in particular. Egoyan’s films *Family Viewing* (1988) and *Ararat* (2002) depict cultures where video mediation dictates the ability to relate to our family and national pasts. Egoyan’s films force us to recognize the role that home video mediation plays in understanding the past in the contemporary era, especially for generations of people who grew up with video technology. This chapter builds on the third by exploring not just the strengths and limitations of home videos in depicting the family and the home, but also the larger consequences for social and national memory.

CHAPTER 1:

WHAT'S PAST IS PUBLIC: HOME MOVIES, PUBLIC SPACES, AND REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA

Home Movies and Nostalgic Response

Home movies exist at the intersection of memorializing and historicizing processes. They were produced as supplements or appendages to memory, as were most artifacts of what Richard Chalfen has dubbed the “home mode,” “a pattern of interpersonal and small group communication centered around the home” (8-9). With the home mode, the apparatus of audiovisual production and reproduction, circulation, and spectatorship remains within the family circle. The home mode artifact, of which home movies are a major category, is produced and consumed as a memory aid, an indexical representation of events and people to prevent the details from fading into memory.

However, scholars have recently recognized the value of home movies as historical documents.¹⁵ Home movies provide sociological evidence of ritual behavior and cultural activities, and visual proof of fashion trends and the appearance of locales. One of the fundamental tensions in home movies, then, is between their personal, private status as memory supplements and as their impersonal, public value as historical documents. Further, when we consider the different contexts in which home movies circulate, their memorial or historical status changes. While this may seem an obvious point, it is also an under theorized one. Home movies seem hopelessly private and subjective at first glance; it is often difficult to imagine why

¹⁵ See Patricia R. Zimmermann and Karen L. Ishizuka’s collection *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*; Stefan Szczelkun discuss home movies as a form of oral history in “The Value of Home Movies.”

people would have an interest in home movies outside the extended family. However, I would argue that it is actually the public sphere that informs the representations in home movies far more than the private. In other words, the historical dimension of home movies is more central to our understanding than commonly believed; home movies are expressions of a family or individual's relationship to the larger social world. They depict the family in public space, performing publicly recognizable rituals, and are geared towards public presentation, despite their private circulation. Home movies reiterate the boundary between the spheres not by asserting the primacy of the private, but by encapsulating the family in the public.¹⁶

The common characterization of home movies in nostalgic terms offers an example of the tension between private memory and public history. Nostalgia can be characterized as a state wherein one's subjective memory of the past substitutes for the actual conditions of the time. Generally speaking, nostalgia prefers the past to the present. As Fred Davis notes, "nostalgic feeling is infused with imputations of past beauty, pleasure, joy, satisfaction, goodness, happiness, love, and the like, in sum, any or several of the positive aspects of being. Nostalgic feeling is almost never infused with those sentiments we commonly think of as negative" (14). By recalling the past through a lens suffused with positive emotional connotations, nostalgia casts the present as "more bleak, grim, wretched, ugly, deprivational, unfulfilling, frightening, and so forth" (15). Moreover, nostalgia "is often of a highly conventional cast, e.g., marriage, children, job success, a home of one's own. These are the institutional staples which we are socialized to contemplate from an early age" and which we look back on (and look forward to looking back on) with nostalgic feelings (12-13). Because home movies present us with images

¹⁶ For an analysis of home movies in this respect, see Devin Orgeron's essay "Mobile Home Movies: Travel and *le Politique des Amateurs*."

of the past, and the “stuff” of nostalgia is similar to the content of many home movies, it is unsurprising that they take on nostalgic qualities.

Home movies not only echo theorizations of nostalgia, however, but popular cultural depictions consign them to representing a better, brighter past. Consider how *The Wonder Years*, which ran on ABC from 1988 to 1993, mirrors home movies’ nostalgic depiction of the past. Each episode recounts an event from the youth of protagonist Kevin Arnold as the adult Kevin (heard in voice-over and never seen) narrates events with in an ironic and nostalgic tone. The conceit is the sitcom equivalent watching home movies and being told the significance of the unreeling images.

More to the point, the title sequence directly imitates home movie aesthetic and content. It begins with just the title of the program, set against a black screen, and the opening notes of “With a Little Help From My Friends” as sung by Joe Cocker. A white screen with projection scratches appears, which then becomes a scene from a simulated home movie of the Arnolds, the sitcom’s central family. The film footage is scratched, occasionally overexposed, and has the color quality and soft focus of 8mm. The Arnolds pose for a tableau at the end of their driveway, and other scenes are of the type often found in a home movies: the characters eat and wave at a backyard barbeque, and the children play baseball in the street.

The opening is nostalgic not only in its usage of commonplace home movie devices, but in their mobilization to depict a particular time period. As a family sitcom, the show was intended for parents and children to watch together. Given its initial television run, those parents would have been baby boomers; their ages align with protagonist Kevin Arnold and his siblings growing up in the 1960s. The Cocker tune, a cover of a well-known Beatles song, would be recognizable as a song from their youth. The program’s title combined with its content and

setting suggests not just childhood generally but childhood during the 1960s as a special period of “wonder.” It imagines, for an audience of boomers and their children, the 1960s as a decade to be looked back on fondly. Despite the enormity of social changes occurring at the time, the period is presented as a time of family togetherness. The Arnolds are depicted, in both the opening sequence and in individual episodes, as resistant to potential threats embodied by social change; it reifies the notion that the outside world is “outside,” i.e. apart from the private realm of family and domestic life. It also demonstrates how a particular configuration of technological and representational history contained in home movie depictions is often tied to a specific era when home movies were widely produced: the nostalgia triggered by a home movie is usually a nostalgia for some time during the 1950s-1970s. In other words, home movies seem like ideal nostalgic artifacts because of contemporary generational configurations; people of certain ages remember their childhoods through the medium of 8mm home movies.¹⁷

But home movie nostalgia is more than a temporal phenomenon. In an essay tracing the history of the term “nostalgia” from medicine to contemporary poetics, Jean Starobinski notes the term originally referred to an unhealthy degree of homesickness first observed and diagnosed in soldiers during the Napoleonic wars. Starobinski argues that in the contemporary period “nostalgia no longer designates the loss of one’s native land, but...rather the conflict between the exigencies of integration into the adult world and the temptation to preserve the unique status of the child. The literature of exile...is, for the most part, a literature concerned with the loss of

¹⁷ Despite this specific historical configuration, home mode artifacts have a long history of association with nostalgia. As Nancy Martha West argues, Kodak’s advertising has, for over a century, routinely positioned nostalgia as an appropriate response to family photography. “Kodak taught amateur photographers,” she writes, “to apprehend their experiences and memories as objects of nostalgia, for the easy availability of snapshots allowed people for the first time in history to arrange their lives in such a way that painful or unpleasant aspects were systematically erased” (1).

childhood” (103). Historically, nostalgia designates a longing for both a lost space and a lost time.

Starobinski’s analysis is productive for considering the work undertaken by home movies. The *mise-en-scène* of the home movie is dominated by children and suburbia; rather than looking back nostalgically to a “native land” we look to the family home, and we cannot help but be aware while watching home movies that the children therein have grown, their childhoods “lost.” Starobinski’s theory adds a crucial dimension to the nostalgia evoked by home movies: behind a feeling of desire for the past lies distress over spatial change and loss. As I will demonstrate below, home movies, as a form of both spatial and temporal representation, take the family within space as their true subject matter.

In an effort to recuperate nostalgia from critiques leveled against it, Svetlana Boym divides nostalgic response into two categories. Like Starobinski, Boym conceives nostalgia in both temporal and spatial terms, but she distinguishes between ethically reductive and productive forms of the feeling: “restorative nostalgia...puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” while “reflective nostalgia...is more concerned...with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude...[and] the meditation on history and passage of time (41, 49). Nationalist nostalgia, and the nostalgia described by Fred Davis, is the restorative type; Boym argues that its most common political manifestations are conspiracy theories and origin narratives (43). Reflective nostalgia aligns with the personal and occurs on a much smaller scale; Boym writes “[r]estorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory” (49).

Although it may seem as though I want to defend home movies from nostalgic response, I would actually claim the home movie is fundamentally nostalgic, while still tying that nostalgia

to historically situated periods, such as the 1950s. Home movies absolutely substitute a particular vision of the past for the past itself, and it would seem that typical home movie response is restorative rather than reflective. Restorative nostalgia hinges on reading home movies as valorizations of the past that reify the private sphere as a protection for the family against the vicissitudes of public life and social change, much like *The Wonder Years*. Despite the fact that nostalgia triggered by a home movie is usually nostalgia for a specific historical period, often the postwar decades, there is an ahistorical bent to the nostalgic mobilization of the home movie: it imagines social constructs like “the family” or “childhood” as universal categories immune to changing mores occurring “out there” in the social world. As Boym writes, “for the restorative nostalgic...the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot” (49).

However, I argue that home movies embody a tension between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Home movies reveal to us an image of the past that is clearly not objective, and generally speaking, we might characterize that image as restorative. That response is shaped by their presentation as restorative nostalgia in the mass media, but if we examine home movies more closely, they can be found to comment on the passage of time and evince familial negotiation with public spaces. In producing home movies, families actively attempted to locate themselves within and between the public and private spheres, and this constitutes a form of reflective nostalgia, an ability to recognize “the gap between identity and resemblance...a sense of distance [which] drives them [nostalgics] to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present, and future” (Boym 50). To put it entirely in Boym’s terms, home movies evince a tension between that gap, or distance, and the “perfect snapshot.”

Home movies mark the spatial and behavioral differences between private and public spheres, demonstrate their fundamental irreconcilability, and recognize the way families must

negotiate within that irreconcilability. They depict the family in “public terms” and in relationship to public spaces and public accountability. I argue that home movies offer significant evidence for ways that families and individuals negotiated a place for themselves in the public sphere: home movies were not entirely centered on the home as a site of production and spectatorship, but rather evince attributes of “publicity” – that is, they use representational conventions that demonstrate a consideration of public scrutiny and fear of castigation. Neither entirely private nor entirely public, home movies are a liminal form of representation that set the stage for that liminality to deepen with the emergence of home video.

“Home” Movies and the Public - Gesture, Space, and History

Many stylistic tendencies in home filmmaking derive from snapshot photography, and are expressed primarily in framing, subject matter and mise-en-scène.¹⁸ To ensure that the camera captures the full significance of events, typical framing in home movies, like family photos, is frontal and presentational. Frontal presentation ensures that relevant objects, individuals, and behavior are clearly visible for the camera lens to best trigger memories in later viewers. Subjects filmed facing the camera and will gaze, talk, and gesture towards it, as well as responding to directions and questions from the person filming (in home movies, which very rarely have synchronous sound, this is evident from the subject’s actions on screen). Paradigmatic of this framing is the shot of a child running towards the camera, which is so common it has practically become a home movie convention.

¹⁸ I start with the relationship between home movies and the earlier form of snapshot photography out of recognition that stylistic tendencies in media production, amateur or professional, do not emerge fully formed, but are instead modifications of existing practices taken from existing media. The home movie borrows conventions and practices from family photography, which in turn borrowed them from formal portrait photography of the 19th century, which in turn borrowed them from portrait painting, etc.

For Pierre Bourdieu, the frontal tableau became the norm in photography because it was connected to social behavior:

It is certainly possible that the spontaneous desire for frontality is linked to the most deep-rooted cultural values. Honour demands that one pose for the photograph as one would stand before a man whom one respects and from whom one expects respect, face on, one's forehead held high and one's head straight. In this society which exalts the sense of honour, dignity and respectability, in this closed world where one feels at all times inescapably under the gaze of others, it is important to give others the most honourable, the most dignified image of oneself. (82)

The portrait photograph's "declarative" conventions, which are carried into less formal snapshots ("here's the family at Niagara Falls" or "here we are on Tim's graduation day"), continue in home movies. Bourdieu's description holds true for them as well. Despite being privately produced and (usually) privately consumed, behaviors captured in home movies are expressions of a public self. That is, if frontal framing is the product of the social, where we are "at all times inescapably under the gaze of others," it follows that behavior captured in photographs and home movies express a public self, which is performed for the scrutiny of others. The public self is, of course, self-consciously created, as Peter Forgacs observes: "people in home movies represent, 'act' themselves...they play roles that 'become them,' or they wink to us from 'behind' the role: 'I'm playing myself!'"(52). Self-consciousness constitutes the mode of behavior in the home movie, enforcing the public acceptability of the portrayal therein. In other words, the persistence of the tableau in the home movie, which can be traced back to snapshots, is a presentation of the self to the public view, even though the "public" will likely never see it.

An example of this can be found in the home movies of the Benfy family (UMass Lowell Cat. 32A). These films depict a family recently expanded by the arrival of a baby. The baby is presented for the camera's perusal and archiving, continually front and center in close up or medium shot, and usually held towards the lens by a relative. At one moment, an older woman,

presumably the child's grandmother, plays with the baby and coaxes it to look at the camera. This demonstrates how frontal display has been unconsciously integrated into the set of behaviors "proper" to being filmed or photographed. Richard Chalfen calls this behavior circulating around the camera "Kodak culture" and defines it as "whatever it is that one has to learn, know, or do in order to participate appropriately in what has been outlined as the home mode" (10). Kodak culture establishes the conventionality of the home mode artifact, whether it be photographic, filmic, or videographic. Later when mother and child both pose and smile for the camera lens, looking directly into it, it is clear how the family photograph has informed the home movie, with the former transformed into a moving tableau in the latter.

The notion that the home movie represents a public self, privately consumed, is born out by the spaces that home movies depict. Both 16mm and 8mm film requires a great deal of light for an image to register clearly. As a result, home movies tend to favor outdoor settings, where lighting is sufficient. Shots of interiors are often dark and murky, with centered subjects highlighted by warm yellowish light while the space around them is hidden in shadows. In this sense, the term "home" movie is a misnomer. In necessarily de-emphasizing domestic interiors, home movies instead allude to the family's public persona, i.e. how the family unit conducts itself outside of the domestic sphere. It reifies the public, exteriorizing tendency of the frontal tableau by removing the family from the safety and comfort of domestic space and placing them outside it.

The spaces that home movies depict tend to be either completely public – vacation sites, for example – or on the borders between public and private spaces – the yard, for example. In these liminal spaces, home movies suggest intimacy while enforcing a socially acceptable "public" version of the self. Spaces like yards are still part of the family home, but are the most

public parts. They serve as a border between the domestic interior and the fully public street, and the façade of the yard is part of the assurance made to neighbors of family stability and respectability.¹⁹ The spatial arrangement of the tableau can reinforce this: consider the shot in *The Wonder Years* opening where the family stands in the driveway, facing the camera and the “public” space of the street, with the domestic space “hidden” behind them. The shadowy mise-en-scène of interiors in home movies obliquely imply the hidden and still private nature of the domestic. They comment on the entire project of the “home mode” (at least before video) and its idealized presentation of the family, suggestive of the elisions common to home mode representational practices.

In fact, it might be said that the style of the home movie is fundamentally one of ellipsis. Home movies, as with other media practices, are constricted by certain technological parameters, and their form is shaped by those limitations. 8mm film was expensive and came in short reels; the typical reel was approximately fifty feet, which provided roughly three minutes of shooting time.²⁰ Home moviemakers tended to shoot many brief shots over the course of an event so as not to use too much film on a single one. As a result, home movies have a montage-like effect, with brief snippets that capture the “sensation” of events. Spectators have just enough visual information, but a diversity of it, to reconstruct the event; home movies rely on the ability of spectators, who would (usually) recall the events and the people in them, to fill the gaps.

¹⁹ Consider how many municipalities require residents to keep their front lawns clean and trimmed.

²⁰ According to *Consumer Reports*, May 1959, the cost of an 8mm home movie camera was between \$89.50 and \$149.95 (“Auto-Exposure...” 255). This is between approximately \$700 and \$1100 in 2012 dollars (Bureau of Labor Statistics). In July 1963 *Consumer Reports* wrote that 8mm color film, in 25-foot spools, cost between \$2.39 and \$4.80 to purchase and develop (“8mm Color Film...” 353). In 2012 terms, the more expensive spools (from Technicolor) would cost over \$35.

Footage in Nancy Pineau's home movies provides an illustration of this (UMass Lowell Cat. 19). Shots of children tearing paper off gifts, displaying their new toys for the camera and to other family members, and of relatives arriving through the front door, all connote "Christmas morning." They are typically brief and the transition between them rapid, displacing the specificity of the individuals and transforming them into iconographic representations that, alongside the other cultural markers, generate the connotation. Home movies montages provide the sensation of viewing cultural "types" reenacting representative versions of common cultural rituals. The temporal economy of home movies compresses events into a montage of brief snippets, with enormous gaps of information that often require personal memory to contextualize.²¹

The montage effect correlates with the family photo album. A home movie's brief shots are often like individual photographs transformed into "moving tableau," as suggested above. There is, of course, a key difference: the juxtaposition of photographs in the family album is a spatial arrangement, while shots in home movies have a temporal succession. Home movies by their nature enforce temporal sequence, insistently reminding us of the passage of time and forcing a consideration of that fact in response. The very form of the home movie evokes the difference between past, present and future that Boym argues the reflective nostalgic seeks to narrate. Home movies contain a form of "duration" that stymies the desire to read the past as a

²¹ It is worth briefly discussing the concept of montage at work here. In "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" Sergei Eisenstein distinguishes between two ideas of montage: that promulgated by Kuleshov and Pudovkin, and his own. Of the former, he writes "[Pudovkin] loudly defends an understanding of montage as a linkage of pieces...Bricks, arranged in a series to expound an idea" (37). Eisenstein instead has the "view that from the collision of two given factors arises a concept...montage is conflict" (37-38). It strikes me that home moviemakers are less Eisensteinian, where montage is necessarily dialectical and oriented towards a political viewpoint, than Kulshovan. The series of shots from Christmas morning expounds on the idea of what Christmas rituals entail, rather than offering any critique or analysis of it.

“perfect snapshot.” Watching home movies requires us, at least in part, to take on the mantle of the reflective nostalgic.

In examining the aesthetic of home movies, James Moran claims that “iconographic visual postures and tendencies towards stereotyping” dominate the form, reinforced by a lack of sound recording, which “minimized the narrative content of home movies” (41).²² Sound, in Moran’s formulation, is the key factor in developing narrative, more so than the image itself. While this is not the case with narrative silent films, it may be so at first glance with home movies – until one considers the “sound” accompanying them is not contained in the material substrate of the film. Moran is correct in noting that typeage does not “express the intentions of practitioners” and is the result of “the material and economic constraints of the apparatus,” but what he actually indicates is a central tension in the home movie form, deriving from its status as a memory aid (41). Most home movies are viewed by family members and close friends, the

²² A note on sound and home movies: the spectator narration that invariably accompanies home movies is made both possible and necessary by the lack of sound. (One is reminded of silent film traditions, such as that of Japan, where screenings were accompanied by live narration). However, not all home movies are without sound, though that sound is often “imperfect” (at best) by the conventional standards of both professional film and home video recording. Sound recording with Super 8mm was often done with a microphone, and was subject to the difficulties of any unidirectional method – it only captured the sound clearly in front of it, the same problem that troubled early sound filmmakers and was parodied in *Singin’ in the Rain*. The recorded sound can also suffer the same material problems that plague celluloid images, namely damage and inevitable deterioration. Finally, Super 8 sound recording was introduced relatively late in the home movie’s commercial existence – Kodak and Bell and Howell advertised the cameras during the 1970s - and may have been eclipsed by the automatic sound recording of video cameras, which were introduced at the end of the decade. An article in *Consumer Reports* in October 1978 offers some explanation. The authors note that only a third of 8mm equipment sold in 1977, relatively late in the lifespan of the home movie, was sound equipment. Moreover, they report that the sound cameras reviewed offered “somewhat disappointing sound quality. Even the best equipment we tested produced sound that we judged only fair” (“Sound Movie Cameras” 555). Finally, sound cameras, projectors, and film were more expensive than the silent standard. A cartridge of super-8 sound film cost \$10 with processing, while a silent cartridge was about \$8; optional boom mikes, which the authors bought for the tests and whose improved ability to record sound resulted in the “disappointing” quality, cost between \$50 and \$98 (560-561).

very people least likely to see the subjects as “types.” Typage is more likely in the case of outside viewers, such as archivists or scholars (someone like myself or Moran). This difference is the heart of the tension just alluded to. In the typical context of spectatorship, the lack of sound and elliptical montage in a home movie would be interpreted as an incomplete version of family history needing context and commentary. However, the presentational *mise-en-scène* reifies an iconic portrayal of the family, as does the montage and lack of sound, which make home movies explicable to the public at large.

However, the family’s public persona threatens to reinscribe itself on later generations, who will know the past only through these iconic images. From this perspective, intimate family history is as much lost as preserved in home movies: after a while, there will be no one left to contextualize the images and provide the links between the present moment and the home movie past. Once this occurs, the subjects and events slip into types, just ones with slightly more intimate identifiers (“great-grandfather” instead of just “an old man”). The progression of the home movie in viewing, which cannot be halted or perused, conspires with its elliptical style to offer a representation the passing of time itself, an image of the eventual loss of memory through generations. It gives way to mere history, rather than memory, moving from a private-public document to merely a public one once it loses any intimate connection with present viewers. Outside viewers, such as the researcher or family friend, merely preview a home movie’s slippage into mere history. In so doing, home movies highlight for us how the reflective and restorative modes of nostalgia are intertwined. The passage of time is inevitable, both phenomenologically and in home movies, prompting a reflective response; however, that response is eventually made impossible by the procession of generations – but eventually, no one remembers those events or people, and they pass into history: the domain of restoration.

At this point, the process of contextualization and narration should be examined more closely. Home movie viewers recognize that the films do not “stand on their own” and must be “filled in” by those who knew the individuals and events represented. As noted above, the precedent for this intra-familial historical work is the family album. Bourdieu writes, “the reading of old marriage photographs often takes the form of a course in genealogical science, in which the mother, a specialist in the subject, teaches the child about the connections which bind him or her to the people shown” (22-23). This process is highly manipulable; Patricia Holland describes how family albums “construct their own versions of family history, in negotiation with the ideal...they [the “self-appointed archivist”] will include significant moments and suitable family members and rigorously exclude others” (7). In other words, the context in which family photographs are placed can be restructured according to the wishes of family members (especially the album’s creator): images can be included or excluded, transformed by juxtaposition, even reordered temporally, to say nothing of how they might be contextualized by discussions that accompany looking through the album.²³ Family album practices model two forms of negotiation with the past: oral history, which shapes the vision of the past according to the (potentially faulty) memories and desires of an older generation, and the active shaping of the visual past by the inclusion, excision, or contextualization of particular images.

²³ It is interesting to note, as an aside, how the labor of producing family albums or home movies is gendered. Bourdieu, as quoted above, singles out the matriarch as the repository of family memory and instructor in genealogical history. In discussing the creation and maintenance of the family album, Holland notes that “[t]he father is least visible, for it remains his role to handle the apparatus that controls the image” whereas women “have become the historians, the guardians of memory, selecting and preserving the family archive” (7, 9). Finally, Zimmermann sees the pattern altered in postwar home movies, writing that “[t]he father is absent from all of these images...[y]et the camera imprints his presence and control over the actors. It traces his leisure, his time away from work, his experiments with family and technology” (113).

Both modes of negotiation occur in the first part of Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*, "Portrait of an Invisible Man." Writing after the death of his father, Auster struggles to understand not only death itself, but more so his father's character. Auster finds his father's old photographs "irresistible...It seemed that they could tell me things I had never known before, reveal some previously hidden truth...Most of the pictures did not tell me anything new, but they helped to fill in gaps, confirm impressions, offer proof where none had existed before" (12). In particular, the photographs of various women companions from his father's youth validate Auster's feeling that his father was "a man who finds life tolerable only by staying on the surface of himself, [and thus] it is natural to be satisfied with offering no more than this surface to others. There are few demands to be met, and no commitment is required" (13). Auster performs the oral history component of family photos: he takes what he already knows and suspects about his father, and reads it into the photographs.

Later, Auster finds himself haunted by one photograph in particular. His father, still a baby, sits on his mother's lap outside the family house, surrounded by siblings (Auster's aunts and uncles). Studying the photograph more closely, Auster realizes that his grandfather was once part of the image, but was eliminated from it by a tear, leaving only his fingertips visible, "as if he was trying to crawl back into the picture from some hole deep in time" (34). Auster investigates his grandfather's death, a subject discussed with trepidation by his father, and discovers that his grandfather was shot dead by his wife. The tear in the photograph was an effort at eliminating representations of the dead man, just as his physical presence had been removed. Of course, the effort was only partially successful, and the fingers peeking through the tear become the sign of a man who still existed in the memories of his family and in public records of his death. The "family album" was explicitly modified to alter the family narrative;

whoever tore the picture wanted to remove even the image of the grandfather, yet unknowingly suggested the spectral role he would play in his family's lives.

Home movies are generally less easily manipulated than family albums. Patricia Zimmermann discusses how home movie instructional manuals urged domestic filmmakers to imitate "Hollywood narrative visual logic," including continuity editing and establishing a fourth wall, in order to make their home movies more interesting and coherent (122-132). However, she mentions no actual films that do this, though they do exist - most are fiction films made by amateur cinema clubs before the Second World War.²⁴ Amateur cine-clubs were often the only people who were enthusiastic enough and could split costs and labor to produce such films. Many home filmmakers probably did not have the time or inclination to plan and then edit their vacation footage according to the dictates of classical construction.²⁵ Home movies are therefore far less likely to be "edited" than family photographs, which undergo a process of selection and placement in family albums. I would surmise that many families were unwilling to edit home movie footage because it was much more "precious" than family photographs, meaning that home movie footage was more expensive and photographs were far more "voluminous." Editing involves removing segments that potentially have great value, and runs the risk of damaging the footage irreversibly. Moreover, 8mm and Super 8 frames are difficult to see with the naked eye,

²⁴ See, for example, the 1936 film *Tarzan and the Rocky Gorge*, available on the DVD "Living Room Cinema: Films from Home Movie Day, Volume 1" and on the Internet Archive.

²⁵ To give some idea of the difficulty of such an endeavor, consider the marvelous amateur film *With Notebook in Hand*, produced by Frank Kreznar and his family in 1959, which resides in the Smithsonian Human Studies Film Archive. The film is a charming and well-made recounting of a family vacation to Florida centered on daughter Vivian, who has been instructed by a teacher to take notes of her experience. Looking at Kreznar's extant records on making the film, it is clear that the film's polish would have been impossible without Kreznar's considerable expertise and planning. Kreznar actually developed methods for proper sound timing and synchronization with amateur equipment; moreover, his post-production notes for *With Notebook in Hand* reveal that the film has 323 separate shots with meticulously planned framing and editing.

editing equipment could be laborious to set up and use, and sorting through film footage is far more time consuming than sifting through photographs.

If family photographs are contextualized by spatial arrangement in albums, with home movies the oral history model predominates. The ellipses fundamental to the home movie style are filled, sometimes many years later, by narrators who also have gaps in their memories, or who desire to recall the past in pleasant terms (in other words, to act as restorative nostalgics). The distance between when footage is shot and when one can watch it, i.e. the time it takes to develop and print, further aids misremembrance, intentional or not. This gap leaves a distinct impression of pastness to home movie events, rather than continuity with the present. Moreover, the ritualistic aspect of spectatorship further emphasizes the home movie's pastness. Compared to pulling a family photo album off the shelf, watching a home movie is a special activity, requiring an extensive preparation process: taking the projector, film, and screen from wherever they are stored, setting up both projector and screen in a way amenable to watching, and finally loading the film into the projector. This process gives home movie watching the air of an event, a nostalgic trip into family history that only happens on occasion.

Characterizing home movie temporality as restoratively nostalgic is appropriate when we consider how home movies depict the past to us. In home movies, only special events matter. Anything else is confined to abstractions of memory, potentially lost or misremembered because they lack explicit and culturally sanctioned "significance." The image of the past promoted by home movies is of endless leisure, vacations, and holidays. They reify the culturally powerful notion that our lives should be marked and measured by "moments," downplaying the tedium, routine, and mundanity of our lives. Home movies tell us that the vast majority of time in of our lives is not worth remembering or returning to – it is in essence "wasted time." Finally, the

range of emotional responses to that “wasted time” – boredom, anxiety, frustration, anger, desire, contentment – are pre-empted by outward directed displays of togetherness and joy, which are reconstituted with a nostalgic edge in spectatorship.

Thus while there are certain elements of home movies that prompt a reflective nostalgic response, the content of home movies also suggests a restorative one. The content of home movies is mostly holidays, vacations, and other special events; they depict continual family happiness and togetherness, a past made up of “marriage, children, job success, a home of one’s own...the institutional staples which we are socialized to contemplate from an early age” as Fred Davis writes (12-13). While we experience both joy and hardship in the present, in home movies joy is seen; the past appears more perfect than the present. In those instances where negative emotions threaten to disrupt the restorative tone, they are usually smoothed over by commentary – for example, when a young child’s tantrum is laughed off as cute, especially when that child is now a mature adult.

To summarize: in undertaking the ritual of watching home movies we replay of the past, almost like an invoking of the ancestors, but recast that past as a progression of significant events. This version of the past features individuals engaged in private activity, and is viewed in private settings, yet it is suffused with behavior (the “Kodak culture”) that give it a public character and assert the subjects as part of a larger cultural sphere, repeating publicly recognizable cultural rituals. The family in home movies occupies liminal sites between the public and private, while creating personas that turn them into acceptable residents of those sites. The elliptical montage of many home movies matches their elision of most private, intimate activity in favor of “events.” As the reel runs, family members try to remember when and where events took place, and what was happening in people’s lives; and as we forget more and more,

the images become more and more obscure, passing from memory into history.²⁶ While a home movie is designed to alleviate forgetting, it ends up instead instantiating forgetting: a record for private memory that becomes a document of public history.

In light of this, we can better understand home movies as artifacts utilized to restorative nostalgic ends, but with features that suggest the potential for reflective nostalgia as well. Part of that tension between restoration and reflection is embodied by the tension and negotiation between private and public that occurs in home movies. The degree to which a reflective or restorative response occurs might indeed be a function of the specifics of representation vis-a-vis private and public spaces and behaviors that appear in a given home movie. To illustrate how home moviemakers may have understood and represented their relationships to the private and public, I turn to two collections found at the Smithsonian Museum of American History.

Living in the Space of the Home Movie

Harry M. Bergman was a wealthy Jewish construction executive living New York in the early to mid 20th century. He was employed at the Godwin Company, which built the Chrysler Building, among other landmarks. Never married, Bergman found companionship with his extended family, in particular with his favorite niece, Ruth Perl (later Ruth Kahn). For a thirty-year period, from roughly 1926 until 1957, Bergman shot copious amateur footage of his vacations, family gatherings and celebrations, social outings, and documentation of the Godwin Company's activities (Shay and Robinson 1-2). In some ways, Bergman's experiences, and the films of them, are unlike "typical" home movies. Bergman was clearly rich, whereas most home movies are thought of as artifacts of the middle class; he also participated in and filmed a

²⁶ For an illustration of this, see the discussion of the Leno home video that opens the next chapter.

significant architectural event, the erection of the Chrysler Building, and therefore his films have an obviously public historical dimension many home movies do not share. However, Bergman's films also have a number of features common to home movies, and provide us with a superior example of the mode's attention to individual and familial negotiation of shared social space. Regardless of whether Bergman was shooting the Godwin Company activities, his own leisure time and vacations, or important family events, he was a careful documentarian of space, community, and self, situating each in relationship to each other and finding significance in the transformation of each in the encounter. As such, the films are a rich source for an examination of the spatial dynamics of home movies, and also provide us an opportunity to expand what we mean by the "home movie."

Bergman's films reveal the myriad ways "home" moviemakers conceived their own inhabitation of space. Bergman's experience and participation in constructing the Chrysler building gave him the chance to construct a narrative about the transformation of a famous public space, New York City, and a particular neighborhood within it. His leisure and travel films constructed loose, chronological narratives that demonstrate typical encounters with idealized or foreign spaces and the desire to populate them with objects and people from familiar spaces, stressing our own interaction and "understanding" of them. Finally, his actual "home" movies stress cataloguing the presence and appearance of family members over constructing a "narrative" of events that occurred during, say, Thanksgiving.

Bergman's home movies depict liminal public spaces as the sites of narrative. What the contrast between the types of home movies he made show is that the family's domestic experiences are often outside narration in home movies. When I say the home movie is about the family's negotiation with space, that negotiation is also a negotiation with narrative and time,

and a desire to not just memorialize but create a family narrative to grant the family's experiences meaning. Each "genre" Bergman worked in – the "workplace documentary," the vacation and leisure film, and the standard home movie – reveals a filmmaker concerned with documenting his own and his family's experience of space, but also in finding the private dimensions of experience in even the most public of spaces and events.

Bergman was what many in contemporary media industries would dub an "early adopter," making use of 16mm film during its first years of consumer availability.²⁷ Bergman's films distill many of the significant formal features of home movies as they would exist in the postwar era: camera movement as a way of articulating space, shots of relatively brief length (although Bergman's wealth and the capacity of 16mm film meant his shot lengths exceeded later 8mm reels and Super-8 cartridges), montage used to convey a loose continuity of events and thus narrative, and an effort to focus on the familiar in foreign, public, and domestic spaces. His use of camera movement and horizontal pans are seen repeatedly in home movies of all varieties, and vacation films are especially prone to these types of shots, as tourists want to record images of spaces they've visited in totality. With Bergman, however, they became a signature, and are key to the articulation of space and the private connection to it in his films.

Bergman's films documenting the construction of the Chrysler Building initially read as unpolished documentary more than home movie, but the careful attention to the transformation of community space and archivization of a private experience of community created by the construction expand the notion of what a "home movie" can be. The films, deemed worthy of restoration by the National Film Preservation Foundation, chronicle the erection of the building

²⁷ "Bell and Howell, the most prominent holder of motion picture patents and standardized professional equipment, and Eastman Kodak, who controlled virtually all film-manufacturing patents, colluded in 1922 to agree on 16mm film as the amateur standard" (Zimmermann 60).

from initial digging to completion (Smithsonian NMAH Accession 722.1-722.2). The opening reel obliquely suggests the planning stages of the project, with shadowy, silhouetted images of figures in an office building. After these, we see many shots of machinery digging the foundation, including one of a sign reading “Chrysler Building – Ready for occupancy Spring 1930” before panning up to capture the first girders being placed around the site. More shots from the window of a building next door pan up the length of a lofty crane and survey the work site below.

The “crane shot” is one of many where Bergman seems to imagine, by proxy, the height of the yet-to-be completed building. Bergman takes footage of the building as it exists (that is, barely at all, only beams and a foundation) but also anticipates its looming presence far above the street level and the construction pit. The building is figured as it exists in Bergman’s imagination and in the camera’s gaze. The shots taken from the surrounding buildings are documents of a perspective that will soon be destroyed: views of the city uninterrupted by the Chrysler’s presence.

So far, one might have difficulty recognizing these films as “home movies.” There is no family featured and no hint of the domestic, even in the liminal sense, i.e. yards or residential streets. However, there is a focus on establishing the building’s effect on surrounding public space and representing a community of employees creating the edifice. These mirror how home movies depict the “small community” of the family within a public sphere. Bergman recognized the massive revolution the Chrysler signified for the space of the city – upon completion in 1930, it was the world’s tallest building, surpassed by the Empire State Building about a year later. Significantly, he articulated this transformation through formal devices common to home movies. The vast upward pans that imagine the building’s height recall similar pans in vacation

footage; both articulate a continuity of space for purposes of remembrance. Home moviemakers use such shots to get a “full” idea of the space inhabited so they can later remember it more “experientially.” Bergman, in simultaneously imagining the building’s presence and documenting soon-to-be-impossible views, prompts a reflective nostalgia. Later viewers, be they Bergman’s intimates or researchers like myself, cannot help but note and reflect on the difference between the present and past represented in the movies.

A reflective response is cemented in the “ground level” scale of the next series of shots. Images of the worksite give way to lengthy pans of the street around it, showing buildings, sidewalks, and pedestrians around the foundation. Bergman documents the immediate surroundings of the construction site, taking shots of adjacent buildings and businesses, giving the viewer an idea of the space before it existed in the Chrysler Building’s shadow. A pan up the side of the nearby Chanin Building, another skyscraper soon dwarfed by the Chrysler, provides some idea, like the earlier upward pan of the crane, of what the Chrysler’s height will be. Many adjacent structures – which include a barbershop and a billiards hall - are not particularly tall, as we can observe when Bergman carefully pans up their height. The “scale” of the neighborhood will obviously be transformed when the building is finished. Bergman anticipates how the space will be forever altered, combining shots that articulate the height of neighborhood buildings in comparison to the anticipated Chrysler. These shots articulate an archive of the neighborhood as it existed in the months leading up to the Chrysler’s completion, and offer clues about the experience of that space before the building existed.

Interestingly, once the building is complete, Bergman does not photograph it in entirety; rather, based on the dates of his reels, he first took footage of the cityscape and the streets from the observation tower of the building. Bergman’s images of the Manhattan skyline, Brooklyn,

Roosevelt Island, the Hudson River, and city traffic from the height of the Chrysler were probably among the first of their kind. This footage mirrors that taken during the building's construction: Bergman would've been standing in nearly the same spot as earlier shots, just a thousand feet higher in the air. In these shots, Bergman shifts from anticipating and imagining the height of the Chrysler and its transformative effect on the space of the city to envisioning the city from a previously unavailable and only imagined perspective. The massive height of the building is emphasized when Bergman aims his camera down at another skyscraper, pans its length, and ends with a shot of the street far below. If earlier reels anticipated this vision and elegized the spatial scale of the neighborhood, these shots materialize that vision and expand the scale of the neighborhood; suddenly, the Chrysler becomes the focal point of the Manhattan skyline.

In a remarkable gesture of humane archivization, Bergman concludes the reels with a series of close ups of the workers involved in the building's construction. Starting inside an office, Bergman frames individual secretaries against a blank wall. Afterwards, he films similar portraits of men outside on construction sites. Some smoke and smile, others squint against the sun, their caps pulled down over their eyes, and many speak to Bergman and the camera, while others stare blankly. There's no real hierarchy in the shots; men who are obviously company executives are freely interspersed with shots of the construction workers. Bergman probably just shot people as he could grab them, but this intermixing has a nice leveling effect, reflecting Bergman's recognition that all these people - office secretaries, construction workers, executives, and foremen - contributed valuable labor to the project. The close ups provide an archive of human faces that reverberate with the archiving of space and vision lost, imagined, and created in Bergman's pans of streets and buildings. Bergman archives the spatial configurations of the

cityscape and transformation of the neighborhood as well as communities of labor created and then lost in the building's construction.

The portraits and the shots of the building's construction reveal an agenda linked to that of home movies. There is a loose narrative of transformation and erection created through montage that "cuts" from shots of the construction site to pans of the bustling street and nearby buildings. Montage is not only the primary narrative device of home movies, but Bergman's footage articulates a spatial dynamic typical to home movies in representing communities existing in spatial liminality. In the footage of the Chrysler's construction, there are a number of "in-betweens." Bergman is a liminal figure, both a part of the larger community of the city transformed by the building's presence, but someone who also has inside access to the construction process. The building itself hovers between existence and non-existence in much of the footage. Lastly, the portraits show us a particular "family" that only exists in the transformation of space, i.e. erection of the building.

Moreover, the portraits recall the shift between reflective and restorative nostalgias, between memory and history, central to home movie responses. Bergman would be able to identify some of these individuals and their roles in the building's construction, giving protagonists to the loose narrative his films created. Spectators like myself, however, must be content confining the individuals to types, forever wondering who they were and what specific jobs they performed. Their images last, but the particularities of their identities do not, and we are confronted with the home movie paradox: created to ensure some measure of exactitude in our memories, what home movies truly enact is the slippage of individuals out of memory and into categories of history.

The final reel of material Bergman shot of the Chrysler Building (the edge code is marked 1932) finally features external images of the completed structure. The first views are taken from some distance, and a slow pan down the length of the building articulates its height, no longer imagined but material. The bottom floors are obscured from this distance, hidden by other buildings, suggesting the Chrysler's integration into the cityscape. A closer shot of the building breaks it into five discrete shots in sequence, each one a segment of the building from spire to street level. This segmentation is curious given Bergman's preference for camera movement to preserve the continuity of space. While the Chrysler can be integrated into the wider cityscape, viewed from a distance, when Bergman approaches it and gets closer to the neighborhood transformed by the building's presence, he must depict it discontinuously, mirroring its disruption of the neighborhood space.

Bergman's position as an executive at the Godwin company gave him special access to the construction of the Chrysler building, and his films of that process evince a "builder's eye." His subjectivity shapes the style of the films, and this is especially observable in the aforementioned camera movement. The Chrysler films are filled with pans that carefully document the dimensions of buildings and streets (there is more than one 360 degree shot), and through such shots one gathers how Bergman recognized the significance of architectural spatiality. These films exhibit a subjective/private understanding of public space, and serve as connective tissue between filmmaker, community (or family), and publicity.

To further examine how home moviemakers document private experiences with public space, I want to look at three more of Bergman's films. Each evinces a different way that individuals mediate between their private lives and public/liminal space. Bergman's films of the Rockaway Yacht Club reveal the often (in)visible subtext of class and gender, his travel films

manifest the desire to balance the familiar with the novel central to home movies, and finally his family films, which reinforce ideas about home movies I have been pursuing. In home movies such as these, we can see proof of my contention that they operated as a reflection and negotiation with expectations about how public space is occupied and experienced by private individuals.

Bergman's leisure and travel films feature articulations of space and community in more intimate forms than the Chrysler construction films, and therefore more closely resemble typical "home movies" which render a "private" experience of public space. They also offer an opportunity to interrogate the class representations featured in home movies, given the nature of Bergman's privilege and what he chose to film. Bergman co-founded the Rockaway Yacht Club, which was established for New York Jews because they were prohibited from joining the other clubs in the city (Shay and Robinson 1-2).

Just as camera movement imagined the spatial transformation of the Chrysler building, camera movement articulates the representations in Bergman's films of the Rockaway Yacht Club. In the first reel, establishing shots of the bay and repeated images of boats being driven through the water gives way to a 180-degree turn showing wealthy club members boarding a boat. These images establish the atmosphere of the dock and the Yacht Club, demonstrating the class dimension of his club, and pointing to the broader class dimensions of early home movie making. Though they were closed out of other clubs due to their ethnicity, Bergman and his friends were wealthy enough to start another club from scratch and could afford to document their activities on 16mm film.

After these establishing moments, a group of men are shot from a high angle loading goods into a boat – tables, a jug, a block of ice. A "montage" narrates the process of travel to a

private shore: images of the filled boat, the boat in long shot as it sails across the harbor, and the unloading process. The arrival shoreline appears “more natural” than the previous harbor – it has no dock or apparent evidence of structures (though in later shots, a boat house can be seen much further down the shore). As the men unload the boats, a narrative coalesces out Bergman’s shooting: the men leave behind the “civilization” of the Yacht Club, if only for a few hours, to occupy the less developed far shore and have fun away from the stultifying strictures of high society. Ironically, however, they duplicate the conditions of easy, private leisure on the far shore, creating a “dining room” with tables, chairs, food, and drink. They escape the fusty space of the Yacht Club only to restore its pleasures in the more “natural” space.²⁸

The picnickers are all men, so their day trip also demonstrates tension regarding gendered behavior. The men pose and mug for the camera during the picnic; one man pranks another by lifting his long shirt, exposing his ass to the camera. The men wrestle, eat watermelon, push each other into the mud, play practical jokes – in short, they act like children (Smithsonian NMAH Accession 722.11). Although they replicate some of the conditions of bourgeois, adult domestic leisure on the shore, it becomes a ludic space as well, one where the men feel free to indulge in “bad” and childish behavior, far from the view of their wives, children, or the wider public. Bergman’s montage captures elements of both private and public space, bourgeois civilization and its invented opposite, “nature.” The liminal space of the shore becomes a place where social propriety is reconstructed, but also where men feel free to reconfigure that propriety. They still desire the ease of the bourgeois lifestyle in terms of easy access to food and

²⁸ For an acute example of this, see the “home movies” of Henry Ford that feature Ford, his family, and friends camping. The desire to replicate the comforts of the home in the “natural” outdoors is remarkably absurd in the Ford films: the campers eat off china, on a table with a tablecloth, under a tent, with food served by attendants presumably taken on the trip for this express purpose. This footage can be seen on YouTube under the title “Vagabonds: Henry Ford and Friends Camping.”

leisure, but the antics also suggest a homosocial rejection of certain aspects of that lifestyle.

“Private behavior” is not just what occurs behind doors in bourgeois homes, but also in liminal, communal spaces where public behavior is changed by the absence of one sex. In creating a record of the trip, Bergman creates a narrative of the conflict between the trappings of the social and the freedom of the ludic space.

That conflict is driven by the social position of Bergman and his associates. Bergman’s wealth and place in a community of men enable this trip across the harbor and the subsequent monkeyshines. The absence of women and children create an atmosphere where the men feel suitably “free” to play. The film and the trip conflate family and oppressive private society on the one hand, and a masculine, “natural” world with ludic freedom. It complicates the idea of the home movie more broadly. Home movies are often considered documents of the nuclear family; many of the examples I use earlier in this chapter are of this sort. In these films of the Rockaway Yacht Club, the family disappears, replaced by a different social unit. That social unit is self-chosen, and entirely composed of men; however, the modes of behavior they undertake are shaped by their experiences as part of the familial social unit. In other words, the men’s behavior is a reaction to the social strictures faced as part of the bourgeoisie. Their actions are “private” in nature, i.e. not appropriate to the public sphere, but reflect differences in particular kinds of public spaces. At the dock and Yacht Club, part of the respectable bourgeois social structure, behavior is muted and proper. The far shore, a the liminal space both public but isolated (both socially and spatially), becomes a place where “private,” less socially respectable, behavior can occur.

In his essay on amateur travel films, Devin Orgeron discusses a collection of postwar home movies of families on vacation, paying close attention to “the emergence of a dialectically

rhythmic editing structure that finds the amateur cinematographer moving, at times within the very limited narrative space of a fifty-foot reel, between images of difference (typically glimpsed voyeuristically) and images of familiarity (typically captured nostalgically)” (78). Bergman’s travel films, because of their careful documentation of space, align the tension between difference and familiarity with the memorial and the historical, and re-echo Boym’s formulation of twin nostalgias. The familiar stresses memory, while difference stresses the historical aspects of the footage.

Bergman shot a number of films of travels around the United States and in Europe, all of which follow a similar pattern of narration born out of temporal and (abbreviated) spatial continuity. These films often feature Ruth Perl, Bergman’s favorite niece, who accompanied him on many of these trips. For illustrative purposes, let’s take footage shot during Bergman and Perl’s trip to Europe in 1929. It opens with Perl playing ring toss onboard a steamship, then features many shots, from different angles, of boxing matches staged for the entertainment of the passengers. Bergman pans around the crowd in long shot (later shots are ringside; apparently Bergman moved closer after a while), seeking out his niece. These shots suggest a common feature of vacation footage, the effort to situate the familiar within the unfamiliar, hence Bergman’s camera seeking Perl out, and this footage altogether runs for over eight minutes, suggesting the long experience of inter-continental boat travel.

More footage documents the process of departure and movement with exterior shots of a steamship, low angle shots of people waving from the windows, long horizontal pans to capture its length, and finally long shots of other steamships sailing in the distance, which recall Bergman’s *Yacht Club* films (Smithsonian NMAH Accession 722.19). The latter images are paradigmatic of a tendency in Bergman’s substantial travel footage, namely sequences taken

from the sides of ships, and rapid, blurred shots from the windows of railroad cars and automobiles. This is in keeping with amateur travel movies, which feature a great deal of footage shot from, in particular, moving cars.

Footage like this generates the narrative drive of the “home-travel movie” as a movement through space. In attempting to capture that experience, to archive a total (or near-total) record of spaces visited as well as those moved through, the films create a loose narrative based entirely on the notion of occupying different spaces. What makes Bergman’s 1929 footage particularly interesting is the chronicling of a now largely defunct mode of travel (suggesting the historical dimension of the memorializing home movie), and how his lengthy sequences of leisure, along with slow moving pans of the seascape, suggest the duration of sea travel – as opposed to the rapid, whip-pan effect (and often brief shot length) of footage taken from rail cars or automobiles.

When the travelers reach Geneva, Bergman shoots footage inflected with his strong concern with spatial archivization. Initial shots show streets and parks under a blanket of snow, and we then see the monument to Martin Luther, dwarfing Ruth Perl as she stands against it. Further exterior shots of Geneva feature other parks, monuments, and architectural views. As is usual in travel footage, Bergman makes sweeping pans across the space. These pans reveal greater portions of the space in one shot, and that spatial continuity better situates the spectator to the experience of occupying that space. Bergman, being from a large city and employed by a construction company, is clearly interested in urban planning and architecture and works to provide, as far as possible, an idea of the spatial experience of Geneva. He continues a tendency seen in the footage of the Chrysler construction.

Perl's appearance at the Martin Luther monument allows Bergman to demonstrate the scale of the monument in comparison to a familiar object of reference, the human body (and the human body as it belongs to a relative). Secondly, the shot places an identifiable subject into the many exterior, largely person-less shots of the city. It attests to the fact that a family member was there, in the space itself. To capture the experience of the trip, Bergman offers a continuity of space through his exterior pans and traveling shots, but also records Perl's being there. The presence of family members is central to our experiences of visited spaces: they mix the alien with the familiar, as Orgeron discusses. Moments like this are significant to our experience of foreign spaces; they familiarize them by placing the known within that space.

Moreover, such moments continue to articulate the tension between memory and history in the home movie. The memories of the trip embodied by the film run parallel to a form of historical documentation. Vacation films, perhaps more than any other type of home movie, represent the family in public terms and embody that tension between the public and private. Vacation spaces are public spaces, albeit subordinated to the private pursuit of leisure. They are liminal, like other common spaces of the home movie, such as the yard. Even when vacation spaces are more definitely public, such as the streets of Geneva, they are being consumed for leisurely purposes, and in the experience of vacationers and the spectators of their films, are represented in a private context. Thus the very process of taking vacation films privatizes public space for those who can find the familiar within the alien (i.e. those who went on the vacation or are related to them). Beyond that, Bergman's film becomes an exercise in historical documentation, providing evidence of how Geneva looked in the late 1920s.

Bergman's family films, especially a series shot in 1928-29, reiterate how domestic space functions in home movies and contrasts with the travel footage. These reels open with a medium

shot of a house in an urban neighborhood (my guess would be Brooklyn), which Bergman pans across to capture in its entirety. This functions as an establishing shot. Afterwards, family members (including Ruth Perl) step out of the house one by one, pose briefly for the camera, then walk past it or down the sidewalk, off screen left. Once everyone has emptied from the house, each has an individual close up, recalling the shots (or, given their relative dates, anticipating) Bergman took of the Chrysler Building workers. The images catalogue family members in a specific excision of space and time, like snapshots. After these portraits, Bergman pans around the block from right to left, and then back again, recording the house in its spatial context (and again, recalling/anticipating a formal device he uses elsewhere).

Later in the reel is another catalogue of family members, this time shot inside at a family gathering (the finding aid says it's Thanksgiving 1928). These shots, unlike the exteriors, suffer from poor lighting and a short focal length, commonplace traits of interiors shot in amateur gauges. Family members have been lined up on their way to dinner, and the camera's presence turns the event into a chance to pose. Both focus and lighting improve as people step forward. They laugh and gesture, talking to others off screen; one man pretends to be drunk, and two teenagers make a show of kissing their grandmother and arguing over her (Smithsonian NMAH Accession 722.29). These shots distill certain personas for the family members they archive, but also depict the movement of family members through the space of the home. The parade is suggestive of a reoccurring phenomenon in family life: the movement of family members through each other's homes.

These two sets of images condense the memories of spaces and people together. Rather than the touristic shot of family members in visited places, which contrast the alien with the known, these images are doubly familiar, with family members in places they "belong." As

Bergman's family members leave the house and pose on the sidewalk, the liminal nature of space and family narrative is reiterated. The family occupies a space "between" the private home and the larger public sphere, suggested by the pan shots of the neighborhood. The images of the family members are clearest while outside the home. Compare this to the interior parade: in the darkened interiors of the house, most of the private space remains unseen, and people wait in the shadows to come forward and, as Forgacs suggested, "play themselves."

What we can observe through Bergman's family films is that the space of family representation is less dependent on actual spaces than on the camera itself. The camera enforces a spatial regime on family representation: the family can only be seen clearly outside the home, in the borderland between the domestic and public sphere, or within the short focal distance of the camera lens inside the home. The family is either seen entering public through the liminal "in-between" space, or they appear "out of context," that is, with little of the private domestic space they occupy clearly represented. Bergman's footage suggests to us that family representation through amateur gauges was already forcing individuals into public display: the technological capabilities of the representation pushed people out of their homes into more publicly visible spaces directly outside of them.

The Robinson-Via family films, which are also located in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, demonstrate one last case we might consider: what if the public space of labor and the domestic space are collapsed? What would "home" movies look like in such a situation? These films feature two families of Maryland tobacco farmers joined in 1958 by the marriage of Franklin Robinson and Adina Via (Robinson 1). Most of the films depict Robinson at work on the farm or family gatherings – a number of Christmases appear on the reels. The documentation of mid-Atlantic farm work in the 1950s and 60s gives the films a

historical importance, justifying their inclusion in the museum's collections, but they also bear a subjective dimension, an experience of time and space based primarily on the occupation and lifestyle of the family producing them.

To illustrate this, take a set of reels from 1964-65. This footage was shot on 8mm color film. It opens with a panning shot of thick snow on the ground of the farm, taken from inside the house. This is one of many snowstorms chronicled in the films, often in the same manner – shot from the interior of the house through its windows, capturing as much of the farmland as possible in a few panning shots. After the snow, we leap forward to spring with a shot of the farmland that contains a significant (especially for 8mm) depth of field. This shot has parallel, horizontal swaths of color, with the yellow ground, greenish trees in the distance, and the blue sky above. Frank Robinson drives a tractor from left to right, rear to forward in the frame, approaching the camera. We then see a shot of him loading seed into the tractor, and then a mirror of the prior shot as he drives back into the distance (Smithsonian NMAH Accession 475.3).

Footage like this proliferates in the Robinson-Via family films: there is substantial focus on farmwork. There are many, many shots of the farm itself, often slow pans across the landscape during snowstorms or during farming and harvesting seasons. Color and depth in these shots contrast with each other, despite their similar framing and camera movement: in the snowstorms, distance is obliterated, and only the white of the snow and the bluish-white of the sky are visible. In other seasons, parallel swaths of color – yellows, browns, greens, and blues – mark depth and changes in the land. The regular repetition of such shots suggests a close attention to landscape and seasons by the family. This is unsurprising, as these are precisely the concerns of farming families: surveying the landscape and farmland, cognizance of the weather

and its effects, and reading seasonal shifts. In other words, the footage featured in these films betrays a farmer's viewpoint; these home movies articulate a conception of space and the passage of time associated with farm work and life.

The next shots on the reel show two young boys framed against a truck that reads "Ferndale Farms," then the two boys playing and splashing in a tiny swimming pool. Footage from subsequent reels shows interior shots on Christmas day. These demonstrate the light registration capability of 8mm film. The initial shots are very dark, with only the lights on the tree clearly visible. The children, who enter from around a corner to see the tree and presents underneath, are barely visible. As the film continues and time passes, people and objects become more visible with each shot as the big window in the room lets in more and more sunlight from outside.

This more "typical" home movie footage still reveals the subjective mindset of a farming family. The Robinson-Via collection features no fewer than seven Christmases, indicating of a strong desire to archive the passage of time and season by marking the occurrence of Christmas morning. This repetition of Christmas recording evinces a strong concern with temporal rhythms and circularity, both of which are primary concerns with farms and farm work.

The Robinson-Via films, much more so than the Bergman films, mark no division between public and private, work and home. They also extend the idea that home movies, despite some form of similarity across families, are inscribed with an individual (or familial) viewpoint. In the Robinson-Via films, the division between public and private spheres is largely erased because of the nature of farm work, where the spaces of home and work often coincide. The film reels themselves fail to mark this division as well. Reels in the Robinson-Via collection routinely contain footage of the farm landscape, work being done on the farm, and "private"

activity (children playing, holidays) all together, with the only distinction being the order of shooting. In the Bergman films, by contrast, reels are generally segregated, meaning that one reel will only contain footage of, say, Godwin company projects or Rockaway Yacht Club activities. Such material is much more integrated in the Robinson-Via films.

While the Bergman films tend towards a narrative arc within a few reels, the Robinson-Via films instead suggest a broader experience of time and space based primarily on the cyclical nature of labor, the seasons, and cultural rituals such as holidays. While Bergman's films exhibit the perspective of an urbanite involved in construction, they do not, in totality, offer the same degree of encompassing experience of time and space that the Robinson-Via films do.

The Bergman and Robinson-Via films can serve as paradigms for moving beyond the general and understanding the particular in home movies. In many cases, the memories evoked by home movies are lost forever, with the films themselves becoming historical documents. However, close readings of large home movie collections can often reveal a great deal about the concerns of specific individuals and families. These films articulate an experience of space and temporality that suggest how individuals understood their lives, and that moves beyond the archiving of memory into the realm of narrative. The quality of these narratives emerge not from adherence to the classic rules of continuity shooting and editing that dictate comprehension in commercial narrative films, but rather from simpler notions of temporal continuity and the subjective experience of space.

In home movies, the private is reified, remaining outside of representation due to a host of factors: the poor light registration of amateur gauges, elliptical temporal compression, a lack of sound, a focus on extraordinary over quotidian events, a *mise-en-scène* of presentation over internalization. Home movies become public documents instead, focusing on the family in

public spaces, re-enacting culturally significant rituals expressing a connection to wider society, and demonstrating socially sanctioned behavior. Ironically, rather than inoculating private memory against the passage of time, home movies materialize that process when they become historical documents as memories pass away.

So it may appear, on the surface, that home movies always enact the slippage from reflective nostalgia to restorative. While home movies remain prompts to memory, they also remain prompts to reflect critically on the passage of time within our lives. However, they always bear the tinge of a misrepresented past, the possibility of an uncritical reading as well. When they become historical documents, they almost always slip into the realm of the restorative, examples of national history mobilized to demonstrate how the past was so much happier than the present.

However, many home movies, when examined carefully, bear the traces of individual subjectivity and specific cultural formations. They recall lost, or greatly changed, social and cultural practices, such as midcentury family tobacco farming or the leisure pursuits of wealthy 1930s New Yorkers. In such ways, they still offer opportunities to reflect nostalgically on the past, because they carry the subjectivities of their makers. Home movies offer an opportunity to interact with individuals from the past, even we no longer - or never did - have any memory of them.

CHAPTER 2:

HERE IS HOME VIDEO, THEIR MIRROR ONTO YOUR WORLD

The home movie archive at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell holds an interesting example of an 8mm home movie transfer in the collection of the Leno family, accessible on DVD (Cat. 49A). When watching the DVD, viewers see not a clean, professional transfer from 8mm film to digital video, but rather a white screen on which the family's home movies are projected for the video camera's lens. A projector can be clearly heard offscreen, as can family members providing commentary on the footage.²⁹

The content is typical of home movies – there are children playing, plateaus and buffalo shot on vacation, boats and a seascape from another vacation, a high school graduation, and a beach trip with footage of water-skiing, feeding a tame seagull, and a skywritten message informing us that “Solarcain Stops Sunburn Pain.” There is some uncertainty in the offscreen spectators about where the plateaus were: “What were we doing in Yuma?” “Looks like South Dakota to me.” The graduating seniors are “Nancy and Timothy;” one child in the vacation footage is recalled as “the kid who couldn’t swim very well” as he and other children perform dives for the filmmaker.

The Leno transfer encapsulates in one artifact a material and cultural shift from film to video as the dominant moving image medium of personal and familial memorialization. It contains within it two instances, each related to the two home media: one, the original events recorded with an 8mm home movie camera, and the other, the Lenos watching and commenting

²⁹ The video resembles an amateur version of the “director’s commentary” soundtrack on contemporary DVDs. Similar acts, which assuredly were commonplace with home movie screenings, might be seen as a historical precedent for the director’s commentary.

on the home movies while transferring them to video. In the first situation, we have a representation of family memories, in the other, the representation simultaneous with its reception. Although the Lenos' goal was to transfer their home movies to the new medium supplanting 8mm film, they created instead a record of a particular viewing of those home movies. The video transfer captures not just the home movies themselves, but the active negotiation and remembrance taking place as the Lenos watch this representation of their past.

The Leno transfer prompts us to consider the cultural consequences of home video. For one thing, it offers a unique way to recognize the stylistic differences between 8mm home movies and video. The style of each is partly a function of its technological capabilities, which in turn affect the nature of the archives they produce, the image of the past contained therein, and that image's relationship to memory.³⁰ In short, home video's difference from the home movie contributes to a different way of understanding the family events and cultural rituals depicted.

Let me briefly outline the stylistic differences observable in the Leno transfer. The home movie images are silent, which lets the Lenos talk clearly over them. Their conversation is audible due to a central feature – some might say the key feature³¹ – of video technology, the recording of synchronous sound simultaneously with the image. Moreover, while the home movies quickly cut from shot to shot and event to event, the viewing is captured in entirety, without edits or cuts, in one long take of the video camera. The home movies cover no fewer than four events, possibly taking place over the course of months or even years, while the home

³⁰ In *Archive Fever* Jacques Derrida asks, in the context of psychoanalysis, “in what way has the whole of this field been determined by a state of the technology of communication and of archivization?” (16). While explicitly concerned with disciplinary development rather than aesthetics, Derrida induces us to consider media technology's effect on the archive, broadly conceived.

³¹ In *On Video*, Roy Armes writes, “the new balance of sound and image is [what is] characteristic of video” (159).

video containing them features only one event – the screening - in a single “take.” This long running time highlights another feature of video technology central to understanding the shift from 8mm film to video.

Despite these differences, the content of most home movies and home videos remains similar: cultural rituals and significant personal and familial events, as exemplified by the Leno’s home movies. However, the specific *mise-en-scène* around those rituals and events has changed. The Leno’s home movie footage is entirely outdoors, stressing how the family locates themselves within liminal public spaces, as discussed in the previous chapter. The home video, however, is indoors. Video is better able to record in low light, and thus a major *mise-en-scène* shift occurs with home video, exposing the interiors and domestic spaces left shadowy and unseen in most home movies.

In creating the transfer the Lenos consciously, though perhaps tacitly, recognized that video had become the predominant “home” medium in the late 20th century. Video imagery became the standard medium for the recording, capture, and archivization of personal and family history in the late 20th century, through camcorder use, but it has also permeated domestic space for sixty years with the spread of television. The Leno’s production of the transfer “in house” (literally) reflects a domestic comfort with video and acceptance of its presence at family events. Moreover, the television screen has served for decades as a site of mediation between the privacy of the home and the external, public world. The Leno transfer forces another reconsideration of the home mode, one where viewing occurs on the same screen as other electronically reproduced images which similarly negotiate the defining limits of private, domestic space and recast the nature of privacy itself. In other words, the home video is shaped not only by its predecessor, the

home movie, but also by television, the institution with which it shares a history and technical apparatus.

In this chapter, I argue that the imbrication between home video and television meant that home videos were innately suffused with publicity. Families in home movies depicted themselves in liminal public spaces and thereby articulated a public image for themselves. Home videos, on the other hand, present images of private/domestic spaces, but in a medium that suggests those images are open to public view and consumption.

At the same time the typical stylistic features of home video evoke a form of audio-visual realism that recalls prior manifestations of “the real,” in particular that of cinema vérité and live television. That “realism” disguises the tension between revelation and elision that marks home videos as much as 8mm home movies. Home video style thus disguises the publicity derived from the link with television and its contribution to a declining privacy. The tendency to view home video as a banal practice reiterating the worst of bourgeois domestic ideology ignores home videos’ radical reworking of the representational limits of the private.³² The division of public and private spheres emerges out of the bourgeois social order (Habermas); and the continuing impact of that division relies on maintaining a particular division of space (public and domestic), function (labor and leisure), and gender (masculine and feminine). Home video, while typically depicting bourgeois families and spaces, upends some of those distinctions by offering up the private to public vision and consumption. Whether that upending has any positive social force is an open question.

³² Patricia Zimmermann falls into this very trap in the last chapter of *Reel Families*. She writes, “[n]ew use of amateur cameras could be reinvented. They could retaliate against the enervation of the mass media and intervene into its reproduction of aesthetic norms and unexamined familial ideologies...home video bursts with a dialectically loaded possibility. On the one hand, it is merely another leisure-time commodity for the bourgeois family. On the other hand, it may foment opportunities for media-production access, intervention, and critique” (152).

Television and Home Video Publicity

Jarice Hanson reminds us that “[t]he word video is actually a term that describes the picture component of a televised image” though it has proliferated in meaning in the last few decades (12). Video was developed as a recording medium in concert with television, though it was not until the 1950s that corporate research and development found a usable videotape recording system. During that decade, as broadcast television became commercially viable, networks sought a cheap and easy method of recording programs to overcome time zone differentials. It was costly and labor intensive to broadcast a program live for the Eastern time zone and do so again for the West coast. An early solution was kinescoping (recording television broadcasts on celluloid film) the first live performance for later replay, but this too became costly and voluminous: as of 1954, television studios were already using “more raw film for kines than all the Hollywood film studios combined” (Wasko 116). By recording programs ahead of time, television studio availability and space would become more flexible, and television personnel would also have documentation of their labors. Among early investors looking to offset television production costs through video recording were RCA, Bing Crosby Enterprises, and the Ampex Corporation. Ampex ultimately succeeded, offering a public demonstration of their VTR (videotape recorder) in April 1956 (Keen 16-19). By the end of the decade, videotape recording was common practice in the television industry. Rather than merely ameliorating the problem of time zone differences and the cost and labor of live broadcasting, however, videotape inadvertently eliminated live broadcasting for a number of television genres.

Soon thereafter, corporations began seeking ways to enter the consumer market by making videotape systems cheap and mass producible.³³

Unsurprisingly, early video camera systems were bulky and expensive, but they were available for public purchase by the 1960s. The people who bought them were interested in the potential of video art or looking for a cheaper and television friendly alternative for documentary filmmaking (Boyle 3-5). Either way, many video camera “early adopters” wanted to capitalize on the connection to the televisual. Video artists such as Nam June-Paik were interested in manipulating broadcast signals and questioned the intrusion of television into social and cultural life. For their experiments, they required a stable medium for video images. Documentarians and corporate broadcasting reformers used video to defer the costs of celluloid and record on a medium that smoothed their access to the airways. Video was not available and affordable to a mass of consumers, however, until the early 1980s, after the VCR caught hold in the market and domesticated the technology. Even then, camcorders were not widespread until the latter part of the decade when they became lighter and more wieldy.³⁴

Although home videographers quickly used camcorders in ways that incorporated prior home mode practices and respected the capabilities of the video recording technology, home video never escaped its initial imbrication with television: television history, technology, and spectatorship shape home video reception. David Antin notes, “if anything has defined the

³³ For more detail on the development of videotape recording in the television industry, see Janet Wasko chapter 6, esp. pp. 114-120; Eugene Marlow and Eugene Secunda, *Shifting Time and Space* chapter 2 (13-24); Ben Keen, “Play It Again, Sony”: The Double Life of Home Video Technology”; Jarice Hanson, *Understanding Video* 16-23

³⁴ The camcorder is distinguished from the video camera in that it houses both lens and recording unit together and can playback recorded material. For a brief discussion of the industrial strategy to make such devices smaller and more easily usable see James Lardner, *Fast Forward*, pp. 304-311.

formal and technical properties of the video medium, it is the television industry” (149).³⁵

Broadcasting and video playback both rely on the television monitor for display through the reconstitution of electronic signals into images the human eye can register. The lines of the cathode ray tube provide us with broadcast imagery, rented films on video, and home videos of our families, all of which converge in the family home at the same site, the television monitor. Thus any engagement with home video must contend with the institution of television.

I am not claiming that these very different forms of media practice are equalized or conflated by the monitor. No one mistakes a home video for NBC’s latest sitcom.³⁶ However, our perception of video as a medium, and home video as a practice within that medium, is inflected by television. This relationship impacts the reception of home video images. Despite depicting ostensibly private behavior, home video’s synchronic, symbiotic relationship with television forces us to consider those private images as infused with publicity. In other words, television’s position of primacy over all other video images lends publicity to home videos. Though home videos may be powerfully private in nature their undeniable link to television, and the power and influence of television in contemporary culture, mean that home videos inherit from television a publicity that generates tension between public and private in home video representation.

Although it is just a metaphor, the persistent notion of television as a window is a productive way for thinking about its resonance for home video. As early as 1946, Thomas Hutchinson took the metaphor literally in his manual *Here is Television, Your Window on the*

³⁵ Though Antin is referring specifically to video art’s relationship with television, I see no reason not to apply his observation to amateur and home use of the medium.

³⁶ However, a number of recent television sitcoms have adopted stylistic techniques common to home videos and documentaries, the most prominent being *The Office*.

World. Hutchinson anticipated Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, writing that, through television, “in the not too far distant future London, Paris, Moscow, and Washington will be next door and all the peoples of the world near neighbors...Television actually is a window looking out on the world” (x). The metaphor would continue to shape thinking about television’s power and role.

Hutchinson’s comparison was apt, as television’s intercession into postwar culture reflected trends in middle-class homebuilding. Lynn Spigel discusses how television was part of a process by which the private suburban home grew to replace the amenities and culture of the public sphere in postwar America. Americans “secured a position of meaning in the public sphere through their new-found social identities as private land owners” (101). In other words, ownership of private homes and through that, participation in the “American Dream” was the only necessity for involvement in wider culture. Suburbanites no longer had to partake in the broader discourses of the public sphere that shaped political culture, because that engagement was secured merely by home ownership.³⁷ Television entered a domestic space pre-defined as “public.”

Television brought images of the outside world into the home just as domestic space was opened to public inspection through window trends in postwar home construction. Advances in glass and architecture made the picture window commonplace in American homes, and “[g]lass, which brought together indoors and outdoors and leveled the environment, became a medium of display, to excite and titillate everybody’s desires for all the objects which one’s fellow citizens

³⁷ This seems an ironic inverse of Habermas’ thesis in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, where the public sphere is created by land owning bourgeois national citizens. Here, the public sphere seems an immutable object that one enters through land owning. Expansion of the category of landowners, rather than the entry of the mass media into the equation, disrupts Habermas’ historical ideal.

possessed and which comprised the American Standard of Living” (Boorstin 345, Clark 195). In discussing a house on Mulholland Drive in Los Angeles designed by architect John Lautner, featuring an eye-like wall of windows facing out on a hillside, Thomas Keenan argues that “the excess of windows both opens the house to surveillance from the exterior and allows interior scenes to be shot with all the brightness of the open sun” (123). As an architectural object, windows serve as a mediator between private and public; “[t]he opening risks the more violent opening of the distinction between inside and outside, private and public, self and other, on which the house of the human is built” (124). An example Lynn Spigel draws from William H. Whyte illustrates Keenan’s point; she quotes an anecdote from Whyte’s study on suburban conformity, *The Organization Man*, regarding a “woman who was ‘so ashamed of the emptiness of her living room that she smeared the picture window with Bon Ami; not until a dinette set arrived did she wipe it off’” (164). Spigel continues: “Lacking the props with which to display her social prestige, the woman simply inverted the terms of conspicuous consumption, literally making her poverty inconspicuous to her neighbors” (164). The story resonates for a consumer culture obsessed with maintaining cultural capital, especially in relation to one’s neighbors (“keeping up with the Joneses”), but it also illustrates Keenan’s conception of the window. One not only looks out onto the world, but one’s own home is “framed” for outside viewers. The window forces the home’s occupants to display themselves for friends and neighbors, marking a liminal border between domestic and public space, and also private and public performance. Television, with its glass screen bringing images of the outside world into the home, “meshed perfectly with the aesthetics of modern suburban architecture” especially windows, which along with television “promised to conquer space” from the comfort of the living room (Spigel 103). The television screen not only provided a view onto the outside world, but it also offered access

to the interiors of homes, through genres like the family sitcom, much like the living room picture window.³⁸

Keenan further argues that the window replicates the conditions upon which the Western subject is predicated. The subject at the window looks out upon the objectified, external world, ensconced in a position of security. When we venture outside, we risk becoming part of that external world seen through the window. For Keenan, this constitutes the essential difference between the private and public spheres: “the subject’s variable status as public or private individual is defined by its position relative to this window...Publicity tears us from our selves, exposes us to and involves us with others, denies us the security of that window behind which we might install ourselves to gaze” (132-134). The private self gazes, while the public self interacts. The picture window, however, introduces a degree of reflexivity to this equation: the private individual can now be gazed at through the window, and is forced to arrange their private home to be interacted with (i.e. seen) by outside observers.

The home video expands the television/window metaphor. To the outside viewer, home videos function like the picture window, displaying the interior of the home and the behavior within while still maintaining a degree of public decorum. For the insider, home videos enable simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity: one is simultaneously the viewing subject and the object on the screen/through the window. Our memories, materialized by the home video images, are thereby given an “objective” quality; we obtain a sense of mastery over them, compounded by our ability to manipulate them through playback operations, while simultaneously alienating us from them.

³⁸ Moran proposes a similar convergence between sitcoms and home video in chapter 4 of his book.

If television trains audiences to accept it as a window offering views of “what’s happening” in the outside world, it disguises that operation through its conflation of technological apparatus with mode of address.³⁹ Both are geared towards a temporal “presentism” that disguises the ideological operations of television programming.

The technology that creates both the video image and television broadcasting is temporally “presentist.” Television cathode rays work by a continual, constant writing of lines on the monitor, meaning the video image is fundamentally unstable, constantly being rewritten. At any given split-second, the image on the screen is only half-complete, made up of odd or even numbered lines with the others about to be written. Yvonne Spielmann explains: “all the information in the image contains two interlocking half images, a technical necessity for stabilizing it, which produces the impression of the image together with the arresting of the lines. This makes it clear that the ‘video image’ essentially represents an incomplete and discontinuous type of image” (49). Unlike cinema, in which any given frame is still a complete image, the video image is never complete, always in a state of flux. Video images require a continual, presentist renewal of the image, an “always-becoming.”

For a video image to constantly be written and rewritten on the screen, transmission and reception of broadcast material must be simultaneous. Stanley Cavell defines the television medium as “a current of simultaneous event reception” that features “‘no sensuous distinction’ between the live and the repeat, or the replay or the delayed” (205-206). The moment the

³⁹ Consider how much television programming is built on this notion. Aside from news and sports, which are predicated on informing viewers about “what’s happening” outside their homes, many television genres are aligned with home video. Reality television like *Big Brother*, *The Real World*, and *The Jersey Shore* take us inside private dwellings to observe the “private behavior” therein.

broadcasting center transmits an image, my set can receive that image and display it. Liveness (i.e. presentism) is the very mechanism of broadcasting and video imagery.

That liveness and constant renewal of imagery has been incorporated and managed by the mode of address of television programming. Jane Feuer has persuasively argued that television broadcasting uses techniques that address viewers as though programming were live, even when it is not. “The ideology of liveness” serves to “suppress contradictions” in television content, forestalling critical thought. Raymond Williams characterizes television in a similarly dialectical manner, as a synthesis between segment and flow. Broadcast television consists of many discrete segments - snippets of a program, commercials, news stories, and promos for other programs - that are haphazardly, though purposefully, juxtaposed. Flow is the continual stream of images and sounds that smooths over and sutures the disruptions between segments. Together, flow and segment describe commercial television’s constant barrage of image and sound, which never stops and offers no time to reflect on what’s being seen. Moreover, flow “is always available, in several alternative sequences, at the flick of a switch” (95). When one turns on a television set, one accesses an already constituted flow of image and sound that continues unabated whether we tune in or not. The river runs even if we don’t wade into it. The viewer tapping into the flow of television experiences not only a continual stream of imagery indifferent to our presence, but also the sensation that whatever the screen depicts is occurring right now, in the present moment, through Feuer’s live mode of address.

Television broadcasting serves as a de facto public sphere, discursively presenting events and commentary, albeit in a centralized model with enormous institutional and ideological power. By appearing on the same screen as the flow, home videos imaginatively become part of that public sphere to the viewer. The re-presentation of home videos on a screen where

presentism is the temporal mode of address grants that property to the videos. We should also remember that video images recorded on magnetic tape, not just those broadcast, are also reconstituted “at the moment” each and every time they are watched. Thus, our memories are objectified and transformed into something to be viewed by others, even if only in our imaginations.

Home videos, through the television screen, continue and expand a process of shrinking privacy that began with photography. Roland Barthes writes “each photograph is read as the private appearance of its referent: the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly” (98). The interest in consuming “the private as such” is connected to what Barthes dubbed photography’s noeme, that is, its essence: “in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there...[w]hat I intentionalize in a photograph...is Reference, which is the founding order of Photography” (76-77). Photography, in other words, provides us with irrefutable proof that the object or person depicted existed somewhere, sometime. The photograph’s verification to reality coupled with the explosion in production of “private” images due to cheap cameras meant that those images could attest, like never before, to the existence of private lives. The public interest in photography, therefore, is an interest in the basic fact of other people’s private lives. Photography is inherently voyeuristic in Barthes’ formulation.

Barthes defines the “private life” as “that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object” (15). The appeal of private images as circulating objects is paradoxical: they are prized because they purport to show a “zone,” the private, which resists reduction to an image. Photography thus compromises and shrinks that zone. The truly “private” sphere shrinks

further as television and home video expose it to public view. Much as I hate to engage with models of evolution or straightforward progression, as each media format, from photography to film to video, passes into the hands of consumers the private sphere grows smaller and smaller, with more and more of what was private now suffused with publicity. As I argue in the next section, the stylistic features common to home videos – long takes, synchronous sound, interior *mise-en-scène* – display domestic space and private behavior to a greater degree than previous home mode media, and therefore further shrink that zone of the private.

Stanley Cavell's theory of television "monitoring" can illuminate the video image's continued assault on the zone of the private. In monitoring, the sensation of watching television is akin to surveilling the world around you, which is unlike the cinematic experience of "viewing" an existing world unfold. The experience of monitoring relies on televisual temporality, which Cavell calls a "current," in two senses of the word: "suggesting the contemporary as well as indicating the continuous" (206). When we monitor television, we watch a series of continuous images on discrete channels presenting the contemporary world: Cavell's metaphor for the act of television spectatorship is a security guard seated before a bank of surveillance screens. Through a single monitor, television acts as the multiple screens of the surveillance bank, and switching from channel to another recalls the "switch of attention from one monitor to another monitor. Succession [the principle of cutting in a film] is replaced by switching" (210). If a channel draws our attention, we linger on it; otherwise, we continue to search for something that will. The metaphor coincides with the concept of flow; in both circumstances, spectators stumble upon and then observe "events" already in motion. Television viewing is always *in media res*.

By sharing a screen and imaging technology with television, home videos enter into the monitoring process. The shift from the cinema screen, whether in a theater or in the home, to the monitor as the main source of audio-visual information was the major change in how such information altered our conceptions of the public and private spheres. When watching home videos on the television screen, we monitor our own lives, and through this act, take part in a fantasy of surveillance where others might monitor our lives in the same fashion. Watching our home videos flatters us into thinking our lives are important enough to be monitored.⁴⁰ It is the logical fulfillment of the home mode, which tells us our lives are worth the time and resources spent archiving them. If we fantasize about being monitored through our home videos - a publicity-inflected narcissism - it follows that we are monitored at other times, even if we're not recorded. And of course, we are monitored/surveilled whenever we enter public places.⁴¹ Home videos are a private corollary to the Bentham's panopticon; they plant the fantasy notion of continual surveillance in our minds. We behave as though we are always being monitored, and thus we are always being reduced to an image in our own minds. To put it more pithily: television bestows on home videos the sensation of having a private life publicly viewed; home videos are private documents consumed "publicly." We exist on both sides of the television

⁴⁰ We are reminded of Rosalind Krauss' critique of video art as "the aesthetics of narcissism." As with many seminal essays on video, Krauss' concern is with high art, but there is still a resonance with home video practices.

⁴¹ For information on the encompassing surveillance in public places, its intrusion into domestic and private spaces, and possible modes of resistance, see Steve Mann, "'Reflectionism' and 'Diffusionism': New Tactics for Deconstructing the Video Surveillance Superhighway"; William G. Staples, *Everyday Surveillance: Vigilance and Visibility in Postmodern Life*; and Clive Norris and Gary Armstrong, *The Maximum Surveillance Society: The Rise of CCTV*, among many other entries in the growing subfield of surveillance studies. As Bart Simon points out in "The Return of the Panopticon: Supervision, Subjection, and New Surveillance" almost all discussion of video, satellite, and CCTV surveillance in modern scholarship (the last 20 years) at least mentions Bentham's panopticon and Foucault's analysis of it.

“window”: monitoring the outside world, but also monitored by it. This is the price paid to rewatch and renegotiate with our memories. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the aesthetics of home video aim at disguising the process of publicity by appearing as an “objective” record of events and reproducing a realist media aesthetic. However, even the realist home video style contains tensions and contradictions.

Home Video: The Realist Style and Private Memory

Two of the most significant stylistic features of home videos are the long take and synchronous sound. These stylistic traits reinforce one another, granting home videos a powerful spatial and temporal unity read as unmediated realism. Blank magnetic tape, the medium for video recording, was cheap in comparison to film, which had to be both bought and developed. Videotapes were available in recording times that dwarfed those of 8mm film reels, anywhere from one to eight hours, and typically at the upper end of that range.⁴² Video’s economical ratio of cost to recording time lent itself to recording more events for longer periods of time in longer takes. As a librarian at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell home movie archive said to me, home videographers tended to “tape anything and everything, forever.” A further anecdote he told about the early years of the home movie and video collection emphasized the point. When the archive began, many people were willing to donate their VHS home videos, but after a time, the archive stopped accepting them. The volume of donations was so great that the archive no longer had storage space. I took the story two ways. Firstly, it offers anecdotal evidence of the sheer amount of material that people shot on video. Secondly, it also testifies to the willingness

⁴² To compare: in September 1985, *Consumer Reports* ran an extensive article comparing brands of video cameras and videotapes. The article notes that a two hour blank VHS cost about \$5, whereas a 3 ½ minute reel of super-8 cost \$16 with processing; it would cost over \$500 for the film to match the recording time of the \$5 VHS tape (“Video Cameras” 532).

to have personal recorded memories available in a public forum. It was among the first inklings I had that home video engendered publicity different from earlier home modes.

The long takes common to home videos often feature shaky handheld camera movement, the type adopted by commercial filmmakers to signify a sort of “adrenal realism.”⁴³ In home videos, camera movement keeps recognized familial subjects in frame without cessation of recording (and thus has a similar motivation to camera movement in classical narrative films), shifting between subjects or objects of interest and framing them for presentation, thereby capturing the sensation of an event in its entirety – but in a different manner than the montage of the home movie. Camera movement with the long take gives home videos a temporal and spatial unity of representation, excising as little as possible of the perceptual experience of the event. In other words, if ellipsis is the stylistic hallmark of home movies, the home video is characterized by its eschewal. Home video’s temporal economy fantasizes about eliminating ellipses, both temporal and spatial; the fundamental quality of home videos is quantity, representing life as a series of long experiences, rather than punctuations. This is a major source of the “transparency” of home video – the seeming collapse of representation and the real event. Home video’s sensation of realism comes from a combination of a Bazinian long take aesthetic with the home mode’s documenting of events “as they were:” both in spatial configuration (the *mise-en-scène* of the home or locale recorded) and in temporality (the unfolding of events in “real time.”)⁴⁴

⁴³ The horror genre has used the conceit often in the last decade and a half. The films *Cloverfield*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Diary of the Dead*, *Paranormal Activity*, and *[REC]* all have a character recording events with a camcorder to create a realist narrative sheen. Moreover, many films have adopted “shaky-cam” camera movement to signify “realistic” violence, as in the films of Paul Greengrass. Granted the technique does not originate with home video, but became more common in the decades after video’s consumer adoption.

⁴⁴ For Andre Bazin, the long take was a key stylistic method for achieving cinematic realism. While Bazin’s arguments often take an ontological turn, his belief that cinema could reveal and

Dynamic framing and camera movement suggests ways home videos complicate the division of space. Movement through space in home videos mirrors the freedom of movement through the home that family members have. Although some spaces are still never seen in home videos, it is implied they could be: that nothing is outside scrutiny. The entirety of domestic space lies open for the camera to move through and record. An example can be seen in Doug Block's video documentary *51 Birch Street*. Block has decided to videotape his parents' lives, and in one moment he records his mother stepping out of the bedroom in the morning and follows her down the hall to the bathroom, with her protesting the entire time. The video (and Block himself) threatens to enter the bathroom itself. The example is an exceptional one, but it illustrates video's leveling of domestic space with "outside" public spaces, which anyone can more or less freely move through without physical or social restriction.⁴⁵ In home videos, domestic space takes on this quality of public space. I would argue that recent films using camcorder recording as a narrative conceit desire the patina of realism accompanying this idea that the videographic space is equivalent to our physical space, due to the implied freedom of movement through it.

The other ubiquitous stylistic feature of home videos is synchronous sound, a standard feature of consumer video cameras and camcorders. Synchronous sound enabled people in home videos to exhibit specific personalities and traits; it reveals Freudian slips, habitual phrasings,

redeem reality were couched in a particular formal system. The "myth of cinema" for Bazin is a desire to have "a total and complete representation of reality...a recreation of the world in its own image" (20-21). The long take was absolutely central to Bazin's concept of cinematic realism. See "The Myth of Total Cinema," "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," and "De Sica: Metteur-en-Scène" in *What is Cinema?*

⁴⁵ Obviously we do not have total free movement through public space, either contemporaneously or historically. Access to certain areas of public space has been restricted to racial minorities in a number of historic circumstances, for example. However, one of the major distinctions we can draw between public and private spaces is that movement into and through private space is limited whereas in public space it is not.

vocal tone, and inflection. The camera operator also has greater subjectivity when sound is introduced; the cameraperson's comments impress their presence on the video and makes clear that their subjectivity organizes it. The consciousness behind the camera is forcefully felt. This stands in contrast to home movies where filmmakers often remain unseen and unheard, a presence invisibly shaping representation. Sound in home videos makes mediation apparent.

An example of the tendency to "tape anything and everything, forever," as well as the subjective effect of synchronous sound can be found in the Davis family home videos (UMass Lowell Cat. 11). One video of a child's birthday consists of a half-hour of footage broken into only ten separate shots: an approximate average shot length of three minutes. To compare, a single shot from this video would take up an entire 8mm film reel, and in a commercial film from the same period (the 1980s) the average shot length was 8.4 seconds (Salt 296). This collection also features a video from another birthday party for the same child. The boy's father records both parties, and in both he calls a child who dons a pair of sunglasses "Hollywood." It's a minor moment in both videos, the sort of goofy phrase employed by fathers with small children across the country. Given that the two parties are a few years apart, it is the sort of small detail of patterned behavior that only close family members would experience and remember. Home videos reinforce the ability of family members to recall such insignificant tics, increasing the signs of intimacy contained within a video, and more significantly, they enable banal behavior to enter the larger quotidian archive that home videos represent. The existence of such private behavior on a public medium widens the potential sphere of intimacy beyond the family home.

Access to the home and its intimacies is further enabled by video's ability to record in variable light conditions. The dark and murky interiors of home movies, which suggested the hidden and private nature of the domestic, are illuminated in home videos. Video captures and

represents interiors with greater clarity and visibility, avoiding the shadowy obscuration of home movies. Video does flatten lighting conditions and overcompensate for very bright or dark conditions (mostly due to the lenses outfitted on camcorders), but its visibility is quite adequate in most circumstances.

As a result, images of interiors proliferated as video supplanted film in home mode recordings (Moran 41). Home videos better represent the home itself. Viewers can see the spatial relations in a house – how rooms connect, the arrangement of furniture, the style of décor, and the fixtures, technologies, and decorations that are prominently displayed. It makes clearly visible the intimate spaces where family life conducts itself. As a result, home videos moved toward the inclusion of interior space. Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier, in an essay on YouTube dance videos, call this the “aesthetic surplus” of videos: the “endless series of private spaces...full shelves in the background; the edge of a desk at the bottom of the images; posters, sofas and houseplants” which constitute “new aesthetic forms that for their part flow into a pop and media-culture archive “(192-193, 201). While Peters and Seier discuss a video form with actual public distribution, the “aesthetic surplus,” that unintended and uncontrolled mise-en-scène of the home, plays a major role in home videos. In addition to the anthropological dimension of the aesthetic surplus, the clarity of interiors makes some trace of unrepresented events evident through spatial arrangements that shape and are shaped by familial intimacy.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Home videos might offer an occasion for “topoanalysis,” a category of psychoanalysis proposed by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. Our memories of the past, Bachelard argues, are spatialized rather than temporal: “In the theater of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles. At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being’s stability” (8). Bachelard’s “theater of the past” that functions as a material form of memory could describe home videos. Although home videos often feature an event in continuity, they are still only discrete slices of time. They mark specific events or moments, and their images of domestic interiors make a unique contribution to the archive.

Home videos are audiovisual documents experienced as “real” by viewers because they feature spatial and temporal unity and seem to move freely through interior space. This sensation is reinforced by the “genuine” versions of ourselves populating them.⁴⁷ For example, there are fewer of the awkward, frontally posed static shots that proliferate in snapshots and home movies. The behavior in home videos seems less controlled, and people are more likely to “break character” in their self-performances. Peter Forgacs writes, “our many different roles [in the home movie] exemplify the separation and interrelation of our public and private lives” (52). Home videos, in comparison, appear realistic by suggesting that the individuals therein are acting “naturally.” The roles played in home movies, as I suggested last chapter, are versions of our public roles; “breaking character” in home videos means that a private self seemingly pierces that façade, enabling us access to it and thus the “real” person.

The tradition of performing the self continues in home videos, but the performance appears less successful and sustained due to the long takes and synchronous sound. Moran considers how home videos display cracks in that facade of the happy family when he writes “the

By bringing viewers into domestic space, home videos can serve a topoanalytic role. Bachelard details topoanalysis as subjective and solitary, and for the analyst, relational: to perform the “salutary” psychoanalytic function of topoanalysis, “we should have to undertake a topoanalysis of all the space that has invited us to come out of ourselves” (11). Analysis requires the analyst to grasp his/her own subjective topology. For viewers watching themselves, the home video serves as topoanalyst, providing an exteriorized representation of memory that offers a comparison to subjective memories. For an outsider, home videos offer objectified topoanalytical evidence; one witnesses how individuals act in and make use of intimate space. By examining individual inhabitation of the private home and comparing it to one’s own experiences, as Bachelard requires for salutary topoanalysis, the viewer can gain insight into the matrix where individual behavior and family life happens. Home videos lie somewhere between the outward display of the window and the subjective poetics of topoanalysis.

⁴⁷ Laurie Taylor writes about a disappointing lack of emotional resonance in her family photographs: “No matter how long and hard I stare at the expressions I have assumed in most of the prints, I am wholly unable even to guess at the emotions they represent...It’s only smiles that count in photographs” (21). The solution, she finds, is a camcorder, whose images “captured so much of his [her father’s] emotional repertoire, his way of being in the world.”

performativity required of its [the home video's] participants for recording its portrayals may denature any sense of their so-called ideological effectivity...[home videos have a] capacity to trigger self-awareness of the arbitrary nature of domestic role-playing" (111).⁴⁸ The aesthetic surplus of home videos, which might feature pouting children, crying babies, frustrated parents, or acerbic comments, reveals behavior that subjects might otherwise want to keep hidden. This private behavior is typically thought of as "unperformative," because it happens outside the obvious performative strictures of the public sphere. To put it another way, home video style makes it difficult to maintain a carefully composed performance, meaning that we are likely to see a private self emerge – which is no less a performance, just one not regularly enacted in the public sphere or its archives. The division in behavior between home movies and home videos is less a difference in the performed and non-performed than it is between the performance of a public self and a private self.

I would further suggest that the videographic era has created its own form of performativity. Individuals in the last twenty years have grown accustomed to being videotaped, whether in public spaces with the rise of CCTV and surveillance cameras or at home with the family camcorder. As Moran notes, the camcorder has become a normal guest at family events, "left running for hours on a tripod, ultimately forgotten...[not] intervening in routines, selecting content, or posing subjects" (42). We are used to having a camera lens aimed at us. In the digital age, cameras point at us during online conversations and in other banal circumstances. Our awareness of the camera's constant presence forces us into continual performance, and we easily fluctuate between selves appropriate to the setting and moment. Rather than reveal some

⁴⁸ In other words, the sustained performativity required in home videos undercuts the claims that they replicate the problematic familial ideology that scholars like Zimmermann observe in home movies.

“true private self,” home videos force us to master private performances as much as public ones, especially now that private performance can be projected into the public sphere.

So far, I have detailed some common stylistic features in home videos, derived from the technical capabilities of consumer video cameras and their integration into home mode activities: long takes, synchronous sound, a dynamic mobile frame, a domestic *mise-en-scène*, and an “intimate” performance mode. Home videos embody a form of realism both in form and content. They represent the private in a way no other media has, suggesting the necessity of renegotiating between the public sphere and the intimate or domestic. What makes home videos problematic is their realism disguises and abets the publicity of the form. Disguising home video publicity means that we cannot constructively deal with the potential problems of publicity, namely the dwindling of privacy, nor can we recognize the necessity of rethinking the boundary of private and public life.

While the home video aesthetic suggests the form short circuits critical engagement with it, examining the basic style ignores how home videos are watched. What home videos offer the viewer is a form of active spectatorship that enables them to negotiate with past memories beyond the paradigm of photography and home movies. Viewers do not watch home videos unfold in regular time, as they usually do with films or television programs, and this viewing behavior marks a key difference in the aesthetic of the form and our potential responses to it.

In one home video of the Britton family (UMass Lowell Cat. 28), a little girl models her new Easter dress in long shot at her mother’s prompting, and then runs towards the camera, echoing a convention of the home movie. She gestures into the lens and asks, in close-up, “can I see through there?” This inadvertent reflexivity encapsulates a quality of resistance in home video spectatorship: an ability to reframe the contexts and text. Through her question, the little

girl acknowledges the home video as a constructed artifact, where “see[ing] through there” indicates equality between camera operator and subject. The Britton’s home videos feature a few indications of the reflexivity common to the form: the ability to compare events on the same videotape (the Britton’s video contains not just Easter festivities, but a pair of dance recitals as well); the ease of using the camcorder such that it captures random moments (so easy even a child could use it?); and its ability to rapidly allow others to “see through there” in near-instant playback. The reflexivity of the picture window returns, where one both looks through the window but is also looked at.

The long running times of blank tapes encourages a juxtaposition and comparative evaluation of different events in family history. The Davis’ home videos above, which contain son Michael’s 2nd and 5th birthdays, provide an example. A single videotape grants these birthdays a temporal continuity that stresses their connection with each other and by extension, with the present. In other words, their unification as part of a single object, the videocassette, imposes a structure of continuity on the events represented. Each birthday has an intra-Bazinianism, encouraging spectators to linger over aesthetic surpluses within long takes; juxtaposed they constitute an inter-Bazinianism: a series of “long takes” from different moments of family history that encourage, through continuity, comparisons of similarity and difference. The videocassette encourages a vision of family history where different events and the passage of time are seen as in continuity rather than separation; this promotes an acceptance of the past as an influence on the present as well as an opportunity to reflect on the passage of time – echoes of reflective nostalgia.

Since a camcorder is easy to operate and tape is cheap, they were more likely than home movie cameras to be used out of boredom or for sheer amusement. Not everything on home

videos has the purpose of documenting family participation in touchstone life markers. One colleague I spoke to while working on this project mentioned a family video of a hockey practice shot from the arena stands by her brother. It was no more significant than any other weekly hockey practice, but was recorded and preserved for some now unknown reason – was the camcorder new? Was the brother just struck with the urge to use it? Was there something, now forgotten, about the hockey practice that was deemed worth saving? Was it an iteration of an activity undertaken many times? (Brooks).

The ease of camera use is matched by the ease and immediacy of watching video. Viewing a video is as simple as removing it from the camcorder and placing it directly into a VCR connected to a television set. Many homes already have such a setup integrated into the family's leisure activities. With home movies, the process of preparing to watch them reinforced the ritual nature of the images: the "life marker" moments in home movies are given greater import by the cumbersome process of rewatching them. In contrast, a home video can be watched as soon as it's shot – no waiting for film processing or need to unpack equipment. The temporal gap between the moments of recording and viewing collapses, and with it the full registration of the moments as "the past." The collapse reaches its zenith in the simultaneity of closed circuit video, which often fascinates the passer-by when in a shop window. This can be replicated at home with a camcorder and television set, creating an electronic mirror (I have memories of my sisters and myself playing with our family camcorder in precisely this manner).

These "spectator effects" offer an active negotiation with the past represented on home videos. Immediate rewatching creates a prospect for negotiation with the past before the creation of a temporal gap to encourage misremembrance. Furthermore, the viewer can use the VCR controls to rewind, fast-forward, and pause the video; and can therefore dwell on particular

images, rewatch certain moments in rapid repetition, and bypass dull or embarrassing segments.⁴⁹ Unlike home movies or family albums, where re-contextualization and negotiation with material takes place at the level of organization and exterior commentary, using the home mode artifact as a prompt and illustration, with home videos those processes are enacted on the artifact itself. Watching the home video is an active process of negotiating with both the memory of events but also with the object that represents those memories.

That negotiation can sometimes be read on the artifact itself. As Lucas Hilderbrand observes, videotape is medium that registers the history of its viewing and reproduction. In the case of bootlegs dupes, each generation degrades the video image, archiving a history of previous copies: “each pirated cassette becomes a singular text that contains and compounds its circulatory history” (78). Discussing the work *K.I.P.* by video artist Nguyen Tan Hoang, Hilderbrand writes, “Nguyen edited footage from old video store gay porno tapes starring Kip Knoll that had been stretched, distorted, and damaged by viewer abuse – presumably from pausing, slow-motioning, rewinding, and replaying the most intensely sexy moments... This piece presents an archive of erotic consumption recorded... on the magnetic surface of the tapes themselves” (77). Because video is recorded on magnetic tape, distortion, static, and discoloration occur with repeated viewing, manipulation through the VCR controls, or even playback malfunction - when a VCR “eats” a cassette, the tape twists and creases, such that subsequent playback sees disrupted images and increased vulnerability to further damage.

⁴⁹ There is a good deal of evidence that this occurs with pre-recorded videos of films – namely that people rewatch them multiple times, fastforward or rewind certain sections, etc. See, for example, Julian Wood, “Repeatable Pleasures” in *Reading Audiences* (184-201); chapter four of Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, especially note 4 in that chapter. While the pleasures of re-watching home videos might be less obvious or common, I see no reason to assume – and my own experience bears this out – that people do not engage with them in a similar fashion.

Home videos have a similar potential to record a history - if not a circulatory one like bootlegs or rental tapes, then a spectatorial one similar to Hoang's video. While home videos may not contain images as captivating as those of pornography, tape damage could still be revelatory by exposing moments and memories that one family member or another saw fit to return to again and again. This sort of repetition compulsion introduces an tactility to the (re)viewing of old memories on home video, not totally different from Hoang's found footage. Moreover, video reveals places where recordings have changed through erasure or taping over (that is, recording material over existing images). Video technology is palimpsestic; recorded images are layered with evidence of previous use. Anyone who has used a single videocassette for multiple recordings has seen moments of transition where one recording becomes another, and the images vie for occupation of the screen before one dominates. With a family album, photographs can be removed or left out, and with home movies, reels can be excluded from family movie night. With video, such practices of omission can take place at the level of the representation itself, rather than the later set of practices those representations are integrated into. Erasures and tape overs are visible on the video itself, and material taped over threatens to visibly re-emerge, haunting the images chosen over it.

Despite their seemingly straightforward Bazinian realism, there are many habitual uses of home videos that suggest a more sophisticated negotiation with time and memory. The unusual temporality of home video use - the existence of many events on one artifact, the inclusion of both the quotidian and the meaningful, the collapse of recording and viewing - complicate the idea that home videos destroy the private without complication. The powers of video playback - rewind, fastforward, pause - so central to the appeal of the VCR apply to watching videos produced in the home as well. Moreover, a home video's viewing history can etch itself on the

images. Thus, despite home video's "realist" style, playback offers the video spectator a host of methods for manipulation. The likelihood of anyone watching an entire, hour long video of a child's birthday party seem slim; my own experience doing archival research attests to that. The impulse to fastforward through aimless material and rewind the interesting is too tempting. In a way, home videos viewing mimics memory itself: moving between and juxtaposing moments, excising the painfully dull or embarrassing, growing distorted despite (or perhaps because of) our returns to it. Although home videos endanger the private zone of our lives, through our own home viewing they continue to serve as useful artifacts in understanding our family histories. But what happens when the home video fantasy of publicity becomes reality?

Memory in Exchange: *America's Funniest Home Videos*

I conclude by reading the television program *America's Funniest Home Videos* as a case study in the consequences of publicizing the private in home video. *America's Funniest Home Videos* combines the exhibitionist fantasy of home video with the long tradition of representing the family on television. It manifests the "publicity" of the home video artifact by making actual home video excerpts available for viewing on television, the very medium of dissemination video relies on for its public character. In this way, the show completes a circuit that takes home videos to their logical conclusion.

The public imagined by the program is a passive one, divorced from any ideological or political efficacy, much like the community of postwar home owners described by Lynn Spigel: "participating" in a defanged public sphere through consumption. As part of that process, *AFHV* does violence to the "realist" style of home videos to reconcile them with a particular type of publicity. The show reduces home videos and the memories they represent to the basic exchange

logic of the capitalist public sphere: “the small humiliations of childhood...have multiplied a thousand-fold as people scramble for the show’s prize. The visual memory of childhood is thus sold to the highest bidder” (Citron 11). *AFHV* represents a pernicious form of home video publicity, where the public character of home video is transformed into a game show format that turns our objectified memories into exchangeable commodities. However, in doing violence to home video style, *AFHV* inadvertently demonstrates that the tension between public and private in home videos is not entirely reconciled, and that perhaps a new conception of the difference is required in the wake of the video age.

America’s Funniest Home Videos started regular broadcasts on ABC in 1990, and continues today on the cable ABC Family Channel, making it one of the longest running television programs in history. Its format has remained largely unchanged. Home videos sent to the producers are selected, edited, organized into broad themes, and aired. The host’s primary task is introducing and commenting on the videos with a series of lame jokes; the most visible hosts have been comedian Bob Saget and game show veteran Tom Bergeron. Unlike many television programs, the show has never been systematically released for home viewing, so the selection of episodes discussed here is based on availability at the Paley Center for Media, on DVD, and broadcasts I happened to catch. I pay closest attention to the first episode of season 11, the only full season available on DVD, so that readers can more easily examine material for themselves.⁵⁰

AFHV’s raison d’être relies on home video’s capturing of chance events, enabled by the medium’s economical cost to footage ratio and its integration into family life. The humor

⁵⁰ That *AFHV* is not available in a season-by-season DVD release is telling. One episode is largely indistinguishable from the next, so such a release seems purposeless. The only widely available episodes are themed collections. One almost wonders why, after a twenty-year run, the producers continue to make new episodes.

derives from the eruption of the unexpected into otherwise conventional and carefully planned family rituals or quotidian activities; it is comedy based on the randomness home video encourages.⁵¹ *AFHV* differentiates itself from other televisual representations of the family by an “observation and exploitation of failure” (Nicholson). Rather than offer pat resolutions to conflict as family sitcoms often do, *AFHV* presents the spectacle of individuals failing and humiliating themselves in the context of their everyday lives.

AFHV is animated not just by private idiosyncrasy, but also by its tension with public conduct and the exchange values of the public sphere. This latter impulse recuperates the idiosyncratic into an easily digestible form suitable for game show-style competition and exchange, restructuring individual events and family memories into chunks emphasizing communal comprehension and framing of the community in terms of public exchange. It attempts to integrate the home audience, in-studio audience, and video subjects into a simulated community through the mediating device of the home video. Idiosyncrasy, humiliation and failure are recuperated by the material reward promised at the episode’s conclusion. In other words, failure becomes not so much failure at all, as it now carries the potential for reward.

To demonstrate how *AFHV* attempts to reconcile the privately idiosyncratic with the public sphere of exchange, I will examine four central techniques: the host’s joking, the thematic organization of the videos, the mise-en-scène of the studio set, and finally, the methods used to integrate the audience into the show’s ideological project. The first two rely on doing outright violence to home video style: while the home videos featured on the program represent social

⁵¹ To be fair, the 100th episode special contains one home movie, of a Little League baseball game where a young child leaps from the stands to follow one of the players as he runs around the bases. Given the limitations of the home movie, the chances of capturing this sort of happy accident are far less likely than with home video.

disruption, to recuperate them, *AFHV* must create another disruption on the level of representation.

For an example of the host's recuperative commentary, let's look at the first episode of season 11. In the opening moments of the episode, one video features a go-cart racer who takes a fast turn and overturns the cart, luckily tumbling out before it bursts into flames. Another video shows two young girls wading in a river, their backs to the camera; one leans into the water for a few moments and turns around with a large carp clasped in her arms, to the videographer's amazement. Both events are singularly unusual and surprising.

However, the voiceover of host Bergeron integrates the two events into more recognizable comedic context through allusion. In the case of the go-cart accident, Bergeron jokes during the clip, "isn't this a great way to spend an afternoon? Around the track for a few laps, then into the winner's circle for a barbeque." He acknowledges the go-cart race, but associates the dangerous accident with another common and relatively safe family activity, the outdoor barbeque. In the second clip of the little girl and the fish, Bergeron jokes that this is footage from "*Survivor* for kids." By referencing another television program, Bergeron diminishes the unique nature of the event and places it in a recognizable pop cultural context. While the videos feature the irruption of the unexpected into the quotidian, Bergeron's comments "soften the blow" by alluding to more routine family events or well-known cultural texts, effectively drawing the singular event back towards a wider public referent. Simultaneously, through the unexpected events that drive the humor and the host's recuperative efforts, the program evinces two potential uses for humor, one that destabilizes the status quo, and another that maintains it. Of course, Bergeron's joking violates the stylistic unity of the original video, substituting a new soundtrack over the existing one.

A similar stylistic disruption takes place with *AFHV*'s main technique of assemblage, ordering videos into recognizable themes. Weddings, holidays, and "stupid pet tricks" reoccur with frequency. In the same episode mentioned above, an entire segment deals with pets, another with dancing, and yet another with children blowing out birthday cake candles. By grouping these clips according to their larger context, the program presents them as variations on a theme rather than singular events. What gets emphasized is their link to common cultural practices rather than their individual idiosyncrasy. Ironically, this returns the home videos to the state of many home movies, functioning primarily as iterations of a category. There is a further irony in the stylistic violence the show's producers commit, removing the humorous section from the larger videos: it mirrors the likely viewing patterns of videos in private homes, fast-forwarding through long sections to find and review particularly memorable moments.

Like any good cost-saving television program, entire thematic episodes feature material already aired in previous episodes. They are equivalent to the dreaded sitcom "clip show." Thematic episodes circle around events common to the home mode: holidays like Christmas or New Year's, family events like weddings or recitals, pet hijinks, etc. These episodes of recycled material build a ritual repetition into the program's production, mimicking the cultural repetitions we use to organize our lives. In making repetition a major part of its production practices and form of address, *AFHV* integrates its videos into a schema that favors the predictability of the public sphere. Through categorization and repetition, *AFHV* ensures that home videos, which are major medial forces for individuals and families to negotiate with private behavior and memory, become better suited to public expectations.

Let me use another example from our 21st season episode to illustrate. There is a segment halfway through the episode where videos are grouped together under a broad "funny

dancing” theme. Many of the videos feature older or overweight people dancing in various states of dress; in the context of the show, the bodily actions of these individuals are funny. To be fair, most of the people appear to be enjoying themselves unashamedly. There’s a degree of subversiveness in allowing these people’s bodies on broadcast television; many do not conform to social norms for desirable or even acceptable bodies. To contain this social disruption, the producers of *AFHV* place the bodies in the least threatening or most stereotypical context available. Thus, the fat body is necessarily made into a humorous one. I would suggest that *AFHV* desperately tries to recuperate the videos it broadcasts to suppress the potential for the subversion of social mores. The producers face a dilemma: on the one hand, having people send in their own videos makes for cheap, effective television; on the other hand, those videos might disrupt social decorum and offer a taboo glimpse into the domestic spaces and private behavior of others. There is a carnivalesque quality to the program that uses comedy and the body in ways that are implicitly recognized as dangerous, and the typical response of mainstream television to such qualities is to thwart them. These dancers may challenge the idea of what bodies can be seen on authoritative broadcast television, but only in the context of humor, as something to be laughed at. Rather than serving to mock the notion of a singular acceptable body, the humor short circuits the shock of these bodies appearing on television at all. In all, moments like this embody (sometimes, literally) both the subversive and reactionary aspects of carnival: they destabilize television’s typical representational ideology, while at the same time containing that destabilization in a fundamentally conservative mode of comedy. The carnivalesque dialectic mirrors that of the show at large: the unexpected and idiosyncratic, in both event and videographic form, are molded by the program’s game show conceit and

televisual style into something more conventional, and in the case of the dancing bodies, more socially acceptable.⁵²

The mise-en-scène of the studio set during the tenure of the two hosts further emphasizes *AFHV*'s conflicted dialectics. While Bob Saget hosted, the studio was decorated like a bourgeois living room. Saget entered from a "front door" at the rear of the set, and directly addressed the audience (both studio and home) standing in front of a pair of couches, behind which were a set of false windows looking out to a painted horizon. His direct address invited the audience into the space, and his frontal address recalled not only game show hosts and news anchors, but also the staging of family photos and home movies. The home audience finds themselves caught in a mise-en-abyme of living rooms: the one in which they sit is reflected by Saget's simulacra, which in turn contains within it the other living rooms of the home video clips. The "window onto the world" of television becomes instead a mirror, totally eliminating the outside world. Domestic space becomes the only space represented, and any distinction between it and "the outside" ends: when we look through the "window" we see ourselves reflected.

When Bergeron became host, the set changed. The living room was replaced with a colorful and dynamic array of monitors and lights including, as Bergeron points out in the 17th season premiere, a screen on the floor below him. In these later seasons, the mise-en-scène of the set stresses a connection between *AFHV* and the "unscripted realism" of television genres like the game show or news program, rather than the scripted familialism of the sitcom. The

⁵² For Bakhtin, the medieval carnival upended hierarchies and conventions, encouraging people to mock and laugh at social structures. However, he also points out that carnivals were a "second life," part of a dialectic necessary to understand the medieval world: carnivals were temporally bounded and linked to official church feasts, which "sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it" (8-9).

change brought to the fore the exchange dynamic and the integration of home videos into television style. While Saget's role as the wholesome father on the saccharine sitcom *Full House* made him an obvious choice to mediate between audiences and their televised counterparts, Bergeron's prior experience as a game show host reoriented the set towards the realm of competition and exchange.

In recalling the game show or news program, *AFHV* fully subjugates home video style to the televisual. Though only the latter is still actually live, both the game show and news program recall the liveness that is considered the hallmark of the televisual medium. The other major stylistic trait of television, Raymond Williams' segmentation and the flow that smooths it over, are more apparent in those forms as well. In other words, I would argue, the segmentation in game shows and news programs is more obvious than in scripted programming. *AFHV* itself is highly televisual, relying on segmentation in form (a series of short video clips) and in production (cutting segments from longer, more unified home videos), with thematic groupings and host commentary smoothing over the transitions. With the shift in both host and set, the televisual dimension of *AFHV* is emphasized over the mise-en-abyme of domesticity: segment conquers flow, and medium supplants representation.

One of the ways *AFHV* smooths over its contradictions is through audience interpolation. The studio audience reflexively calls attention to the public viewing of home videos. Periodically, the cameras switch from a video to the audience's reaction, integrating studio audience and video into the "monitored" world for home viewers. The home audience sees into private world of the video subjects as well as the "public world" of the studio audience, whose reaction mirrors their own – both are presumably laughing. Response to the show is based on a double recognition that fulfills the fantasy of home video publicity and exhibitionist monitoring.

On one hand, we identify with people in the videos, who engage in the cultural rituals we ourselves participate in. On the other, the home audience identifies with the studio audience, laughing at and monitoring the lives of others. Thus, the program encourages a free exchange of spectatorial subject positions in the home audience. In doing so, *AFHV* represents the larger process at work when watching home videos. The home audience enters into a typical TV monitoring situation, but also sees a representation of monitoring in the relation between the videos and the studio audience reactions. The home audience is sutured into both positions simultaneously, both monitor and monitoree, through identification with the studio audience and video subjects respectively.

Furthermore, *AFHV* turns this joint subject position into a national project. The show's title, of course, alludes to this fact: these are America's videos. The title sequence of the Saget years makes a national appeal quite explicitly. It opens with the image of a camera lens pointed outwards, towards the home viewer, while stars and stripes fire from it. The theme song's lyrics harp on the trope:

We've got laughs from coast to coast, To make you smile, A real life look at each of you,
To capture all that style, You're the red, white and blue, Oh the funny things you do,
America, America this is you, Stories from your friends next door, They never told, You
might be a star tonight, So let that camera roll...

The song addresses icons of American nationalism (the span of coasts, the flag's color scheme) to viewers hailed both as audience and as video producers, introducing their dual subject position. It claims the videos are of your "friends," establishing a direct personal link between video subjects and the audience. The song also attests to the video camera as a "star-maker," turning "you" into an object for public consumption. This star-making capability of the camcorder is based in the "real life" things that people do. In other words, the song proclaims the quotidian as a source of interest and humor: "this is you" in your everyday life becoming a

star. The theme song takes home video publicity to a logical conclusion: that regular individuals living their everyday lives can achieve celebrity. Moreover, the song turns this into fundamental part of national identity, conflating Americanism with both the quotidian and fame.

The connection between Americanism and stardom is often reiterated in the announcer and host's commentary. Every episode has a brief interruption informing viewers how and where to send videos they'd like to have aired on the program. On one "Christmas Special" (first broadcast on 12/10/2006) the program's mailing address appears on-screen while the announcer calls out "Hey there! Do you wanna be in glamorous show business? Of course you do, it's the American way!" In an earlier episode of the same season, Bergeron asks the audience "is there any greater democracy on television than *AFV*? A show of the people, by the people, and for the people. That's the *AFV* bill of rights."

In such declarations, Bergeron and the announcer maintain the show's central schema of national meaning. They conflate Americanism with public fame, home video with public consumption, and construct the intersection between national community and the videographic as based on the obliteration between private and public representations. *AFHV* addresses its American audience and appeals to American ideals of representation and fairness through notions of democracy and protected "rights." Bergeron cements approval over the privately idiosyncratic by reminding viewers that individual video clips are subject to group endorsement and this process is the same as that which maintains the state and assures its justness in national ideology. Voting for the week's best video at each episode's climax offers a veneer of democracy to the proceedings, evoking the American political process and neoliberal

economics.⁵³ In order to win, the private moment in the video clip must meet with communal expectations and sanction; we are reminded again of the living room window enabling both a view out on the neighborhoods, but also a glimpse inside from the exterior.

No matter how many moves at recuperation *AFHV* attempts, however, the synthesis never holds, suggesting that we are still wed to our ideas of what constitutes the private and public sphere. “The American way” built into the show’s premise is predicated on fame and monetary reward for communal approval; it suggests that, on the other side of community lies individuality once more. Choosing one video as “better” (that is, funnier) than the others necessarily requires individuation, countering the communal sentiment generated by audience interpolation and appeal to national identity. Not only does the winning family receive the prize, they are also singled out amongst the studio audience at the conclusion of the show and briefly interviewed by the host, making them the only audience members granted a voice. The others are left massed, their only potential for expression the voting that awards the grand prize.

By winning, a home video is fully objectified, transformed into a commodity for exchange. Home videos are therefore re-individualized only economically: they are made amenable to the same logic of winners and losers by which capitalism operates. The “labor” of creating the video is rewarded monetarily, and with momentary fame, by a brief singling out on television - if you’re lucky enough, that is, to be voted for and approved by your fellow audience members.⁵⁴ *AFHV* ostensibly celebrates the private, representing individual behavior and

⁵³ By this I mean the show appears to vindicate the idea that it is the “best” video that wins against its competitors for the main prize. It echoes the neoliberal idea that the product or service that succeeds in the market is the “best” and has been chosen by consumers for that reason, ignoring any other factors that may hinder or facilitate success.

⁵⁴ *AFHV* offers a televisual example of the post-industrial capitalism detailed by George Ritzer in *The McDonaldization of Society*. Ritzer notes how one strategy of efficiency in contemporary

offering a glimpse into private homes on broadcast television, manifesting the fantasy of publicity integral to home video in its imbrication with television. By subjecting home videos to the actual public viewing we imagine for them, *AFHV* submits them to a recuperative logic that takes the fantasy of publicity to its ultimate conclusion: first, by quashing the idiosyncratic nature of home videos through a strategy of communal integration, and then constructing similarities between the program's discourse and vague notions of Americanism.

While the concept of a "winning" video might seem anathema to that project, *AFHV* enacts a second recuperation by making home videos objects of exchange, incorporating them into the logic that defines much of the public sphere in capitalist society. One family is singled out as the unique, solitary winners, but only inasmuch as they allow their home video to become commodified and meet with the approval of a "voting" public. For those willing to submit to it, the publicity fantasy of home video is there to be had; by actually putting their home videos on television, however, what made those videos private and unique is ultimately stripped away. Ultimately, *America's Funniest Home Videos* illustrates the apex of home video publicity, where publicity is the only value. Any individual still interested in "that zone of space, of time where...[they are] not an image, an object" must avoid that apex, regardless of how funny their home videos might be.

capitalism is inducing the consumer to perform service labor (for example, busing their own garbage at a fast food restaurant). On *AFHV*, the producers are responsible for little of the program's content, instead "farming" it out to regular individuals who are happy to undertake the labor of creating content in exchange for the possibility of reward. By creating the program's content and then re-watching it, home video makers become both exploited labor and consumer.

CHAPTER 3:

NARRATING THE FAMILY IN THE HOME VIDEO FILM

Rachel Getting Married and the Problem of Home Video Narration

Jonathan Demme's 2008 film *Rachel Getting Married*, shot on high-definition digital video, explores the narrative capability and limits of the videographic home mode. The film uses formal techniques common to home videos while presenting situations that require particular sets of knowledge that mimic the logic of home videos. At the same time, it is a relatively mainstream narrative film, and thus adheres to certain conventions of filmic narration for audience comprehension. This tension is mainly articulated through the uninterrupted spatial and temporal long takes common to home videos set against the concision of continuity editing. At the intersection of these two trends we can begin to see some of the limits of the home mode in terms of what its archives can narrate. In other words, certain elements of *Rachel Getting Married* exist for the purpose of drama and narrative comprehension, while others primarily serve to articulate a version of the home videographic.⁵⁵

Furthermore, *Rachel Getting Married* suggests that home video's place within a larger body of institutionalized meaning-making hinges on the dynamics of family history within a particularly fraught space, the home. It illustrates a dynamic repeated in numerous films that represent or incorporate the home mode, especially home video, into their narrative and aesthetic

⁵⁵ In *The Cinema Dreams its Rivals*, Paul Young discusses how Hollywood films recuperate new media technologies, such as radio, television, and the digital, to diminish their potential threat and put them at the service of the classical narrative model. Young does not discuss home video in a consumptive or production capacity, but his observations on mainstream film's response to other media may be instructive in dealing with video. *Rachel Getting Married* still fluctuates between the classical model and one generated by a "new" media, but resolves the dilemma less cleanly than some of the films Young analyzes.

matrix. Filmmakers tend to consider video a truth-telling medium, partly because it has served a major role in documentary production and the democratization of audiovisual recording and storytelling (Boyle).⁵⁶ Many films connect this truth-telling power to the presence of domestic space and the bourgeois families that reside therein. In *Rachel Getting Married* video functions as a truth-teller, revealing secrets hidden in the corners of the home (like Ethan's dish) and serving as the means for airing family secrets (like Ethan's death and the nature of Kym's culpability), but it also disrupts the smooth functioning of narrative. Thus, the film proposes that video's narrative style is as interruptive and confusing as it is revelatory. Home video's memorial function intends to smooth over disruptions and suture together a coherent narrative of family history. Instead, in *Rachel Getting Married*, home video reveals the hidden dimensions of family history, signaling the limits of family narration echoed in narrative disruptions.

The film was conceived to evoke the home mode, especially video. Shortly after the film's release, Demme admitted to the *New York Times* that he had little interest in continuing to make fiction films, and found documentaries and music films – forms he has engaged with throughout his career – more compelling. This attitude informed the making of *Rachel Getting Married*, where Demme wanted to create “the most beautiful home movie ever made, trying to capture that feeling you get when you look at home movies, that you're in the room, that this is really happening.”⁵⁷ While Demme appears to uncritically believe in home mode realism, I

⁵⁶ Consider also the many documentaries produced in the years since *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* combined the autobiographical with the documentary, all while shooting on home (often digital) video: *Tarnation*, *Catfish*, Werner Herzog's reworking of such footage in *Grizzly Man*, and the participatory DV documentaries *Voices of Iraq* or *Awesome; I Fuckin' Shot That!*

⁵⁷ In some respects, the film is a home video for Demme, and its production embodies a tension between narrative filmmaking and other modes. A number of the guests at the party are Demme's personal friends and/or the subjects of his documentaries: his mentor, B-movie filmmaker Roger Corman; musicians Robyn Hitchcock, Donald Harrison Jr., Fab Five Freddie,

think he's careful to characterize this as a "feeling" rather than a fact. He suggests the home movie/video has an important emotional component; a dimension of feeling that contributes to our sensation of realism in such artifacts. At the same time, his comments seem to suggest a desire to, essentially, stage a documentary. The "feeling...that this is really happening" aligns the home mode with Demme's concert films and with televisual liveness, and this tension between fiction and a "fictionalized home mode" animates much of the narration in the film.

Rachel Getting Married covers one weekend in the life of a family preparing for the wedding of the eldest daughter, Rachel (Rosemary DeWitt). Rachel's sister Kym (Anne Hathaway) is granted a reprieve from drug rehab to attend the wedding. During her time at home, Kym mars the celebrations by acting out, while everyone tip-toes around the unspoken, defining secret of the family's history: that young son Ethan died years earlier while under Kym's care. The clash between the two significant family events – Rachel's wedding and Ethan's death – aligns with the tension between video's capabilities and its limits in the film. Rachel's wedding, the ostensible focus of the narrative, is fully recorded by the camera lenses; meanwhile Ethan's death, the event that shapes the family relationships, becomes "visible" only through material and confessional signs. Its representation is an impossibility given the film's imitation of home video style.

The aesthetic tension between home video style and continuity editing is apparent from the first sequence of the film. The opening shot frames Kym in close-up on screen right, with a

and Sister Carol East; and Demme's son, Brooklyn, and his cousin, Robert Castle. During production, Demme may have intended the film to resemble the home mode even further than it does. The deleted scenes on the DVD include more speeches at the rehearsal dinner (see below for more details), and a scene of Kym having a brief discussion with Corman while Hitchcock's music plays in the background. The finished cut of the film seems to represent Demme's recognition that the film needed to conform more closely to the conventions of mainstream narrative filmmaking (Rafferty).

nurse and another patient behind her. While this is a “static” shot, the edges of the frame are in continual shaky motion, as with a hand-held video camera.⁵⁸ Kym’s father and stepmother arrive to retrieve her, and the film cuts in the fashion of classical narration. The use of continuity editing in this scene clashes with the signs of the home video, namely the handheld camera and occasional jump cut. Classical narration, of course, is expressly designed to disguise the use of editing,⁵⁹ whereas home video style features almost no editing. The co-presence of the two styles is suggestive in the film, given that one is predicated on efforts to disguise erasure while the other fails to erase anything.

The following sequence uses home video style to indicate the film’s investment in family interaction and intimacy. A conversation between Kym and her father about the wedding preparations is filmed entirely in close-up, connoting intimacy. The camera remains inside the car with Kym and her parents, eschewing any establishing or traveling shots. The sequence appears as though filmed by someone inside the car with a hand held camera. Snippets of conversation provide the intimate sensation of listening in on long-running family chatter. After her father describes the scene at the house, Kym calls it a “nacht mare,” a family in-joke so old even her stepmother (the handy audience surrogate here) doesn’t get it. “A nightmare so bad it’s in German,” Kym’s father explains to her (and us).

When Kym and her parents reach the house, the hand-held camerawork continues to suggest intimacy by making us privy to the family’s domestic space. The camera follows Kym

⁵⁸ Rand Richards Cooper, in an astute review of the film, writes that “the techniques reinforce the story’s emotional power, with the handheld camera imparting a shaky visual fragility” implying the feelings of the characters (20).

⁵⁹ “Classical editing aims at making each shot the logical outcome of its predecessor and at reorienting the spectator through repeated setups. Momentary disorientation is permissible only if motivated realistically” (Bordwell 163).

through a series of rooms as she searches for Rachel, while many guests and friends of Rachel and her fiancé, Sidney, ignore her. This scene, like the “nacht mare” conversation, balances videographic intimacy with the necessity of presenting narrative information: the hand held camera, like Kym, moves without hesitation through the space of the house, yet the spectator’s experience of seeing it for the first time is mirrored by Kym’s alienation from the bustle of activity going on within. The house is unfamiliar, filled with individuals who are “not family,” while Kym seeks to make it “familiar” by finding her sister. Kym’s search ends in an upstairs bedroom where Rachel is being fitted in her dress for the final time. The camera follows Kym into a private space and a private ritual – an upstairs bedroom and a bride dressing. There, Kym and Rachel tell Emma, Rachel’s best friend, about a fantasy one of the other wedding guests told them years earlier. These early sequences of the film invite the spectator into the intimate spaces of the home and make them feel linked of the circle of family and friends, but also at a remove from that circle: at first, in the car, we are aligned with Kym’s stepmother, then aligned with Kym herself, walking through the house in search of Rachel, and finally, aligned with Emma, hearing the sisters recount their friend’s embarrassing figure skating fantasy. All of this is presented in a handheld aesthetic that recalls home videos.

This continual transference of subject positions, where the spectator is always at a remove from the intimate exchange of the moment, creates cracks related to those intimacies that will later widen. The spectators do not readily identify with a particular character, because our subject position shifts from character to character: within these first twenty minutes, the camera and dialogue place us in the positions of Kym’s stepmother, Kym herself, and Emma in rapid succession. The film reveals to us something significant about home videos: despite the welcoming illusion of intimacy, we are often on the outside looking in, that is, observing the

intimacies of others. These cracks of understanding (and narration) reflect the elisions in family histories that such artifacts aim at disguising, but are incapable of doing so entirely.

Not only does the visual track subtly reinforce the tension between the home video aesthetic and the demands of narrative filmmaking, but the audio does as well. A soft set of strings on the soundtrack emphasizes Kym's anxiety about returning home, yet as we discover later, the sound is diegetic: the wedding band has been practicing in the house the entire time. Later in the film Kym's father, Paul, asks the rehearsing band to "give it a rest" during a particularly tense family conversation, punctuating the slippage between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. That is, the diegetic sound functions in the manner of traditional non-diegetic music, providing commentary or emotional reinforcement for the images. The ambiguity plays on the notion of video as a genuine, complete record of events; the music creates a sound-image relation familiar to us from narrative film, yet it comes directly from the diegesis. The function of the sound in these moments functions as an idealized form of the home video, as though the video could provide us with a complete and emotionally satisfactory version of events.

The tension I have emphasized recalls a key trait of the home mode, the division between two types of spectator: those with sufficient knowledge and memory to contextualize the images in front of them, and those who can only integrate those images into broad sociological narratives. *Rachel Getting Married* positions the spectator in both ways: through its home video aesthetic and logic, it threatens to put the audience in the latter position; at the same time, it offers enough narrative information that the spectator feels they are in the former position. The film offers the narrative "glue" to make sense of its videographic moments, something that actual home videos, despite their wealth of visual and aural information (especially in comparison to

home movies), don't provide – because, of course, their intended audience has that information already.

Despite Demme's desire to create "the most beautiful home movie ever made" the film features two scenes that call explicit attention to the limitations of home video narration. The first takes place at Rachel's engagement dinner, and the second is a dance celebration during the wedding reception. Both sequences feature typically videographic long takes, and although they do not reach the excessive lengths found in many home videos, they mimic the sensation of duration and, frankly, boredom often generated by home video style. In the first sequence we witness no fewer than ten engagement toasts to Rachel and Sidney from their family and friends. This sequence lasts over ten minutes of screen time. The dictates of fiction film's narrative economy might show one or two of the toasts before moving to the most significant one in the sequence, Kym's, which develops her conflict with Rachel. Instead the film presents the toasts as though they were outside such considerations, as spontaneous events removed from the need to develop a story of family history and dramatic conflict for a viewing audience.

The tension in the sequence is partially resolved by having drama emerge "naturally" from the events and the actions of participants. Here is one of the moments where Demme aligns the home mode with a *cinéma vérité*-like documentary reasoning. In other words, he attempts to resolve the home video/narrative dialectic by having narrative drama emerge "naturally" from unstaged events. When Kym's father, Paul, welcomes Sidney's family into their own, there is a shot of the table where the lens of a video camera peeks into frame from the left. Shaky movement reveals Sidney's cousin Joseph videotaping the event. When Paul mentions Joseph, the film cuts to a tighter shot of him, and then follows with a reverse shot of Paul and the dinner guests, as if shot by Joseph's camera. The grainier, less vibrant colors of the reverse shot

emphasizes the camera's view – it is not filmed with the same high definition lens as the rest of the film, yet the shaky-cam aesthetic remains. It literalizes the home video-ness of the entire film, while at the same time drawing attention to difference: the “home video” within the home video.

The film evinces a dialectical relationship with its diegetic videographers. The few brief shots where the film cuts away from the “master” camera to a shot, presumably recorded by one of the wedding guests, suggest the “primary” camera operator as just another wedding guest occupying the diegesis – albeit one with much better access to the inner sanctum of the family's life. On the other hand, the differences between the main shots of the film and those taken by a diegetic character also suggest that the primary videographer is not a “videographer” at all, but phenomenological reality – in other words, the film still operates under the standard ontological disavowal of the fiction film. Either way, the diegesis and aesthetic are in “realism cahoots:” in both circumstances, video has special access to family history and events, although to maintain that illusion, the narrative process must recuperate the aesthetic.

The film singles Joseph out to make its dialectical synthesis. It acknowledges two levels of discourse - the home video and the narrative film - and overlaps them, showing Joseph videotaping much like the camera shaping the primary level of the diegesis (in other words, the cameras used to record the film itself). In other words, the film makes the case that these are one and the same, or at least similar enough that any drama in the film emerges out of the observational mode of the home video. Video's tendency for lengthy shots and sequences coupled to its familial ubiquity ensure that events central to the family history are captured and integrated into a cohesive narrative.

The second scene mentioned above, during the wedding reception, tests the limits of that narrative capability. The guests have retired to a large tent erected in the backyard, where a lengthy dance sequence takes place. More so than the toasting sequence, this one feels like watching someone else's wedding video: the audience recognizes only a few of the dancing characters, and very little narrative development occurs, aside from a few shots isolating Kym, who eventually leaves the celebration in search of her mother. In this sequence, as with the toasting one, the film is caught between home video style and narrative demands.

Further linking the two sequences, Sidney's cousin Joseph reappears during the dancing, and Paul exhorts him to "put down that damn camera." Moreover, there are repeated shots taken "from the crowd" in this sequence, signaled as "video" in the same way as the toasting sequence. Although Joseph is the most enthusiastic videographer, his cessation doesn't prevent the reception dance from being videotaped. It is assumed, given that we are at a wedding, that every moment will be captured by the camera's lens. Through characters like Joseph, the film affirms that the wedding and everything surrounding it are appropriate for video recording; and although Joseph's obsessive video taping is seen as an outlier by Paul, it is still coded as normative by the behavior of other guests. In other words, someone will always be recording because the event itself calls for it: and *Rachel Getting Married* itself proves the proposition.

Despite efforts at reconciling home video style with narrative necessity, critical response to the film called attention to the reception sequence, in particular, in disparaging terms. Philip Kemp in *Sight and Sound* wrote that "for the last half-hour or so of the movie...[e]veryone's having one hell of a good time, except possibly the audience. Oh, and the plot, which gets rather drowned out by all this hoopla" (69). In *Film Journal*, Doris Toumarkine criticized the film for "[e]xtraneous scenes [that] go on and on...the many dance scenes suck the drama out of the

film” (114). These critical responses articulate the tension in the film between narrative demands and mimicry of the home mode, but without explicitly recognizing that dialectical tension as central to the film’s project. The responses are valuable, however, because they mark the limit of the dialectic. Both Kemp and Toumarkine understandably read the film with attention to its dramatic coherency and according to the dictates of mainstream narrative filmmaking. Instead, we should read those scenes as indicative of the limits of home video’s narrative capacities. Viewers have spent a fair amount of time with these characters (certainly no less than with any narrative film) only to experience boredom and dissatisfaction with these scenes. The dance scene tries the patience of the viewer precisely because, as critics point out, despite spending time getting to know and empathize with these characters, we ultimately are not members of this circle of family and friends. We cannot share their joy during the dancing, especially when the film cues us at other moments to experience the film as a relatively straightforward narrative. Despite their integration into a narrative framework that invites us in and resembles our own home videos, the film cannot remove the boredom and feeling of dramatic inertia accompanying these scenes.

The two registers of *Rachel Getting Married* are placed in further tension regarding how those different forms narrate family history, particularly its hidden secrets, which is focused on the space of the house. The film connects the narration of family history and uncovering of intimate secrets to domestic space and a question of media practice. “Home” and “video,” in other words, become the vehicles for revealing secrets, drawing them out of hidden spaces, and integrating them into the family narrative.

The central scene in which the home discloses the family secret is when Paul and Sidney compete to see who can fit the most dishes into the dishwasher. After Sidney’s admirable

attempt, Paul steps in to show him how it's done. He fits all of the dishes Sidney was able to, and with room left over, calls out for "more dishes!" Kym reaches into the nearby cupboards and places a stack of plates on the counter for him. After loading a few into the dishwasher, Paul pauses on one plate, and eventually leaves the room. The crowd disperses and the camera reveals the plate, made by Ethan as a child.

Though Ethan's death is largely unspoken about for much of the film, reminders of it lie hidden in the crooks and corners (and cabinets) of the house, waiting for accidental exposure. That Kym hands her father the plates is telling; her accident caused Ethan's death, and her presence acts as a continual reminder to the family of the tragedy. She both generates and discloses, by removing the plate from hiding, the family secret. The scene makes particular use of the videographic aesthetic, with handheld camera work and whip pans dominating, while an observer plays frenetic violin music that serves the same dual purpose as music throughout the film, setting the mood while reemphasizing the "pure diegesis" of home video. Highlighting the videographic in the scene where the family secret is exposed casts home video once more as a uniquely truthful medium, central to our contemporary understanding of family histories.

However, this is only ostensibly the family secret - and our response to it complicates an easy equation between secretiveness and aesthetics. For one thing, Ethan's death is only a secret to the audience, something slowly revealed through hints as the film progresses. We learn about it through moments like the dishwasher competition, or an extended scene of confrontational dialogue between Kym, Paul, and Rachel, where each evinces a different reaction to the past: Kym feels guilt but limited culpability, Paul suppresses the memory of his son's death however he can, and Rachel clearly blames her sister.

However, the brute fact of Ethan's death is not really the central "secret" of the family's history, given that it's not really a secret to them at all. The secret that the audience discovers along with Kym is how she was set up to fail by her mother. Tellingly, the sequence where Kym accuses her mother of this misdeed does not take place at the central house but rather one where Kym's mother lives with her new husband. This domestic space is decidedly less "homey" than the space where we've spent much of our time. The lighting is darker, the decor more modern and severe, and there is none of the hustle and bustle of wedding preparations. Domestic space has relatively little to do with concealing or revealing the secret; instead, we learn the circumstances of Ethan's death through dialogue. The mother's failure is not disclosed by physical objects, but through direct confrontation. In other words, this is a secret not "kept in house" but one "kept in mind;" there is no memory-prompting object on the shelf to attest to it, only the subjectively differing interpretations of culpability between Kym and her mother.

We associate the home video with the "home," for obvious reasons. By separating out the accusation and question of culpability in Ethan's death from the space of the home, into a more *unheimlich* space, the film indicates that the event is not simply of the home and of the home video, but rather "somewhere else" outside representation. Ethan's death is central to the family's history - signs and discussions of it occur within the domestic space - but the discussion of its cause is set in a domestic space unfamiliar and alienating to both the audience and Kym. The mise-en-scene becomes discomfiting because the question of cause and culpability is outside the purview of the home video and the home space it depicts.

What the two scenes reveal together is the actual limit point of home video representations of family history. In *Rachel Getting Married* the video camera captures the revelation of outward signs of suppressed moments as well as confrontation over family secrets,

but cannot represent those moments themselves. There is no flashback to Ethan's death, no indexical moment where the audience sees it to judge for themselves. It remains impossible to see, outside the representations of home video. The event can be gestured towards, through objects or speech, but never recovered. Moreover, that event, so central to the family's history, is open to different perspectives on blame, motivation, culpability, and remembrance.

In comparison to *Rachel Getting Married*, I want to re-examine the most famous "video film", Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape*. That film also aims at articulating the limits of video as a narrative medium by suggesting it has a power to alienate. Through a scenario that "reads" as videographic, exploring intimate familial relationships in mostly domestic settings, *sex, lies, and videotape* appears to validate filmic narration at the expense of videographic. However, like *Rachel Getting Married*'s conflict between classical and home video narration, the divide is not as clear as it first appears.

Dialectics of Home and Media: *sex, lies, and videotape* and Film

sex, lies, and videotape was a sensation when it appeared, becoming the first film by a rookie director to win the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and making Soderbergh the youngest director to ever win the prize (he was 26). Miramax Films paid an unprecedented sum to distribute the film, and it paved the way for Miramax's absolute dominance in the "Indiewood" scene for the next decade. Yet in the twenty-odd years since its release, the film has largely disappeared from the radar of cineastes and film scholars. The former tend to view it as the first film of a director who has gone on to a varied and unpredictable career, while for film scholars interested in the rise of mainstream, independently-produced American cinema it has

been eclipsed by films like *Do the Right Thing*, ironically the primary competitor with *sex, lies, and videotape* at Cannes in 1989.⁶⁰

One could make any number of guesses as to why the film lost its cachet. I offer that part of its initial success was appearing at a key moment of video's domestication. In the popular imagination of the late 1980s, the medium was still linked with violence and pornography (Greenberg chapter 6). At the same time, more and more Americans were becoming familiar with video as a distribution method for home viewing of mainstream films, to say nothing of a growing number of amateur videographers buying newly compact Sony camcorders. No doubt the combination of the illicit and the readily available gave video an outsider cachet and excitement, as though you might be the one operating the camcorder to taboo ends. The routine nature of home video production in subsequent years, however, has largely eroded that sensation, and perhaps with it, interest in *sex, lies, and videotape*.

Like *Rachel Getting Married*, *sex, lies, and videotape* situates video in relation to private behavior and domestic space, and charts its intercession into the private lives of its characters. The central character, Graham (James Spader) enters into the stable, if unhealthy, relationship between Ann (Andie McDowell) and her husband John (Peter Gallagher), who is having an affair with Ann's sister Cynthia (Laura San Giacomo). We learn over the course of the film that Graham has an extensive collection of videos featuring interviews with women regarding their sexual histories, and watching these videos is the only way he can reach sexual gratification. However, rather than reinforce the bonds of the family, video has a disruptive effect: Graham's

⁶⁰ In Mary Corliss' report on the 1989 Cannes Film Festival for *Film Comment*, she writes that *sex, lies and videotape* "really was the best of the bunch" and, while dismissive of Lee's film, notes it was "widely acclaimed, and considered a strong contender for the Palme d'Or" (66,70).

videographic sexual archive threatens the bourgeois sexual hierarchy wherein alpha male John has sexual access to both sisters.

Graham's difference from the bourgeois couple, and his potential for disruption, is signaled at the opening of the film. The first shot of a road speeding by resembles the unreeling of a film, suggestive of the disruptive force (Graham's videotapes) approaching. As the car stops and reverses, we hear the voices of Ann and her therapist on the soundtrack. Graham steps out of the car, and shaves and changes his clothes in a gas station bathroom. His transience, black clothing, and the bathroom setting are juxtaposed, through cross cutting, with Ann in her clean clothes, seated in her decorated therapist's office. Ann is positioned as thoroughly middle class in the sequence: able to afford therapy, reduced to housewifery due to her husband's lucrative job, and expressing liberal guilt - she discusses her concern over the massive amounts of garbage produced by the consumerist society she clearly participates in.

The juxtaposition of the bourgeois Ann/John and the drifter Graham sets up the dichotomy between video as subversive or dangerous and its eventual domestication. The adoption of video by middle class families led to its eventual innocuousness, which *sex, lies, and videotape* seems to play out. Between Graham's videos of sexual testimony and Ann's eventual seizure of his camcorder to force him into a "talking cure," the film dramatizes video's transformation from tool of perversion to an implement for therapy. In other words, video shifts from a medium enabling antisocial and transgressive sexuality to one that restores normativity in social and sexual relations.

Soderbergh calls Graham a "dissembler," although aspects of his character, as with others, are reinforced by the film's mise-en-scene, in particular the costuming and set decoration (*sex, lies... 94*). In this way, the film emphasizes the importance of private space as indicative of

character. The film contains only six locations, and three are the private homes of the main characters (the others are John's law office, the bar where Cynthia works, and a cafe Ann and Graham visit). Ann and John's house features late 80s middle class taste in home decoration: monochrome walls, light colors, and flower prints; it is fastidiously clean and well lit with large windows. The decor and Ann's clothing match in terms of the color scheme and patterning, signifying the house as a repressed and repressive space. Ann and John dress conservatively, with John often sporting a suit and tie and Ann buttoned up in whites and light colors, signifying her virginity and sexual repression.

Ann and John's bourgeois respectability contrasts with Cynthia and Graham's bohemian natures. Cynthia dresses in casual streetwear befitting her occupation as a bartender. Her apartment is divided between the red bedroom, indicative of the lust and sexuality associated with her character (it's where she has sex with John, for example), and a white living room; the color scheme divides the fully private and more public spaces of the apartment. A reiteration of the color association with each sister occurs when Ann visits Cynthia's apartment; she spends much of the scene in the living room, while Cynthia stays in the lurid bedroom. This division of space also marks Ann and John's home. We gather that their bedroom is upstairs, dividing it from the more public living and dining rooms that Graham passes through at the beginning,⁶¹ but we do not actually see it clearly until much later, when we have already seen much of the characters' private behavior. In terms of narrative development, this parsing of space mirrors the experience of the spectator: we only see Ann and John's bedroom after "getting to know" them,

⁶¹ This division of domestic space into the "private private" and the "public private" in middle class homes is common in the modern United States, and indicative of the development of concepts of privacy during the 19th and 20th centuries (Rybczynski).

while the more licentious Cynthia is introduced in her bedroom. In other words, we are like the “public” that has to become intimate with the characters to even see their bourgeois bedroom.

Finally, Graham represents the far end of the spectrum away from Ann and John, and more unconventional still than Cynthia. His typical dress is a black shirt and jeans, darker than the couple; John even asks at one point, “what’s with the getup? Did somebody die?” Graham also expresses a reluctance to obtain any more things, or even an apartment to live in, expressing his anti-materialism through the metonymy of a key:

“You know, right now I have one key, everything I own is in the car. And I just, I like that, if I get an apartment that’s two keys, if I get a job, you know, I might have to open or close, and that’s more keys. Buy some stuff, and then I’m afraid it’s gonna get ripped off or something and that’s more keys. You know, I like just having the one key, it’s clean.”

Graham’s rented apartment is markedly different from Ann and John’s house. The space is small, almost cramped, with wooden floors and trimming. The decor is sparse; the only things on the walls are xeroxed images of idols and a map with marker lines on it. Boxes and newspapers are strewn about, with sheets are used as curtains. Graham’s speech and his apartment stress a desire for transience over stability and security, the main things Ann cites liking her marriage. One scene opens with him sitting in the living room, watching one of his videos, presumably preparing to masturbate, when Ann visits and interrupts him. Like Cynthia’s apartment, where the red bedroom is visible from the white living room, Graham’s apartment is less regulated spatially than Ann’s home. Graham has no compunction about using the more “private-public” space (the front door opens directly into the living room) for the “private-private” action of sexual gratification.

The use of space as a clear marker of character traits and character-spectator relations links *sex*, *lies*, and *videotape* to modes of meaning making in home videos. As discussed last

chapter, home videos contain a great deal of “aesthetic surplus,” revealing the domestic interiors of homes, from which spectators may gather information about the individuals or families therein: class, consumptive habits, fashionability, taste, values. As a controlled, deliberate narrative film, *sex, lies, and videotape* reveals more than could be expected of a random home video, but it models a mode of reading appropriate to home videos. When we are barred from seeing John and Ann’s bedroom until later in the film, or observe Graham’s unbounded behavior, the film dramatizes the negotiations individuals make with their private space - negotiations often visible in the spaces seen (or not seen) in home videos.

Reading *sex, lies, and videotape* through an auteurist lens, it becomes a project that clearly resonates with home video. The film served as a form of catharsis for writer/director Soderbergh, who repeatedly stressed an autobiographical dimension in press interviews at the time of the film’s release. Harlan Jacobson’s interview with Soderbergh in the July/August 1989 issue of *Film Comment* spends about half its length discussing Soderbergh’s personal life and history as a way of providing insight into the film. In other interviews, Soderbergh recalls that in “early 1987, my life was a lot like that of the husband in *sex, lies, and videotape*” (Ciment/Niogret 17). “I was involved in a relationship with a woman in which I behaved poorly - in which I was deceptive and mentally manipulative. I got involved with a number of other woman, you know, simultaneously - I was just fucking up” (Minsky 7). Though not explicitly autobiographical, the film was cast by Soderbergh and the press as a reflection on his past behavior. The film had a similar purpose as home videos do, enabling its creator and audience to remember and confront past events.

Soderbergh’s willingness to discuss his past and the interviewers’ desire to read the film through the lens of personal experience and confession speaks to certain assumptions about

videography and filmmaking. Home videography and independent cinema share an expectation of personal expression. Home videos are produced to supplement personal memories of significant personal events; and as I argued in chapter one, home mode artifacts often feature the imprint of their creator. Meanwhile, the independent film movement of which Soderbergh is a part wholeheartedly adopted the notion of auteurism, both as production ethos and as a marketing ploy. Both therefore share an assumption that the media object is fundamentally personal, that it either depicts personal events or is inflected with personal experiences. Soderbergh's adoption of that notion, true or not, impacts our reception of *sex, lies, and videotape*, pushing it toward a liminal realm where the fiction film and the home video intersect. It's not quite *Rachel Getting Married* in that regard, but approaches it.

In confining itself to the intimate spaces, behaviors, and conversations of its four central characters, the film alludes to the invasive quality of home video, even though camera setups and movement are far removed from the wobbly, spontaneous framing of home videos. Soderbergh's tracking shots are smooth, slow, and rhythmic, but designed to have "a very predatory feel, the idea of encircling a character and getting closer" ("Candid Camera...." 36). A good example of such camera movement appears in an early scene where Graham has dinner with John and Ann; it features the "key" speech quoted above. The only scene where this more classical formal schema falls aside is when John confronts Graham at his apartment; this scene features handheld camera movement meant to convey John's agitated state and emphasize the violence of his assault on Graham. In associating handheld camera movement with violence, the film might suggest a similar, symbolic violence inherent in Graham's use of videotape. However, we should keep in mind Soderbergh's characterization of the more classical construction as predatory or invasive as well. While the videos or videographic aesthetic may

contain real or symbolic violence, classicism drives that violence and surrounds it; if certain shots or movements are “predatory,” the videos or scene of John’s assault are the “pounce.” Neither style is “safe” in the sense that the intimacies depicted will remain contained; this idea of containment (for what other function do lies serve?) drives much of the narrative conflict, while a tension between aesthetic modes or levels of narration, as with *Rachel Getting Married*, drive the finale of the film.

In depicting Graham’s videotapes, Soderbergh demonstrates an understanding of amateur video practice. The ability to tape is more or less spontaneous; Graham records both Cynthia and Ann’s confessions as soon as they ask. Graham prefers the tapes to “magazines or porno movies,” as John puts it, because of their interactivity: he takes part in their creation, and can manipulate them after the fact. The tapes themselves, as far as we can observe, bear the common stylistic imprints of home videos: long takes, shaky handheld camera movement, synchronous sound. Finally, the videotapes themselves recast the relationships between Ann, John, and Cynthia. The videotaped sessions draw out secret intimacies: Cynthia reveals to Graham her affair with John, while Ann admits to lusting after men other than her husband. The revelation of these secrets is what drives Ann and John both to confront Graham, and upend the sexual triangle. In this way, *sex, lies, and videotape* depicts the video medium as revelatory, seemingly inherently honest and truthful.

That “honesty” functions also a source of fear, and calls into question the ethics of videographic veracity. Graham’s ability to easily record Cynthia and Ann’s confessions on video creates the suspicion that he could just as easily publicize those confessions - and not just to a circle of individuals, but to the entire world. Ann worries that Cynthia’s tape could “be bouncing it off some satellite” while John worries about “this tape get[ting] into the wrong

hands.” Both presume video’s publicity: because Graham has video equipment, he also has access to modes of wide distribution through broadcasting.⁶² The publicity of videotape, discussed at length last chapter, becomes a plot point; thus Graham must repeatedly insist that his archive is private, for his use only. The disruption represented by his videos has the potential to spread beyond the private lives of the characters into the public sphere. Through video, revelation itself becomes a public process; the nature of secretive behavior transforms utterly. Personal and familial narratives, which differ from public ones because of the material they incorporate, threaten to collapse. In this way, *sex, lies, and videotape* appears prescient, seeing the privacy threat of the digital age before personal computers and networks were commonplace.

Although superficially *sex, lies, and videotape* presents video as a medium of truth, the film also upends the truth-telling power of video in favor of a therapeutic “talking cure” and the cinematic medium. Video enables Graham’s feelings of displacement from erotic and intimate experience, substituting displaced and simulated sensations. For Graham, video is an affective simulacrum. It plays a role many claim for digital media today - the Internet, social media, text messaging, and video games - as distractions or replacements for interpersonal relationships. The videos of Graham’s “archive” qualify as “home videos” in that they allow Graham to relive the experience of interviewing his female subjects, and he further interacts with them as his sole method of sexual excitation. The videos capture intimate events, much like home videos do (I

⁶² *sex, lies, and videotape* shares a fear of broadcasting with another early video film, David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*. In *sex, lies, and videotape*, Graham’s use of video is seen as a reflection of his damaged sexuality; whereas in *Videodrome* video, both as object and image, carries an erotic and literally penetrative force. The two films reverse each other’s equation. Regardless, however, both films view broadcasting as threatening to privacy: in the former broadcasting is the means by which one’s secrets are aired, in the latter, the personal itself, as the foundation of privacy, is completely destroyed by entrance into the collective, becoming nothing more than a set of representations (thus Max Renn loses his decision making capacity and, at the climax of the film, destroys himself to enter “the New Flesh”).

mean intimate in the sense that a video of Uncle Fred's birthday party means nothing to anyone who doesn't know Uncle Fred), but Graham relates to them as videos, not memories, and they become not only a substitute for physical experience (i.e. sexual intercourse) they also stand in for displaced memories of intimate experience. The memories "captured" on tape are not Graham's, but those of his subjects. In other words, he and his videos embody an outsider perspective on home videos. They are at a remove from the events: they represent a narration rather than the events themselves. At the same time however, they also are direct representations, in the sense that they archive the moment of storytelling and its accompanying behavior (Cynthia, for example, masturbates during her video).

The videos in Graham's archive embody Roy Armes and Lawrence Vale's fear that the home video will become a substitute for memory. For Vale, home video runs the risk of forcing viewers to "accept the sights and sounds of an event shot from a point of view that may differ significantly from that of their own perceptual experience...that is then given the added legitimacy of portrayal on television" (207). Armes, similarly, fears a loss of "those aspects of the event which memory alone can preserve: smells and tastes, moments of private feeling" (5). While Graham's videos are shot from his own point of view, they narrate events he took no part in, and indeed his only "moments of private feeling" and intimacy take place in his subsequent viewings of the tapes. Graham's videos embody a version of the male gaze, subjecting all female subjects to his framing and line of questioning, produced primarily for his subsequent sexual gratification. They remind us of the power imbalance Patricia Zimmermann observes in home movies, where the father points his camera at his wife and children. The Chinese box structure of Graham's videos depicts the videotape as the primary affective object, rather than

the memories contained in those videotapes, for which the video itself is merely the easy medium of preservation.

The third act of the film implies that video is inadequate as a medium of confession, therapy, and memory. After Ann discovers John's affair with Cynthia, she goes to Graham and asks him to videotape an interview with her. When John discovers this, he is enraged and physically forces Graham out of his own house to watch the video of Ann's interview. As the interview starts, the audience shares John's subject position: we have no idea of the substance of the video. The sequence begins with the video image filling the frame, and the collapse of John's and Graham's viewpoints - John as spectator, Graham as videographer. We see Anne on video, and hear Graham on the soundtrack, but both the viewpoint and medium change when Anne hijacks the conversation and the video camera from Graham. She reverses the direction of Graham's gaze, rebelling against both him and the therapist who has similarly directed his power over her. The image shifts from video to film, transporting the diegesis "backwards" in time; the rest of the sequence is filmed as if it were unfolding in real time, in the manner of typical classical construction. The video image, which represents the diegetic present of John watching the conversation unfold, interrupts the sequence only intermittently, and once the focus shifts to Graham, disappears entirely.

Video is thus associated with Graham's male gaze and its associated power dynamic. All the videos we see in the film are from his perspective, and once Ann turns the tables on him, video images disappear entirely. She forces a confession from Graham: that his "personal project" is a way to avoid intimacy, a way of "structuring things so this [an intimate and confessional encounter] wouldn't happen." After seeing the video, John leaves Graham behind without a word, and Graham proceeds to destroy the videotapes. With one gesture, Ann reverses

the power imbalance of the entire film: by agreeing to the interview, she unseats John's sense of sexual mastery, and by turning the video on Graham, disrupts his gaze. The film associates video with a false sense of mastery over the past; it reveals the memories therein as somehow faulty.

The video medium failed Graham, enabling him to wallow in a state of disconnect, operationalizing only the power of his gaze. *sex, lies, and videotape* pursues the same line of argument as *Armes and Vale*: that video has a suspect relationship to memory, and easily perpetuates an affective falsehood regarding the intimate events of our lives. The transference from the video image to the film image during the "therapy session" between Ann and Graham posits the filmic image as rendering intimate experience truthfully. Moreover, there is a dimension of shame connected to publicized videographic intimacy. Graham only destroys his tapes after John watches his confession on the climactic video, not after the initial exchange with Ann. The subjection of Graham's confession to the "publicity" of John's viewing, manifesting the fear the other characters expressed earlier in the film, is turned on Graham himself. The film's conclusion offers a critique of the publicity of video, casting certain intimate events or conversations as outside the purview of publicity, and thus inappropriate for video archiving.

Finally, John and the audience view the film's climactic therapy session in different terms. John's views it through the video medium, while the audience watches the video become filmic. In other words, the spectator's experience equates film with diegetic reality. At the same time, this diegetic reality takes on the features of the videographic, which inflects the depiction of and movement through space. Unlike *Rachel Getting Married*, which sets specific limits to home video's power of narration, *sex, lies, and videotape* envisions an uneasy divide in narrative power between video and film/reality. It asserts the primacy of the latter, but acknowledges a

“bleeding over” effect, setting up the terms of *Rachel Getting Married*, where the videographic is diegetic reality.

In *sex, lies, and videotape* the video archive is suspect: it threatens to replace rather than supplement memory, creates barriers to intimacy through its mediation of memory, and represents power rather than truth, which is embodied in cinematic practice. The underlying issue is a suspicion of the individual archive’s relationship to temporality: for Vale, part of home video’s problematic memory is “the illusion that past events can be brought forward and rendered convincingly in the present” (205). In the film, the videotapes expose this as a falsehood: the interviews are past moments being rendered in the present, not the actual events. Graham’s videotapes displace a displacement: recalling the recall of past events in the present moment, two degrees removed from the event remembered. Video becomes a present where the past has already been shaped by memory and integrated into narrative.

In the conflict between modes of media narration, *sex, lies, and videotape* reasserts the primacy of classical filmic narration. While video prompts the recollection of past events and the therapeutic potential they hold - in Graham and Ann’s climactic conversation, and in Cynthia’s videotaping, we form some idea of how past actions have shaped the present - we never actually see video footage until after this therapeutic function has occurred. In the film, video becomes a retarding force on the narration, preventing Graham from facing his problems and negotiating with his own past. His erotic past is covered over with those of his interview subjects. Their narration of sexual histories becomes a replacement for his inability to narrate his own past, either to others or to himself.

However, the videographic does not remain cleanly within its own purview, infecting the film around it. While Graham ends the film “cured,” with Ann by his side, the videographic has

extended its representative regime into the filmic and diegetic reality. So while video narration is false or displaced, one senses its slow dissemination into filmic reality, such that we begin approaching *Rachel Getting Married*, where the videographic is the level of reality itself, with all the narrational possibilities and limitations that entails. If *sex, lies, and videotape* suggests the video as a displaced narration and an affective falsehood, then a situation where video has replaced film as the “real” in essence offers us nothing but displacement and false sensations.

To conclude, I want to examine a documentary film as a comparison to the fictional scenarios presented by *Rachel Getting Married* and *sex, lies, and videotape*. Doug Block’s *51 Birch Street* in many ways brings us back around to *Rachel Getting Married*, in that a marriage and a particular domestic space is central to its unfolding. But whereas *Rachel Getting Married* depicts the limits of video’s narration, *51 Birch Street* juxtaposes home video as a medium of narration alongside other documents, demonstrating home video as merely one tool among many in that process of narration.

Family Narration Amidst the Documents (and the Documentary Mode): *51 Birch Street*

51 Birch Street, written, directed, and narrated by filmmaker Doug Block, neatly and consciously displays the act of turning family documents into narrative. To accomplish that task, Block has crafted a film that uses video to interrogate how typical home mode content – marriages (as represented by weddings) and the interiors of homes – become the ground on which family narrative is constructed. In so doing, he realizes the limits of particular types of home mode documentation, mobilizing video’s strengths to compensate for the limits of photographs and home movies, while also demonstrating the limits of video in the face of other familial documentation. The film asks: how much do home mode artifacts tell us, and how are

those stories altered in light of other such artifacts? Is it possible to piece together some sort of truth from them?

51 Birch Street focuses on Block's own family, in particular his elderly parents, Mike and Mina. At first, Block merely wanted to "capture them for posterity" as he says in the opening voiceover, a typical memorializing use of the home mode. Events outside his control, namely the sudden death of his mother and his father's quick remarriage to a former secretary, led Block to instead make a film about his parents' marriage. Block recognizes two registers of video - the archival and the investigative, the memorializing and the historic - and speaks to the difference between the two modalities in the opening narration. Over video footage and photographs of his parents, he notes "they're not rich, they're not famous, and while they're not exactly ordinary, they're hardly people you'd think of making a documentary about, even if you're their son, and even if making documentaries is what you do...I never intended to tell their story." His emphasis of the normality of his parents, and his goal of merely "capturing them for posterity" is fully within the range of home mode practice as defined by Richard Chalfen, among others. But his juxtaposition of that archival process and the process of creating a longer documentary that "tells their story" reveals the self-conscious nature of uncovering and narrating history.

In some ways Block's film reifies the conventional rhetoric of the home mode, which centralizes events like marriages in the family narrative, as opposed to more quotidian events that actually make up most of family life. Block works as a wedding videographer to supplement his income, and the film is littered with footage taken on the job. His dual career as documentarian and wedding videographer places him at the intersection of the home mode (albeit as a professional practitioner of that mode) intended for small, private viewings, and the documentary, which is intended for widespread distribution to a viewing public. In practicing

his dual career Block already blurs the lines between the private and public document, which have different demands of comprehension due to their differing spectatorial address.

The form of *51 Birch Street* delineates much of that difference. Block continually uses voice-over to contextualize home video images, providing the audience with a means of comprehension. Without the soundtrack and the advantage of structured editing, much of the home video footage in the film would be as meaningless (in narrative or affective terms) as a home video seen at random. One might say, then, that the difference between the documentary and the home mode is formal: the documentary creates a kind of order, through sound and the arrangement of editing. We gain a similar insight from *Rachel Getting Married*'s most videographic scenes, those where the orderliness of narrative breaks down. Narrative, in both documentaries and fiction films, is generated through self-conscious ordering. I do not claim this as a great revelation, but calling explicit attention to it helps us understand how home videos function. Home videos and other home mode artifacts have an order and conventions, just as documentaries and fiction films, but those conventions are less self-consciously mobilized. Thus, self-consciousness and deliberate usage of conventions is perhaps what differentiates publicly viewed audiovisual creations from private ones.⁶³ *51 Birch Street* clarifies some of the ideas proposed last chapter. Part of the project of the film is mapping out how home videos reveal certain narrational characteristics when the filmmaker becomes self-conscious about them, and how even those disclosures must be supplemented by other family documents.

⁶³ Another good test case for this idea would be *With Notebook in Hand*, held at the Smithsonian Human Studies Film Archive. This film, mentioned in earlier footnotes, was planned, edited, and narrated from home movie footage taken on vacation. The film is not professional in the sense that the filmmaker, Frank Kreznar, was not paid for his efforts, and though the film was screened publicly, it did not generate any profits.

We can observe this in the conventionalized wedding footage that appears in the film. Block includes this material, much of which features total strangers, to examine the limits of what can be seen and read in such imagery. He calls his parallel career “very intimate work,” and the footage attests to that: we see close up images of couples during their wedding ceremonies, and witness a pair of circumstances where a couple exchange glances no one else can see – except for Block and his camera. After one wedding montage, Block talks about his “projecting” when on the job: observing the couple and predicting how long their marriage will last. He thus injects doubt into the conventionalized nature of these images; we see intimacy in the expressions of the couples, but also question the resilience of that intimacy.

The point is elaborated in Block’s personal life when his father gets remarried to a former secretary, Kitty. Here, Block can provide the narrative from an insider’s perspective, rather than speculating. Mike and Kitty’s wedding video resembles footage seen earlier, speaking to the general conventionality of home video imagery. However, Block intercuts that footage with video interviews of his sisters, both of whom express trepidation about their father’s second marriage. In particular, Block’s sister Ellen calls the marriage “an insult” to their mother Mina. Intercut with these remarks are the joyful reactions of the wedding guests. For instance, one guest smiles and hugs Mike and congratulates him, saying “I think its wonderful, I really do;” Block comments in voice over that “to some [of the guests], Dad and Kitty finding each other after all these years is like something out of an old-time Hollywood love story.” Regardless of whether the sentiments are genuine, the two responses offer conflicting perspectives and reactions to the union. Two different types of video footage, the home video and the interview, express joy and betrayal respectively. Like *Rachel Getting Married*, dual discourse expresses both the power and limitations of home video documentation. Block uses video’s ability to

capture the intimacy of an event like the wedding alongside the more confessional interviews to show how events are integrated into a family narrative in different ways. The authority home videos claim over family narratives is called into question.

Like the other films discussed this chapter, the process of uncovering family dynamics that lay inert and hidden, and which reframe the entire family narrative, becomes the *raison d'être* of *51 Birch Street*. Mike's marriage to Kitty prompts Block to undertake an investigation of their relationship, wondering if the marriage is a reinvigoration of an affair conducted years before. Home mode documents now take on a suspicious tint, suggestive of a hidden history. For instance, Block takes particular interest in a photograph at his bar mitzvah, showing a much younger Kitty at the event. His father's marriage, the most recent major addition to the family "story," forces Block to reconsider existing home mode documents and cast them in new terms. This photograph supplements and transforms the wedding video, casting it as the culmination of a long dormant relationship, and makes Ellen's sense of betrayal more plausible.

These establishing moments in the film set up and lay out the terms for Block's investigation of his family's past, and his use of different home mode documents to conduct that investigation. Ultimately, *51 Birch Street* presents video as an idealized investigatory medium, revealing emotional and narrative information that previous home mode artifacts only hint at. At the same time, it still has its limits; the written and oral word, for example, carries a greater power, as evidenced by Mina's diaries and Block's reliance on testimony and voice over.

Block links memory of his parents and their relationship specifically to their house at *51 Birch Street* (hence the film's title), and his investigation takes on greater urgency when Mike and Kitty decide to sell the house and move to Florida. The house itself becomes a symbol of Mike's prior marriage and Block's childhood. Through Block's thorough documentation of the

house interior over the course of the film, the viewer gains an understanding of its architectural arrangement. While such mapping also occurs in *Rachel Getting Married* and *sex, lies, and videotape*, *51 Birch Street* uses it to different effect. In *Rachel*, the mapping helps the audience to identify with Kym as she searches the house for her sister; in *slv*, spatial mapping expresses character and suggests the videographic through entry into the intimate spaces of the characters. While *51 Birch Street* similarly allows us entry into such intimate spaces, Block's documentation of the house renders the emotional resonance of the space clear. Here we can see a central difference between the documentary and fictional uses of home video in the other two films. For example, when Mike takes Block into the basement, we learn of its role as a "sanctuary." Although dusty and dark, the basement teems with Mike's tools, and when Mike takes to carving a piece of wood on a bench grinder, Block remarks "this is the Dad I do know, lost in his work, silent." In this moment, Block links his memory with the home space of the basement through the home video he records. The video becomes a trigger to memory, but in a manner that reverses our typical thinking. Rather than the past, the video depicts the present, and the present gestures recall memories: the present perfect of the videographic.

Like *Rachel Getting Married*, the house becomes a charged space of secrets, literally encasing them within its walls; in the case of *51 Birch Street*, those secrets are family documents, like home videos, that testify to experience. As Kitty and Mike prepare to move, a number of scenes around the house show them and other friends and relatives sorting through a lifetime's worth of accumulated detritus packed into its corners. At one point Mina's journals are pulled from their storage space, prompting a short debate over whether they should be kept. Block decides to keep them, briefly agonizes over reading them, and then begins to do so. He narrates, with select shots of the pages, the discovery of an entire hidden history to his parent's marriage,

forcing him to rethink their entire relationship. In her diaries, his mother reveals her dissatisfaction with her marriage, her devotion to and lust for her therapist, and anger at her husband, who distanced himself after realizing he couldn't provide for her emotionally. Mina confesses in her journal to hating the home, which the film presents as the physical symbol of Mike and Mina's marriage.

With this knowledge, the video interviews dispersed throughout the film assume a new meaning. It is as though these secrets were always there in his video footage, waiting for Block to uncover them with the proper emotional code. Towards the end of the film, Block discovers through his mother's diary that she eventually made peace with her marriage, and cut off her extramarital affair. Right after this revelation, Block cuts to a two shot of his parents, obviously recorded while Mina still lived, where his mother voices an insight that seems to emerge directly from that realization. The lessons and "secrets" of his parent's marriage were there for Block to see and hear in his video conversations with them; he just lacked the context and knowledge to recognize them. *51 Birch Street* shows the process of recontextualizing home video footage in light of new understandings of family history. When existing records of family life combine and new questions are asked from a variety of perspectives – his own, but also those of his sisters and father – Block can put together a more complete, or at least a more complete seeming, idea of his family's history.

Block's documentary enacts, for a public audience, the private negotiations with home mode documents and family history, offering a privileged place for home video among them. His initial ignorance of certain dimensions of his parents' relationship echo the spectator who comes to a home video without context, which can only really be provided with other documentation or testimony. In a way, the film redeems the private nature of home video,

ironically through the form of a publicly disseminated documentary. Even if home videos are wholly public artifacts, as I argued last chapter, some kernel of the private remains in our inability to fully know the events and experiences that shape what happens onscreen. One of the more profound realizations that Block's film models for us is that this is the case even in the home videos of our own family members.

At the film's conclusion, Block reiterates the symbolic significance of the house and the role that representing it plays in understanding his family's history. In so doing, he emphasizes the significance of home video in that process. Now that Block has gained some insight into the dynamics of his parent's marriage, the house they shared finally being "emptied" of the material evidence of that marriage. As the moving van pulls up to the curb, Mike wanders through the basement, his "sanctuary," and a long shot reveals the space to be tidier, more open, and better lit than earlier in the film. The clutter and dimness that marked the basement is lifted. Block's camera gets more distance from Mike, eliminating any feeling of claustrophobia. These shots represent the home in the film generally; the space goes through a process of literal emptying that mirrors its metaphorical one. As objects and rubbish are cleared from the house, so too are the hidden and private feelings that Mike and Mina had for one another.

To emphasize the house as a space of accumulated memory that can be cleared out, the camera captures separate images of the house exterior and the neighborhood as seen from the windows, while Mike says in voice over "there are overwhelming memories, memories of the house...it was a bare place, with practically no shrubs or trees...but I don't think there's any one dominant memory that comes through...things were growing up around me, the family's growing up, the plants and shrubs and trees were growing up...it's just, it was a wonderful spot, it was like a wonderland for me...the house was a collection of many, many things." In this

voice over, Mike discusses the house as a place that filled before becoming empty once again. It moves from being a “bare place” to a place invested with a history of growth and change. The plants represent the larger relationships at work within the house, and Block accompanies the metaphor with footage of the house’s exterior where many trees and bushes have grown to fruition around it. The articulation of the house as a “collection of many, many things” suggests the ability for memory to imbed and accumulate in material objects. However, it is only through the video medium that Block employs that we learn what specific memories fix in such objects.

The final pair of sequences cement the significance of video to the project of family history. Mike is framed in medium close up, the completely empty living room behind him. Block finally asks his father if he had an affair during his marriage, and frames the question by referring to the many photographs his father has posing the war with “pretty girls.” Block considers the photographs potential clues to his father’s secrets; he reads in them unspoken deeds that might shed some light on his father’s actions. They have become, much like the other home mode documents of the film, overdetermined. His father responds, “I never did,” after which Block cuts to 8mm home movie footage. We hear Mike in voice over continue, “I had plenty of opportunity, just never did, that’s all.”

By cutting back to the home movie, Block articulates video’s place in the schema of artifacts narrating family history. The final video interview with Mike reiterates a pattern in the film: video enables Block to uncover and present what he accepts as the truth of the matter, one that was disguised by photographs and 8mm films, but apparent (if one had the ability to see it) in video footage. Reifying video’s place one final time, the film concludes with Mike ensuring the empty house is locked up and driving off into the distance, the two red rear lights receding and disappearing. “As I stand in the dark in the middle of the street, my mind drifts back to a

past summer day,” Block says in voice over, and he cuts to video footage of an anniversary party for Mike and Mina. The footage begins with a shot of the camera emerging from inside the house, through the back door, which has the effect of “entering” the memory. An association between “memory” and “video footage” is produced; both voice over and camera movement enable Block to cast his memory into representation. Memory, of course, is the final arbiter of truth in the film; Block takes his own memory as truthful, as he does his father’s memory of events. By aligning home video with memory, he seems to indicate that, although the medium has limitations, it is the most “truthful” of possible home mode documents. The final shot of the film is the exterior of the house taken during this party, one final linkage between the house and the idea of his parent’s marriage – celebrated in this anniversary video - made clear.

In the last two decades, filmmakers have tangled with the consequences of home media for processes of narration, fulfilling a long-standing role as commentators on media developments (Young). Many films about home video claim the media has a special form of insight, granting filmmakers or their characters the ability to see into the dark corners of their family histories, to uncover secrets about the past, and to rework those histories in new lights. Often, the family home materializes this process as the literal ground on which family history is enacted.

Home video does not enable a new kind of familial narrative, but rather changes the quality of that narrative. While the films surveyed here suggest video is a specialized form of family document, one with great ability to transform family narratives, they also recognize the limits of that transformative power. They stage and enact the limits of videographic narrative power by contrasting it with another mode of narration, while simultaneously insisting on its potential. Both *Rachel Getting Married* and *sex, lies, and videotape* envision the limit in relation

to classical narration; for the former, videographic narrative breaks down at the point of both character and spectator experience of depicted events, and for the latter, the issue is depicted in terms of media specificity. Finally, *51 Birch Street* relates the home mode to documentation and the documentary form, reflexively enacting the process of discovery that makes a documentary legible to the wider public through by envisioning home videos as site of accumulated family narration. While each film delineates a special dimension of narrative power for home videos, the repeated dialectic suggests a culturally unresolved attitude towards home videos and how they have recast our family relations and concept of the home. While home videos are praised and prized for their ability to re-present our memories in an aesthetic mode culturally constructed as realistic, these films express a lingering discomfort with what home videos may inadvertently reveals about our own family histories and relations. By offering us new tools to represent our homes and narrate our family histories, home videos also threaten our desire for stable notions of both home and family.

CHAPTER 4:

VIDEO CONQUERS THE WORLD (AND CANADA): NARRATING FAMILY AND NATIONAL HISTORY IN ATOM EGOYAN'S VIDEO FILMS

Few contemporary world filmmakers have engaged with questions related to video and the home more than Atom Egoyan. Egoyan's films, broadly speaking, concern how representational technology mediates our experience and family history. As Emma Wilson writes, "Egoyan's films look at the way family structures become saturated, swollen, and overwhelmed by emotion and distorting consuming sensation...[t]he family house and its avatars...are spaces of the interpenetration of the psychical and material [where this is made manifest]" (7,9). Beyond this, I would claim those family structures and spaces of interpenetration are further contorted and shaped by photo- or videographic representations in many of Egoyan's films. The films are actively engaged in a theorization of the social and personal effects of media on the lives of families and the domestic spaces they inhabit. Characters in Egoyan's films encounter photographs, films, and videos, and in many cases find them necessary to order and reorder their lives. These media often reveal hidden dimensions of the pasts and force characters to reconsider their personal and familial histories.

What differentiates Egoyan from other filmmakers is how often video practices, in both amateur and public contexts, narrate competing visions of family narratives. In *Next of Kin*, for example, videotaped family therapy sessions starkly and bluntly illustrate the generational problems of the immigrant Deryans, sparking the interest of alienated young bourgeois Peter, whose own family seems to be without any history at all. The young photographer in *Calendar*, played by Egoyan himself, unwittingly videotapes his wife's seduction at the hands of an Armenian tour guide while they travel through the country, only to realize what the tapes reveal

after she has left him. The investigation into video is centrally related to Egoyan's concern with the family unit and the home; as Jonathan Romney puts it, "he is concerned with video's status as a prosthesis for human memory...[and] is fascinated in general with the psyche's need for external correlatives and rituals that echo the multiple play/record/rewind/erase mechanisms of video" (5-6). Egoyan is engaged in a home-videographic mode of filmmaking; his continual turn to the problems of memory, family, and self are themselves fundamental to the home video form, and his repeated return to video recognizes this relationship.

To put it another way, the central themes that tie Egoyan's work together and mark him as an auteur – the nature of family relationships, diasporic nationhood (encompassing both his Canadian citizenship and his Armenian heritage), attempts to represent the "unrepresentable" (from the erotic to individual tragedy to national trauma), and the depth of our engagement with visual images – all coincide in the creation and manipulation of moving imagery enabled by home video.⁶⁴ What interests me about Egoyan's filmmaking is how it can be used to interrogate subjective experiences of the videographic; that is, how his films dramatize the experience of encountering family history and reorganizing it. Video in Egoyan's films reveals hidden dimensions of family relations "which are discovered and reformatted in other ways, depending on the needs of the particular receiver" (Egoyan "Ripple Effects" 346). What differentiates Egoyan's films from the films explored last chapter is that, rather than demonstrate how home video expands or limits our capacity to narrate the family, they narrate the individual encounter with family history through the videographic and the subjective new understanding that derives from that encounter.

⁶⁴ One might note the neat chronological correspondence of Egoyan's career as a filmmaker with the increasing availability of home video technology, which has raised questions of family narration (as discussed in chapters 2 and 3) and the accession of cultural history (through the availability of films on video), echoing Egoyan's recurrent themes.

In this chapter I perform a diachronic reading of two of Egoyan's films, which offer competing perspectives of video's transformative effect on conceptualizing family history. The first, *Family Viewing*, situates home videos in an Oedipal struggle over family memory and the home space itself. The film envisions intergenerational perspectives on family history at odds, and writes that conflict directly on videotapes that represent and come to embody that history. *Ararat*, Egoyan's magnum opus, includes video in its catalogue of media responses to history. Through Raffi, the youthful protagonists, *Ararat* delineates video's contribution to a panoply of media representations that shape contending and contentious versions of family histories integrated into national narratives.

Family Viewing: Memory and Home Colonized by Video

Family Viewing explicitly casts home videos as records of family history, which then become the objects of generational male contestation. Van (Aidan Tierney), a young Canadian, lives at home with his father, Stan (David Hemblen), and Stan's live-in girlfriend Sandra (Gabrielle Rose). Unsatisfied with his home life and haunted by his mother's sudden abandonment years earlier, Van spends time with his only link to her, his maternal grandmother Armen (Selma Keklikian), who Stan has stashed at a nursing home. There, he meets and befriends Aline (Arsinée Khanjian), who moonlights as a phone sex operator to pay the cost of keeping her mother in the home. Realizing the dehumanizing conditions at the home, Van plots to rescue Armen and live with Aline. The central conflict aligns Van with the past and the relationships developed during his childhood, memories of which are depicted in family home videos. Van struggles to maintain those personal relationships in the present. Stan, meanwhile, has repudiated the past, and wants his intimacies to be entirely mediated – through television

broadcasts, self-produced amateur pornography, and phone sex. Stan represents an oppressive, videographic society that places a premium on the present at the expense of the past. While Van eventually manages to escape his father's grasp, he is still caught in a society where the video image is omnipresent and inescapable.

The film's very first shot establishes the dominance of the video image over the characters and their environment. A tray rack, holding food for the residents of Armen's nursing home, is the subject of a slow track inward while trays are removed, creating gaps to see through. On the soundtrack can be heard the tinny narration of a television nature program, whose screen is the first thing visible through the rack. The second thing visible is Van himself, in the same room as the television but visually separated by the bars of the rack. The opening image establishes Van's detachment from the video image, but also the impossibility of his escape from it, for he still shares the frame with it.

Nature programs are a repeated motif in the film, often serving as a counterpoint or commentary on the family conflict. In the opening moments, aside from introducing the omnipresence of video imagery in the lives of the characters, it also suggests the conflict between the documentary and the interpretive. The home videos seen in the film function as documents of Van's childhood, as objectified memories (though they are, like nature documentaries, shaped by a recording subject). The voice over narration of the nature shows contextualize and shape our perspectives of animal behavior,⁶⁵ suggesting the eventual conflict between Van and his father over interpreting the home videos.

⁶⁵ "Like most classical documentaries, wildlife documentaries rely on narrative to construct meaning from disparate shots of nature" (Horak 462). Anthropomorphizing animal behavior is a common way to create such meanings, and something that *Family Viewing* playfully engages in later scenes between Van and Stan.

The film cuts from Van and the tray rack to Armen lying in bed, seemingly staring into space, with the sound of the nature program still in the background. Van is revealed standing at her bedside, watching her and then turning his head towards us. He walks forward, finally filling much of the frame in close up, his gaze just barely offscreen. The audience sees the two from the position of Armen's television screen. Van reaches up to change the channel, and a cut puts us in his position, with televisual footage of elephants filling the frame. As Van changes the channels, shots of the principal characters - his father, himself, Sandra, and Aline – the actors' title cards, and more television footage are all interspersed, suggesting the characters, and even the actors themselves, have been integrated into a world visible through the television monitor. The monitor is figured as an object whose aim is to capture the entirety of the private and social worlds, something that watches us put also encapsulates us in its display.

Consider the significance of the ubiquity of video images in regards to surveillance cameras, which especially target Aline. A surveillance monitor introduces us to the dingy “office” where she is employed as a phone sex operator, and her later tryst with a client in a hotel is seen through surveillance video as well. A private investigator Stan hires to discover Aline's identity has multiple television monitors in his office, and is introduced in a pan away from a monitor that fills the frame. The movement suggests the P.I. as the man “behind the monitor” i.e. he who surveys. The surveillance that surrounds her frames her in terms of her sexuality (as a phone sex operator and occasional prostitute), and Stan, representing the power of technological monitoring, aims at keeping her within that framework (his only contact with her is as a phone sex customer). Video images function oppressively for characters like Armen and Aline, keeping them bound within particular, controllable roles – the forgotten elderly and the disposable sex worker.

Stan lives his life entirely mediated by television and video imagery; intimacy is nearly impossible for him and thus requires technological intercession. Television focuses and shapes Stan's conversations with his family. In one early scene, the family sits to watch a television show, and Stan and Sandra have a banal interchange clarifying an unimportant plot point. As Romney observes, this is one of the scenes where characters "speak less as individuals than in the language of...pre-scripted social ritual" (46). Like the characters on a television show, the interchange reflects the rote memorization of a script: that of the family watching television together. Family interactions have been colonized by television, so therefore all that remains is the performance of the family ritual of watching it.

Both major conversations between Stan and his son revolve around the television set. After Van manages to convince his father to visit Armen in the nursing home, where she attacks him, the two discuss Van's feelings of disorientation and alienation. The sequence begins with a shot from a television nature show of an owl with a mouse in its mouth – a smash cut from the previous sequence, where Armen digs her nails into Stan's face. The next shot features Stan in close up, staring off screen where we presume the television set is located. Van appears next to him in the following two shot, with both sitting on the couch in front of the TV, and Van raises the possibility of moving Armen into the house. The conversation is conducted in short, staccato fragments, mostly with Van asking for clarification to his father's brief and decisive answers. As Egoyan notes, Stan "tries desperately to be a 'T.V. Dad', to give advice and it's so pat it becomes ridiculous" ("Burnett Interview" 28). The only language he can speak is that of the television. The conversation is shot as a repeated series of close ups, with Van and Stan both alone in the frame, signaling their disconnect. Stan's eyes are just as often directed at his son as they are to

the offscreen television, demonstrating his detachment from his family fostered by the distractions of the television screen.

Scholarship on television, especially when *Family Viewing* was made, conceptualized television viewing as a state of distraction; it was assumed that television was only “half-watched,” viewed out of the corner of the eye while one did other things.⁶⁶ The paradigmatic television viewer in this formulation was the housewife watching soap operas while doing household chores. Egoyan reverses that assumed gender and viewing model in *Family Viewing*, depicting Stan as consumed by television, which distracts him from important family relationships. Van’s struggle in the film is to resist that all-consuming force, a proposition made difficult by the fact his memories of childhood and of his mother are objectified in the same visual media. While Van is dissatisfied by the domination of video over his family life and environment, he has to contend with his past and memories being colonized by the same electronic imagery.

Stan’s link with television extends to his house, which is shot as though it was a sitcom set. The rooms are brightly and uniformly lit and feature stereotypical, personality-free bourgeois decoration. The shots and sequences resemble the typical three-camera setup of the sitcom, which in turn recall the proscenium arch of the theater and emphasize the setting’s falsity.⁶⁷ The scenes in the house lack the sharp focus and range of color and light of scenes outside the space of the house, resembling video footage. Egoyan actually shot the scenes with a

⁶⁶ See John Ellis’ notion of the glance in *Visible Fictions*, formulated most clearly in chapter 8, or Tania Modleski’s characterization of daytime television as denying the “luxury of a total and prolonged absorption” in *Loving with a Vengeance* (101).

⁶⁷ In *Television Sitcom*, Brett Mills makes precisely this connection between the typical sitcom shooting style and theatricality, claiming that newer sitcoms have largely abandoned it “because the traditional sitcom look appears artificial and staged to younger audiences for whom the theatrical experience has little meaning” (51).

two-camera setup and edited the sequences live, as with broadcast television (Egoyan “Burnett Interview 25). The first scene set in the house, the aforementioned “family sits down to watch TV” scene, even ends with a jokey bit straight from a situation comedy, with Van gulping down beer when his father leaves the room. Even the family house is presented to the audience in a televisual idiom.

The conventional family Stan tries to establish through televisual mediation is resisted by Van, who in turn tries to establish a substitute family consisting of himself, Armen, and Aline. While Stan’s family formation depends on the media conventions of the sitcom (and pornography, as discussed below), Van, in resisting those formulations, can only find an alternative in the home videos of his childhood: in other words, another form of conventionalized media. What differentiates the two is the encompassing nature of public videographic images, like television and surveillance, against the private-ish home videos. While the former feature an oppressive mise-en-scene and aim at containing characters in the present, the latter at least attempt to draw connections between the present moment and the past from which they emerge.

The extent to which Stan uses videographic mediation to instantiate a new family in the present and eliminate the remnants of a past family configuration is revealed in the video recordings he makes having sex with Sandra. Van (and the audience) first sees these images when he wanders into the master bedroom, curious at the video camera pointed at the bed. Turning on the VCR, an image appears on screen of Stan and Sandra naked, in medium shot, with Stan lying on top of her but with his head turned away from hers, looking into the camera lens. After a moment, he turns away and they begin to have sex. It’s clear Stan was waiting for the camera to begin recording before engaging in the act. The necessity of recording creates a closed circuit of voyeurism and narcissism for Stan, which recalls and resembles the function of

surveillance systems. After this disturbing shot, static fills the screen, and upon its dissipation we have a similar shot of Stan in a suburban backyard in close up, staring into the lens for a moment. A small boy, who we learn is Van, kicks a ball to him.

Stan is clearly recording his sexual exploits over videos of Van's childhood and their former family configuration. The act of recording sex with Sandra over these images constitutes two simultaneous acts of aggression in forming a "new" family: first, documenting his patriarchal possession of a younger woman, and secondly, destroying the evidence of the past family. Stan's efforts to build a new family for himself are predicated on doing violence to the memory of his old family, and that violence is written on the representations of those memories.

The repeated gesture and framing in the sex tape and the family video is telling: in both video shots, Stan looks out from the frame (i.e. into the camera lens) on frame left, waiting for it to begin recording before "sharing a moment" with a member of his family. The static, a common visual feature of videotape when its recording has ceased or been interrupted, marks on the video image itself both a continuity and divide in Stan's life: the continuity in the shared framing and the existence of both events on the same videotape, a divide in the static separation and in the content of the two video images. There is a troubling link created by the shared framing and videotape. In having Stan record his sexual activity on the same tape as family videos, Egoyan shifts the representational strategies of the home mode, where sexuality is one of the taboo topics studiously avoided ("erased"). Although Stan's actions are perverse, they reveal through video a structuring absence in the home mode, and the repeated framing in the two video clips are evidence that both the family togetherness that marks home videos and the "absent" images of sexuality are central to family history and narrative, even though only one is ever recorded.

Stan's recording of amateur pornography over Van's childhood speaks to videotape's generating the documentary of family history. The family archive embodied by artifacts like photo albums, home movies, and home videos is intended to be a lasting one, as Richard Chalfen's survey of the home mode reveals. They are supposed to serve as a buffer against the immateriality and deterioration of memory by offering an indexical, transparent record of the past that substitutes for memory's vicissitudes. Stan attempts to manipulate this presumably fixed record, and is enabled by videotape's ability to re-record and erase. As Sandra informs Van, Stan "likes to record...and erase. He prefers to erase." A photograph or home movie might never be seen after development, locked away in a family chest or attic, but barring its willful destruction or complete deterioration, it still exists. Videotape, on the other hand, is easy to erase or record over. With blank videotapes, one had to remove a tab on the cassette to prevent those actions; and even then, one could simply put masking tape over the gap and re-record once again. Stan's obsession with "recording and erasing" is a sort of archival fever: his actions only have real meaning for him when they're committed to an ostensibly archival medium, yet he continually desires to shape that archive for his own purposes, creating a family history that eliminates his ex-wife and her mother (i.e. Van's mother and Armen) and that resembles the televisual, the site of meaning in his life.

Stan's actions give a sinister cast to the active and conscious shaping of family history fostered by video technology. He uses video's capabilities to shape family history to his liking, retaining or erasing past moments like the VCR user choosing which programs to record for later watching. His is a consumerist approach to family life, treating it like an array of programming to select from; Stan collapses the home video archive into the televisual, turning the former into an ephemeral circuit of observation and display. In having Stan choose an archive of sexual

practice over one of family scenes, Egoyan taps into the moral panic surrounding video in contemporaneous culture: the notion that video made violent or (as is the case here) sexually explicit spectacles available for home viewing and thus including impressionable children in their audience.⁶⁸

Stan's actions reveal to us a "secret history" of the home video, and are fundamental to a critique of the form. In his hands, video is not just imbricated with television, as I argued in chapter two, but also fully conflated with it, in a purely negative sense. By submitting his life to video imagery, to the extent where his relationships and his very home are articulated through it, Stan has successfully reduced both to the common denominator of television. His home is entirely portrayed in a televisual idiom, and the sex tapes initial manifest as a closed circuit; in other words, they are expressed in the instantaneous image capture/transmission/reception process of broadcasting.

However, Stan's pornographic videography is not new, and in fact constitutes part of the family history. Van's absent mother is a spectral figure in the film, appearing almost entirely in the home video footage of the past. These moments represent the paradisiacal past for Van, one of family togetherness under the kind and watchful hands of his mother and grandmother. However, that past includes a moment where the happy family footage is interrupted by her bound and gagged in a BDSM scenario. Thus the videos provide assurance of Van's pleasant childhood past, but simultaneously remind us of Stan's perverse attempts to control the other

⁶⁸ The height of this moral panic was the crusade against the "video nasties" in Great Britain from 1982-1985; for details see Martin Barker, *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media*. In the United States, similar public and legislative efforts were largely directed towards pornography, as a result of the confluence of feminist and evangelical agitation against the genre through the mobilization of what Philip Jenkins calls "the politics of children," i.e. the use of children as rhetorical tools for pushing moralizing legislation (chapter 4). Canada, Egoyan's county, was not without a similar movement, which culminated in the Fraser Committee report on prostitution and pornography, issued in April 1985.

people in his life.⁶⁹ To put a cap on this line of thinking, Stan's actions represent a "secret history" of home video because they demonstrate that behind the images of childhood and family togetherness lies an unusual and unhealthy way of relating to and representing one's family; they suggest that all such home video images may be similarly tainted.

The two images of Van's mother – the caregiver and the unwilling sexual participant – serve paradigmatically for a conflict in the film that suffuses the generational conflict between Van and Stan with a psychosexual one that conflates technological representations and devices with women. Stan's patriarchal desire to control both women and his offspring through televisual representation lead Van to rebel and join with two women, namely Aline and Armen, who have similarly suffered under Stan's thumb. To strike back at his father, Van steals the family home videos, preventing Stan from taping over them, but also the VCR, which "produces" the family by displaying their images. When Van comes home to take it, Sandra tries to convince him to stay, and an ambiguous shift in the conversation indicates the confusion between the VCR and Sandra herself:

Sandra: Why don't you take the one in the living room?

Van: This one's better.

Sandra: But it's his!

Van: There's lots more where it came from.

Sandra: Did you ask him?

Van: Of course not!

Sandra: Can we talk about this?

Van: No.

Sandra: Why not?

Van: Because it's decided.

Sandra: I want you to stay!

Van: I don't want to.

Sandra: You won't miss me?

⁶⁹ I do not suggest that the sexual acts Stan engages in are perverse in and of themselves, but rather that they represent a form of control through videographic mediation that he attempts to impose on others, mostly women. In other words, it is his general attitude towards interpersonal relationships, and not his specific sexual actions, that make him perverse.

Van: I hope not.

Sandra: What if you do?

Van: I'll live with it. People live with all sorts of things.

The confusion emerges at a shift in the conversation: the lines “Can we talk about this?” through “I want you to stay!” Sandra changes the topic from Van’s theft of the VCR to pleading with him to stay. The ambiguity in the conversation – does “can we talk about this” refer to the theft or leaving her behind? - equates Sandra with the VCR as objects of contention between Van and Stan. The pattern is repeated in the other relationships both men have with the women in the film. Armen is Van’s last link to his vanished mother, along with the home videos he preserves; while Armen and the home videos are irritants to Stan for the same reason, because they are lingering reminders of the prior life he wishes to (quite literally) erase the traces of. Stan’s controlling mastery over women, technology, and ultimately over the family past itself is what Van finds himself compelled to rebel against.

The next sequence visually encapsulates the equation of family history and memory with the technology of its reproduction, and demonstrates how gendered power operates not just through the technology, but also over the representation (and thus, family history itself). Van and Armen watch the home videos of the past, and a continuous pan moves from the machine, the images on the television monitor, and the happy faces of the pair, bathed in the blue glow of the screen. It then cuts back to the screen, where Stan appears on screen left in close up, his back to the camera, with Van as a child and his mother on screen right in long shot, being watched by Stan through a window. Stan raps on the window, and Van dances to his father’s instruction; Van’s mother then brings him inside to sing “Ba Ba Black Sheep.” The pleasure Van and Armen obtain from seeing these past events conflicts with the hold Stan still exerts over those representations.

For Van and Armen, the home videos represent happy memories of the past, when Van's mother still lived with them. The valorization of the home videos as the source of this joy is suggested by the camera movement, which links the use of the machine, the video images it reproduces, and the smiling pair in one uncut segment. It also marries the past in the video images with the present-day Van and Armen, establishing them as the standard-bearers of family history in opposition to Stan, who seeks to erase that history. However, the shot of Stan dominating the frame and commanding his family's performance suggests that, in the past as much as the present, he inhabits the role of controlling patriarch. Stan's power over Van and his mother is emphasized by his looming size in the frame. The window through which he observes his son and wife mirrors the television screen through which Van and Armen watch the scene, as well as the screen Stan's home, where he enacts a similar control over Sandra through sex and the past through erasure.

Family Viewing thereby constructs home video representations as expressions of (often gendered) power over family history. Stan's erasure of the videos is excessive; he unnecessarily eliminates images wherein he already holds all the power. Not only does he "command" the actions of his family and dominate the frame, but the doubling of gazes – Van and Armen (and us) through the TV screen, and Stan through the window – forces us to recognize his perspective as dominating the home videos Van covets.⁷⁰ Unfortunately for Van and Armen, even after escaping Stan's immediate grasp and rescuing the videos from erasure, his influence over the documents of family history can still be seen and felt.

⁷⁰ Stan's role coincides with the critique of the home movie made by Patricia Zimmermann. Van's memories have been recovered from his father in a material sense, yet "the camera [still] imprints his [the patriarch, here Stan] presence and control over the actors," made obvious by Stan calling on the child Van to dance and sing (112-113).

How is it then possible for Van, Armen, and Aline to resist Stan, and by extension, the whole of the oppressive and patriarchal videographic regime of representation? Since Stan's power extends to the sphere of representation, that resistance must strike at the level of those representations. Van and Aline successfully do so by attacking Stan's sexual potency. A static transition shows us to Stan and Sandra in the bedroom, with Stan preparing to record a sexual episode. After setting up the camera and monitor, however, Stan discovers the tapes are "all blank" – because, of course, Van has substituted those he rescued. Sandra tries to distract him from the problem, but Stan remains unmoved; the camera pans into the television screen as he sits on the bed, staring blankly into the screen.

Later, another cut to static reveals Stan and Sandra still in bed, obviously frustrated by sexual failure. As with the ending of the previous scene of impotence, they are seen through the television monitor. A telephone sits in Stan's lap, hiding his crotch, and suggesting a connection between impotence and an inability to technologically mediate sexual performance. The phone sex operator, who has refused to call and thus further ruined Stan's sexual scenario, is Aline. Recording his sex acts, as well as being prompted to them by the voice on the telephone, is necessary for Stan's sexual potency. In stealing the tapes, the VCR, and Aline (in a sense), Van symbolically castrates his father. Stan's sexual potency and dominance over his family is tied to his mastery of the video technology, which is threatened by Van's theft of the VCR and home videos.

In both sequences, Stan's technological, and therefore sexual and familial, mastery has been impeded.⁷¹ At the level of the narrative, Van and Aline successfully disrupt that mastery,

⁷¹ In *Video Playtime*, her sociological survey and analysis of gendered VCR use, Ann Gray writes that for many women, VCRs fell into a category of "newer and, almost by definition, more 'complicated' or technologically advanced pieces of entertainment equipment." Women

such that Stan hires a private detective to restore it, but he is doomed to fail because that disruption has leaked into the narration itself. As mentioned, both sequences of failed sex begin with a cut to static (*videus interruptus*?); Stan's inability to perform is joined to an interruption in the smooth functioning of the media representation through which he exercises his power. Moreover, both sequences allow the audience to see Stan and Sandra captured in the frame of the television monitor, enacting a reversal of the gaze Stan subjects his family to.

Ultimately, however, the film finds the avenues of escape in the patriarchal and videographic world to be temporary and circumscribed. Even in the film's ostensibly "happy ending," where the characters finally reunite with Van's mother and enter Armen into a more humane nursing home, the majority of residents there are gathered around a TV set. A shot of this television audience cuts to a now familiar image of the child Van from a home video, making it seem as though the home videos are on the television set. In the following shot, the camera tracks through the room and upward to reveal a surveillance camera installed near the ceiling, translating everyone into video images that remain unseen. Van, Armen, and Aline may have escaped Stan and his private detective, but they are still subject to a videographic regime that seeks to capture and control through subjecting everyone to a conventionalized logic of representation – the home video or the secret surveillance tape, in this circumstance. Through the confusion between the nursing home audience and Van's home video, we are reminded that no matter how private the videos may seem to Van, they retain an inescapable dimension of

are socialized to see such technology as the province of "the adult male or children of the household...[despite the fact that women] routinely operate quite sophisticated pieces of technology in the course of their domestic work" (178-179). For Gray, VCR use is paradigmatic of household scenarios that posit the husband as not only master of the house and family, but also of the technologies therein. These forms of mastery coincide when one recognizes that many of those technologies – VCRs, TVs, camcorders, cameras, radios, etc. – reproduce conventional representations of the family in both the home mode and as entertainment.

publicity. According to *Family Viewing*, that publicity can be challenged at an individual level – the rebellion against Stan succeeds – but the problem is the videographic by definition contains a public, and thus objectifying, dimension. The final shot of the film is a freeze frame of the video seen earlier, with Stan looking through the window at his family, controlling their actions, the frame, and our gaze.

As Van says when he first puts the family home videos on the television for Armen, “all she does is watch that stupid thing. I thought it’d be nice to put on something she could relate to.” In a society where video images dominate, perhaps the only thing one can do is to find “something to relate to.” Although the home video images are precious to Van and Armen, and worth saving as memorial artifacts, they are still part of an enveloping, televisually mediated reality, and bear the imprint of Van’s controlling father. In trying to break the hold of that reality through the home video image, Van inadvertently re-establishes its premises. His memories, ultimately, are still only video images, seen through the television monitor.

Video Amongst the Panoply: Media Response to National Trauma in *Ararat*

Egoyan’s later film *Ararat* is far more sanguine about video’s relationship to memory than *Family Viewing*, in that it accepts the ubiquity of the video image and tries to make greater sense of how videographers might actively use it to express their relationship to the world. *Ararat* addresses the Armenian genocide, the historical trauma that haunted both Egoyan’s family history and, according to some critics, his filmmaking.⁷² However, rather than make a

⁷² Due to his ethnicity and international stature, critics seemed to expect that Egoyan would eventually make a film about the genocide. He recounts, in the introduction to the published *Ararat* script, being taken aback at a journalist’s suggestion that *The Sweet Hereafter* was “a metaphor for the Armenian genocide...[and] that many of my films had dealt with themes of denial and its consequences” central to the politics of the genocide (vii).

straightforward historical film recreating and dramatizing significant events, Egoyan instead depicts the genocide in terms of its resonance through generations of diasporic Armenians. “Instead of making an Armenian *Schindler’s List*...he wanted to explore an analytical perspective on the genocide, to tell a story about historic events while enquiring how such stories can be translated to screen without traducing their meaning” (Romney 171).

Typical of a filmmaker whose repeated themes include family, home, and the mediation of both, Egoyan centers the film on a mother and son, Ani (Arsinée Khanjian) and Raffi (David Alpay), who are ethnically Armenian but live in Canada (like Egoyan himself). Both become involved in the making of a historical film about the genocide directed by Edward Saroyan (Charles Aznavour). Ani is hired as an historical consultant because of her scholarship on the painter Arshile Gorky, who appears as a character in Saroyan’s film, while Raffi works as a PA. Inspired by the film, Raffi travels to Armenia to shoot video footage of his national “home,” hoping the experience will help him understand the motivations of his father, an Armenian nationalist who was killed attempting to assassinate a Turkish diplomat. When he returns to Canada, Raffi is interrogated by customs inspector David (Christopher Plummer), who suspects Raffi may be smuggling drugs into the country.

The focus on family history, which is connected directly to national memory, features characters separated from their “homeland” and who attempt to reconcile that historical and spatial separation through a series of representations. The central representations include Gorky’s photograph and paintings of his dead mother, Ani’s written scholarship and lectures, Saroyan’s mainstream narrative film, and Raffi’s video diary. The final piece is most resonant with my concerns in this project, and in the film’s narrative it becomes the most significant in Raffi’s reconciliation with his family’s past. However, each has an important role to play in

Egoyan's thesis regarding historical understanding, and plays a part in an argument about the form that understanding takes in the contemporary media landscape.

I want to consider each one of the representational strategies – Gorky's paintings, Saroyan's film, and Raffi's travel video – in turn. Each offers a particular way of accessing the unrepresentable familial and national past, with its own advantages and problems. In reading each, I pay close attention to how each representation articulates a vision of the family and the home, and how the past is accessed for particular, individual purposes. Raffi's video plays a particularly significant role in the narrative, and enables a reading of *Ararat* as a model for the future state of media intervention into understanding the past and the role that home video might play in that process.

One way to conceptualize the functions of the representations in *Ararat* is through Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. Rather than just illustrate that theory, however, Gorky's painting, Saroyan's film, and Raffi's video conceptualize historical traumas across history, demonstrating that the gap generated by a traumatic event compounds through time, but also how the expression of that gap shifts in relation to the necessities of the contemporary moment. Caruth argues that a traumatic event results in an overwhelming desire for the traumatized subject to express his/her experience, despite trauma constituting a gap in understanding. Traumatized subjects are ethically compelled to transmit their experiences to others, or we risk losing the significance of all transmissions of experience (9). Caruth follows Freud and Lacan, who figure the emergence of consciousness itself as a trauma which we grapple with through the experience of the deaths of others (102-105). In this formulation we are all traumatized by the very fact of our being, and further traumatic events trigger a gap in our understanding that reminds us of this, and thus can never be fully sutured into our self-narratives or worldviews. Although we still feel

the pressing need to articulate the traumatic gap to others, even though that articulation betrays the experience itself, how can a gap in memory, cognition and even emotion be articulated? Each of the representations in *Ararat* expresses the compulsion to articulate national and familial trauma, but the strength of the film is that Egoyan shows how each also contains the gap of experience and understanding. That gap, moreover, is sustained across generations, who each relate to the trauma of the genocide in ways that patch certain gaps but open others, with the videographic functioning as a palimpsest. *Ararat* deepens Caruth's claims by dramatizing how trauma sustains generations of people, and how their cultural expressions define, close, and open new gaps in traumatic expression.

The film's opening scenes explicitly connect Gorky, Saroyan, and Raffi through visual and aural fades that present their three artistic forms in succession. The first image of the film is a photograph of Gorky as a child with his mother, which serves as the model for his famous painting "The Artist and his Mother." As the credits begin, the camera moves through Gorky's studio, offering close ups of Gorky's tools (brushes, tubes of paint) but also multiple iterations of the painting until stopping on the incomplete final version and Gorky himself. Lisa Siraganian notes that in this sequence "we are not only deliberately moving through Gorky's studio to see his attempt to grapple with a moment in history and memory; we are also following a particular path and process of symbolization" (145-146). In other words, the film begins by showing us an artistic endeavor that represents the past (Gorky's lost childhood, before the genocide) as a process, rather than a finished piece. By being "in process," the painting suggests something of the contingent, always incomplete nature of traumatic expression.

After settling on Gorky, the film proceeds to link him with Saroyan and Raffi. The image fades into a blurred, indistinct mass of light and dark and moving shapes. As the image focuses

and the opening music recedes in favor of the diegetic sound of a new setting, we realize the fade has taken us into a contemporary airport. After focusing on Saroyan seated in the airport, his image in turn fades into a video image of the Armenian countryside zooming in on Mt. Ararat in the distance, which we later learn is part of Raffi's video diary. Not only does this sequence suggest a linkage between the three men, but also between their projects. We see Gorky at work on the painting, Saroyan is introduced to us through the cinematic device of the fade and sound bridge, and Raffi's presence is suggested by the obviously videographic footage. Ending the sequence with the video image of Mt. Ararat, the symbol of the lost homeland that connects all three men, suggests the importance not only of the mountain but also its videographic depiction. The zoom, a key feature of videography, "reaches out" towards the national symbol, and the video is what gets us "closest" to Mt. Ararat.

As already mentioned, the images of Gorky's painting and studio suggest to us the idea of artistic work "in process," that is, as something not yet complete or perhaps never to be completed. We see Gorky working in his studio on the painting a few times in the film, yet it is never clear whether these visions are part of Saroyan's film, another element of *Ararat* itself, or Ani's fantasies of the artist. The most significant sequence features Gorky blotting out the hands of his mother in the finished painting by smearing the canvas with his own hands. The attempt to reconnect haptically with his mother, to regain some sense of her physical presence through a representation, is of course bound to fail, and results in the painting remaining this way, with the hands forever indistinct. The hands are blotted out and remain so because Gorky realizes he can never regain what is lost, and the painting must acknowledge that fact. This simultaneous desire for a physical and subjective connection with a marking of the gap in traumatic experience connects Gorky to Raffi and his video, and remains a problem with Saroyan's film. This is

perhaps why Saroyan's film is the "gap" in the opening: while we see the painting and the video in that sequence, nothing of Saroyan's film is seen, only Saroyan himself.

Saroyan's film conforms to the typical narrative conventions of the historical drama. As Jonathan Markowitz notes, "through a critique of this film...Egoyan is able to pose some important questions concerning the creation and popularization of collective memories of genocide" (236). The film presents the Armenian genocide as filtered through American missionary Charles Ussher, and focuses on his personal and political conflict with the villainous Turkish governor Jevdet Bey. In this way *Ararat* parodies the narrative of *Schindler's List*, which similarly focuses on the actions of two men (Schindler and the Nazi commander Amon Goeth) rather than the larger social and political conflict, and denies a member of the suffering group the protagonist's role (Hanson 299-300). Bey is portrayed cartoonishly, as an egotistical, sneering torturer of children. By displacing the social and political motivations and methods that make genocidal projects possible onto a single, unbelievably sinister character, the film-within-a-film reveals the limits of character-based historical representations.

Falsehoods abound in the film-within-a-film. Sequences from it are presented as complete pieces of work, but they occur in the narrative while being filmed, so there is an unusual "disagreement" between their polished style and their diegetic moment. In other words, the viewer sees the scenes while they are being "filmed" by Saroyan and his crew, but they are presented to the viewer at the same time as impossibly finished sequences, complete with editing and background music. These sequences voice a criticism regarding the narration of history in such an idiom. Saroyan's film engages erases traumatic gaps, much like historical films

typically do, through the use of classical construction and the omniscient narration it offers.⁷³ It offers events to the viewers as though they had unfettered access to them and could therefore be “experienced” without the gap that constitutes them as traumatic to the witness or victim.⁷⁴

Saroyan’s film is also completely set-bound, rather than shot on location in Armenia, and thereby must attempt to bridge a series of spatial and temporal gaps. Saroyan and his screenwriter Rouben (re)build the town of Van so that Mt. Ararat can be seen in the distance, foregrounding the constructed nature of the film. As Ani points out to them, this is a geographic impossibility, but the two filmmakers are more concerned with “poetic license” that brings out “truth in spirit.” The scene “highlights the artifice involved in cinematic historical reconstruction” (Markovitz 242). The bridging of the spatial and temporal gap that the film-within-the-film makes is revealed as entirely illusory. The spatial bridge, which Raffi will later rebuild by visiting and videotaping the sites of the genocide, is a falsification of space. The temporal bridge, that is, the experiential feeling engendered by the representation of events, is thus called into question when *Ararat* highlights the “poetic license” in Saroyan’s film. Rather than confront the gap between the historical and contemporary Armenia, Saroyan prefers a past he has total control over. Though not as sinister as Stan in *Family Viewing*, he too wants a past subject to his vision; but by creating one, he threatens to do injustice to the actual past.

While Saroyan’s film adheres to the problematic conventions of a particular type of historical film, Egoyan’s purpose is not merely to criticize this genre of filmmaking as pernicious

⁷³ See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, for more on the linkage between classical narration and omniscience.

⁷⁴ See Miriam Bratu Hansen’s discussion of the critical response to *Schindler’s List*, which charged that the film did precisely this because of its use of the classical idiom emphasizing “compositional unity, motivation, linearity, equilibrium, and closure” all of which are at odds with traumatic history’s “discontinuity and otherness of historical experience” (298).

by demonstrating the falsehoods that it perpetuates. There is evidence that Egoyan sympathizes with projects like Saroyan's: in interviews, he has talked about how Saroyan's film functions, saying that "[t]he film within the film may not be very good, and probably isn't - it's probably just going to disappear after the premiere. I think that's the difficult thing for people to understand. I'm not trying to be judgmental about it, but the fact is that there are things which disappear and there are things that endure" ("Ripple Effects" 352). Markovitz suggests that Egoyan sympathizes with Saroyan because the Armenian genocide, unlike the Holocaust, has no images and films shaping public consciousness (237). As Egoyan writes, "no widely-released dramatic movie had ever presented the genocide, it was important that any film project would need to show what happened. We live in a popular culture that demands images before we allow ourselves to believe" (*Ararat* script viii). The film-within-a-film enables Egoyan to kill two birds with one stone: he is able to provide those images to the public as well as critique their circulation through popular culture.

Saroyan makes the film in an effort to speak to a traumatic event that personally resonates with him; he cites his mother's experience as the root of some of the film's images, as she was a survivor of the genocide and Saroyan's first source of information about it. In a sense, Saroyan's film follows the logic of the home mode as a bequeathing of family memory to later generations. Moreover, Saroyan's efforts frame generational succession as central to the representational and familial relationships in *Ararat* more broadly. Family histories equal national history, and in this sense Egoyan uses of modes of domestic rhetoric that see the family as central to ideological and national reproduction, but short circuits the jingoistic consequences.

One scene in particular links the three representations with notions of generational succession and traumatic testimony while envisioning the home mode as the framework for that

palimpsestic layering. While his video footage of the Armenian countryside plays on a camcorder screen, Raffi reads a page of Saroyan's script to David. The script recites Ussher's record of the testimony of a German woman who witnessed Armenian brides humiliated and immolated at the hands of Turkish soldiers. As Raffi reads, the film dramatizes, in a series of embedded flashbacks, the woman's testimony to Ussher and the event itself. Further emphasizing the significance of eyewitnessing, the latter part of the sequence reveals the adolescent Gorky watching the scene and weeping, hidden from view.

The layering of witnesses and testimony – Raffi's video footage, the German woman, Ussher recounting her story, the young Gorky, even the audience – radically questions the nature of the history being recounted. This is not to say that the atrocity committed did not happen, but rather, it emphasizes the contingencies of unofficial history, witnessed and transmitted through multiple iterations of telling rather than through official channels and narratives of history. It acknowledges what is left out of those official histories, which can be reconstituted by the home mode or other unofficial forms of documentation. As much as Gorky's painting recognizes that his desire to reconnect with his mother is doomed to fail, Saroyan's film functions as a memorial to his own mother, and thus the "poetic license" and gaps therein are as much a record of personal experience and active shaping of family history as a home movie or video.

Impelled by his experience with Saroyan's film, Raffi travels to Turkey to see firsthand the places where the genocide took place and attempt to work through the loss of his father. Like Gorky and Saroyan, Raffi's endeavors are tied to generational loss and memorialization and the inexplicable, and thus traumatizing, effect thereof. He keeps a video diary of his experience, asking questions related to a personal history centered on "the home" (that is, Armenia). These

images are the “home videos” of *Ararat*: footage of Raffi’s “homeland,” over which he ruminates about the lost possibility of family togetherness.

Raffi’s video footage is demarcated as imagery that demands “private viewing,” despite the fact that we see it, along with suspicious customs official David, in the public space of the customs office. When David asks to see the video footage on the small screen on the camera, Raffi replies, “Its kind of personal,” designating the footage as something only to be seen by particular individuals. David takes him into the customs office, away from the more public space of the airport. In the customs office, the imagery first appears on the small viewscreen of Raffi’s camcorder. The scale indicates a certain lack of significance, at least in comparison to the Gorky painting and Saroyan’s film, which respectively are displayed in a museum and receive a glitzy premiere. The video soon fills the screen, however, serving to balance it against the other representations and affording it similar importance.

Over images of the landscape and ruins of Eastern Turkey, Raffi expresses a disconnect from the territory in voice-over: “I’m here mom...in a dream world the three of us would be here together...I remember all the stories I used to hear about this place, glorious capital of our kingdom, ancient history...like the story that dad was a freedom fighter, fighting for the return of this, I guess.” Raffi’s video images of the place itself, where his ancestors lived and experienced great horror, is at odds with his mental image of it: the “dream world” that is “ancient history” gives way to the place whose resonance is lost, whose value as something worth fighting for is expressed by an apathetic “I guess.”

The trip itself reveals Raffi’s growing reluctance to ascribe any real meaning to the space at all. “What am I supposed to feel when looking at these ruins? Can I ever feel the anger that dad must have felt...when he tried to kill that man? Why was he prepared to give us up for

that?...When I see these places I realize how much we've lost. Not just the land and the people, but the loss of any way to remember it. There is nothing here to prove anything happened."

The distance Raffi feels from the landscape is emphasized by the emptiness of the footage. There is a woman in long shot at one point, but otherwise it is almost entirely flat landscapes with ruins. This is an empty space, filled with land and history that can be returned to but that evokes no personal response. Moreover, Raffi himself appears nowhere in the video footage, and he only shares the frame with the images after the fact, when showing them to David. In her reading of a similar stylistic move in *Calendar*, Nellie Hogikyan writes:

Estranged from the origin, the photographer [*Calendar*'s main character, played by Egoyan himself] performs absence by not appearing physically in the scenes that take place in Armenia. The spectator listens to his voice, dissociated from his body, from behind the camera, but never sees him enter the frame he photographing or filming. (206)

Raffi performs the same absence and estrangement from his national homeland, both in voice-over and in remaining absent from the frames that contain it.

In other words, rather than posit the "home" video as filling the gaps and answering the questions left by other representations, the video instead generates different ones. Though Raffi's subjectivity shapes the images of Armenia, they remain impersonal, offering no real answers to the questions he has about his familial past. His response can be seen as that of a later generation to home mode footage: you are told that these places (and faces) are those of your precursors, but it remains difficult to see any evidence of yourself in them. Like Saroyan, Raffi laments that denial of the genocide has led to a situation where the event cannot even be remembered. But rather than supply images that aspire to shape public memory of the genocide, Raffi's images remain steadfastly personal and reflective. While Saroyan's film is the impetus and excuse for Raffi's trip, it has ultimately failed in the task of providing Raffi with a set of images to connect the genocide to the land he travels through. In his own videos, the "home" of

Raffi's home videos remains inexplicable. The videos suggest the gap between the "home" of home video and the contemporary experience is embedded within the videos themselves.

Returning to the scene of the immolated women can help illuminate Raffi's problem. The scene, as mentioned, opens with Raffi reading from the film script while his video plays on the camcorder's tiny monitor, and from there a cut is made to Ussher listening to the German woman's story. The eyewitnessing that takes place in the scene is important because it offers evidence to the events, bridging a gap in knowledge. But it also generates a traumatic gap, a fundamental gap in understanding and experience premised on the difference between witnessing and telling. The German woman's final line to Ussher – "how shall I dig out these eyes of mine?" – and the adolescent Gorky's silent weeping, indicate that there is no immediate understanding to be had through vision. As the scene closes and Raffi reads the woman's words, we return to the interrogation room, and he is framed alongside his video images of the Armenian ruins. The video stands as a form of witnessing, not traumatic in the way of direct witnessing to horrific events, but it also testifies to a gap in understanding that Raffi cannot quite reconcile; as David says to him after looking at part of the video, "the meaning of things changed." Raffi's experience of the space and creation of the video images didn't provide what he thought it would: rather than illuminating his family's past and its connection to historical trauma, the videos merely raise further questions.

It is discussing the videos with David after the fact that provides Raffi with illumination. These "home videos," videos of the homeland, are the central node in a process of Raffi coming to terms, if not full understanding, with his family's past. He has to recognize the traumatic gap for what it is: that there is no full understanding. Recording the videos lead to the realization that he will not have the epiphany he desires, and articulating that trauma to David is what enables

his reconciliation with it. Raffi's realization serves as the climax of the film. He tries desperately to make David understand his need to travel to Turkey – indicated by his excited gesturing toward the video camera's little LCD screen – and that in order to get an image of Mt. Ararat itself, he had to bribe a Turkish army officer. David, believing the canisters contain smuggled drugs, insists he and Raffi open the film canisters, which Raffi requests they do in the dark. There, as Raffi later tells his girlfriend Celia, he “felt the ghost” of his father. The ghost is a spectral presence, something that Raffi doesn't see (i.e. witness) but can only feel. It is an echo of understanding, much like the echoed presence of Gorky's mother in the painting; something that embodies historical understanding but that cannot be physically reconnected with.

Opening the film canisters and finally feeling his father's ghost pass, Raffi is able to understand the significance of what he has seen, experienced, and produced. The release of the ghost seems to be the release of the burden of history on Raffi; his home videos are no longer tasked with explaining the past, and can merely attest to a link with it, much like the traumatic telling in Caruth's theorization. Visiting Celia in prison, Raffi shows her the icon of the mother and child at Aghtamar, the basis for Gorky's painting. In this moment, near the very end of the film, Egoyan drives home the ways in which representations are, as Ani said earlier of the Gorky painting, “a repository of our history...[it] explains who we are, and how and why we got here.” The mother and child icon passes into modernity with its replication in the photograph of Gorky and his mother, which in turn becomes the famous painting. The painting is central to Ani's book, which becomes the basis for Saroyan's film along with the experiences of Gorky, Ussher, and his mother. Raffi is inspired by the film to move beyond his inchoate comprehension of his father and undertake a process of investigation, the result of which is the important video diary. Finally, the video diary changes the meaning of events for Raffi, and is key to his process of

working through trauma. Crucial to the video diary are the images of Mt. Ararat and of the icon. The symbolic process of representation as response to the traumatic genocide is replicated, passed down, and becomes cyclical. The icon that inspired Gorky reappears in Raffi's video images. Egoyan reiterates the passage of generations that opened the film, but this time with a sense of the legacy of representation on historical understanding.

In this way, Egoyan sees video, and in particular personal, amateur video, as belonging to a chain or sequence of significant representations – significant because they participate and re-mediate central symbols and past representations, casting them into new and personal contexts. Much like home videos recast earlier formats (photographs and small gauge film) in new ways and, as James Moran argues, remediated televisual discourses on the family, so Raffi's home video participates in a process that video makes manifest and is only intensified with digital technology (chapter 4). Raffi's age – he is the youngest of the generations of diasporic Armenians dealing with the legacy of the genocide in the film - and his video-making is indicative of video's centrality to the contemporary mediation of experience, a medium both personal and suffused with the history of image-making. For individuals of Raffi's generation, growing up with television and home video images, video is central to their way of understanding and meaning making in the world.

While *Family Viewing* is wary of how inescapable video images have become in the contemporary era, replacing family life with a series of circulating video images that threaten to replicate existing structures of inequality, *Ararat* argues for video's importance in the contemporary era for re-mediating, understanding, and interpreting the past. It recognizes contemporary society as marked by a multiplicity of narratives and media representations, all of which contribute to an understating of home, nation and family. The specter of *Family Viewing*

cannot be escaped, however, for the fact still remains that Raffi's video encapsulates the representations of the past with the final images of the icon he shows to Celia. This is doubly ironic when we consider that many viewers will come to *Ararat*, as I did, on DVD, where it, along with the many images appearing as part of its narrative, are reduced to the binary code of the digital. The film represents a way for coming to terms with the traumas of history, but also charts a shift in the primacy of particular media for representing a conflated familial/national history. While in *Ararat*, the past that Raffi deals with is particularly contentious and fraught with historical significance, the film offers a paradigm for reinterpreting the family past to which video is central. Raffi's understanding comes not only through his process of making the video diary, but also narrating it, and then in turn narrating its significance to David, during which the meanings it seems to hold destabilize and change once again. Video becomes a method through which to represent the past, but it also requires critical distance, else it should come to represent the past and consume all other media representations within it. This possibility only becomes more prevalent in the digital age.

In the last few decades, family photographs and home movies were continually remediated, transferred first to videotape and now to various digital formats. As this occurs, various sorts of reinterpretations appear – the Leno tape, with which I opened the second chapter, is some evidence of this. Family events that were previously captured in photographs or home movies are now the subjects of videotapes. Video, including digital video, is now the format in which we encounter our family's past. Egoyan has offered at least two positions on home video in his work. Both are instructive in thinking about video's place in the mediation of our past(s). *Ararat* recognizes this by narrating Raffi's experiences, but also reminds us of the history of family representations that video captures and transforms in the process. Less clearly suspicious

or despairing of the reduction of family interchanges to the video image than *Family Viewing*, *Ararat* recognizes the necessity of accounting for video's centrality in representing the familial and national past in the early 21st century.

CONCLUSION:

OFFICE POLITICS: A WAY OF CONCLUDING

In the contemporary moment, the primary means of distributing private audiovisual material publicly is YouTube, and in the process fulfills the fantasy of home video publicity. If the video image, in both home and broadcast forms, generates a fantasy of having one's life monitored in the sense proposed by Stanley Cavell, then YouTube offers a manifestation of that monitoring process, where the fantasy is supported by a feedback loop and the possibility of public fame. In other words, YouTube offers proof that our lives are interesting and significant enough to watch. A video uploaded to YouTube creates the sensation of your life entering a stream of others, readily viewable, just as you have viewed the lives of others in that stream.⁷⁵ Moreover, like many websites, YouTube features a commenting and rating function where viewers can "like" or "dislike" a video and comment on its content. Thus, one has evidence of one's video being publicly consumed and becoming the subject of public discourse (although calling it "discourse" may be overstating the reasonableness of YouTube commentating).

A number of YouTube videos have also gone "viral," becoming publicly well known through word of mouth and channels of internet sociality, demonstrating a form of media awareness vastly different from the marketing that typically makes the public aware of

⁷⁵ This differs from Raymond Williams' televisual flow. With televisual flow, a viewer taps into an existing stream of image and sound indifferent to his or her watching, whereas with YouTube, the viewer consciously acts by choosing a video to watch and then controlling its playback by pausing, jumping forward, etc. Thus YouTube offers the viewer a greater sense of mastery over content. At the same time it seems to better manifest Cavell's monitoring metaphor than broadcast television; the layout of the website offers a series of small screens to choose from, imitating the bank of screens a security officer might see at their post. YouTube, more than television, is an experience of switching screens, whereas television exists partway between switching and succession, Cavell's category of cinematic spectatorial experience.

commercially produced media.⁷⁶ While the chance of going viral is miniscule compared to the vast number of videos uploaded to YouTube (according to the site itself, 48 hours worth every minute), the potential for massive, albeit usually brief, public fame and fortune is possible (“Frequently Asked Questions”).

Thus, YouTube exacerbates many of the tendencies that existed in home mode media already, and, in a sense, fulfills their destiny. Visible Measures, a company that tracks the number of video views on internet sites like YouTube, maintains a list of YouTube videos that have reached 100 million views. Of the 65 videos on the most recent list, ten feature material not produced and owned by a corporate entity.⁷⁷ The other material on the list includes music videos, film trailers, and clips from television shows and comedic performances. The variety of material suggests the increased willingness of media consumers to see privately made video material as part of a larger media landscape. Home videos are just another part of a massive catalog of viewable media. Most of the material that “goes viral,” however, shares with *America’s Funniest Home Videos* an emphasis on comic entertainment. The top user-generated video, “Charlie Bit My Finger Again” is typical *AFHV* fare, with a baby chuckling after biting his disarmingly patient older brother’s finger. The second highest user-generated video, “Numa Numa,” features a young man on his webcam lip-synching the words and dancing to a European pop song: a comic performance. If the Visible Measures list is any indication, privately

⁷⁶ Though, of course, many major media companies have learned their lesson from YouTube and other social media nodes, and use “viral marketing” as well as traditional marketing to sell their products. Filmmakers, for example, create short videos, webpages, and other content, much of which will never appear in the film itself, in the months leading up to a film’s release to build speculation about it in social media. The marketing campaign for 2008’s *The Dark Knight* is a particularly spectacular example of viral marketing success (Crook and Sanders).

⁷⁷ Accessed 23 November 2012; unfortunately, the list has not been updated since 23 March 2010.

produced video distributed through the Internet is just as popular as commercially produced material; its status as home video material doesn't bias people from watching it. Home videos have become a cog in the universalizing impulse of digital media, which reduces all other media forms and practices to one medium of distribution and circulation. YouTube is merely a central node in the contemporary matrix of media exchange, but it is significant that home videos have come to occupy so much of that central node. The smooth integration of amateur and home videos into the media landscape through network mediators like YouTube allow us to see how home videos are still part of an ongoing renegotiation of the border between the public and private. As part of public discourse, however, viral home videos have seen their potential severely limited, as widely seen videos are primarily in a comic form.

Home videos are also open to greater critique when they enter the public media landscape. One YouTube video in particular experienced a brief "controversy" in the summer of 2009. After becoming one of YouTube's greatest successes, some claimed that "David After Dentist" exploited its subject, David DeVore Jr. The video, which was posted on YouTube in January 2009 and has since been viewed by web surfers over 112 million times (as of this writing) features young DeVore in the back seat of a car, still drugged after a trip to the dentist. Like many of the personal home videos posted on YouTube, "David After Dentist" bears the home video aesthetic: handheld camera work, live synchronous sound, and a long take (the two minute clip has no editing at all). The video's comedy derives from David's unexpected and seemingly random questions and observations while under the influence of anesthetic drugs, asking "is this real life?" and shortly afterwards noting that "I have two fingers."

After "David After Dentist" became widely known, it was subjected to a public critique. It was posted innocently enough by David's father, David DeVore Sr., to make it more widely

available to friends and family than distribution methods such as Facebook or email allowed for. The video's context was private, but by making it available to a public audience, the door opened for it to become viral and subject to public scrutiny. DeVore underestimated public interest, but even so, viewed the video primarily in a comic context: "I chose to make it public thinking no one would think it would be as funny as we did. Once we realized people thought it was cute and funny, we embraced the attention that came with it" (DeVore). However, when DeVore appeared on the Bill O'Reilly show, O'Reilly accused him of exploiting his son directly to his face (although O'Reilly apparently didn't think DeVore was a "bad guy") (Linkins). Criticism was frequent enough that Matt Lauer asked DeVore and his wife to respond to it when they were guests on NBC's morning "Today Show" (Inbar). The issue with these critics was an idea that DeVore was using his son for fame and profit, broadcasting David's embarrassing episode for others to laugh at. However, DeVore's actions are perfectly explicable in a culture where home videos are publicly valued for their comic content. It is important to note the video has a sympathetic component to it: DeVore recorded his son's actions because they were so unusual, but on the soundtrack he can be heard consoling and reassuring his son just as much as laughing.

Objections to programs like *America's Funniest Home Videos* or YouTube phenomena like "David After Dentist" are couched in ethical problems with their comedic cruelty and exploitative invasion of private lives. Now that personal home videos are part of a system of public exchange, Michelle Citron's warning about *AFHV* seems prescient: the "dark shadow of power" is revealed by "capturing the small humiliations of childhood" which are "multiplied a thousand-fold as people scramble for the show's prize. The visual memory of childhood is thus sold to the highest bidder" (9-11). In other words, now that home videos have become public fodder, the necessity of ethical creation, use, and response towards them is more important than

ever. It is sympathy with the subjects of these videos, much like DeVore exhibits for his son, which marks an interruption in the comic cruelty and provides an opportunity for an ethical warning regarding the home video aesthetic.

To examine the potential implications of the comic for an ethics of home video, I want to turn to an unusual place: the sitcom *The Office*. At first glance, the show would appear to have little to do with home videos: it is entirely fictional, rather than recording actual events; its setting is the workplace, center of the public sphere, rather than offering a glimpse of the private sphere; and the purpose of its production is entertainment, while home videos are made for documentation or memorialization. However, *The Office*, like a number of other contemporary mass media texts, simulates a realist aesthetic which home video inherited and popularized.

There are similarities beyond stylistic resemblance. Like home videos and direct cinema documentaries, such as the films of Frederick Wiseman, *The Office* explores personal relationships in a setting laden with particular behavioral strictures and hierarchal social structures. For the home video, that setting is typically the domestic space, while in *The Office* it's the white-collar workplace. Additionally, as many critics of the sitcom have noted, in recent decades "the American (and British) sitcom has repeatedly centered on surrogate families, symbolising the fragmentary nature of the family in contemporary society" (Mills 44). Thus, when the genre is transplanted to the workplace, the characters often become a de facto family, indicative of the growing importance of co-worker relationships in post-industrial society.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ A great deal of writing on the sitcom genre identifies it as a source of commentary on contemporary social and cultural issues. Brett Mills argues that "the sitcom is a genre which has repeatedly responded to changes within the societies which produce it" and that, in the United States particularly, "the genre is the place audiences look to for popular social analysis" (45, 59). Gerard Jones writes "[t]hrough sitcoms we can trace the hopes and concerns of the majority of Americans over the past forty-five years" (6); and the stated goal of the anthology *Critiquing the Sitcom* is, editor Joanne Morreale states, to discover how sitcoms "express the ideological

Finally, *The Office* marries the videographic aesthetic with comedic purpose, much like home videos seen on *America's Funniest Home Videos* or on YouTube. While it is not the first or only television comedy to consciously mobilize that aesthetic, *The Office* is the most popular of those programs, and I would claim, has the most to say about its chosen aesthetic.⁷⁹

The Office, as most television viewers know, is an adaptation of the successful British program of the same name. Its central premise is that a documentary film crew has entered the Scranton, PA branch of Dunder-Mifflin, a small paper-supply company under constant threat from larger corporations such as Staples. With this conceit in mind, the show draws on a set of stylistic features that have become strongly identified with first person video.

In the episode “The Client,” idiot manager Michael Scott (Steve Carell) is interrupted while giving a “talking head” interview by a ringing phone on his desk. On the other end is Jan Levinson (Melora Hardin), his boss, with whom Michael recently had a romantic encounter. Jan is calling to discuss the encounter and quash any notions Michael might have of a blossoming relationship. At first, the camera stays back, in a common interview framing, keeping Michael in medium shot behind the desk. But as the conversation goes sour, the camera zooms in on Michael’s face, invading his space at an embarrassing personal moment. As the conversation worsens, Michael gestures towards the door, asking the camera operator to leave. When his request goes unheeded, Michael retreats underneath his desk while still protesting to Jan on the phone. The camera whirls around the side of the desk in order to record Michael cringing

tensions that mark particular social and historical moments” (xi). The 1970s debate over women in the workplace represented in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, or *Leave It to Beaver*’s idealized vision of the patriarchal 1950s, are two well known examples.

⁷⁹ Brett Mills mentions a number of English-language sitcoms from the past decade shot with the realist, documentary aesthetic (62). Those best known to American audiences would be *The Larry Sanders Show*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Parks and Recreation*, and, of course, *The Office*.

underneath, trying to both appease his would be lover and boss while shirking away from the lens of the camera. This entire sequence occurs in one long take.

Criticisms leveled at texts such as *America's Funniest Home Videos* or "David After Dentist" might similarly apply to this situation involving Michael. The camera operator goes beyond his/her task in interviewing Michael by violating Michael's consent to being recorded and ignoring his request to leave. The operator's insistent attempts to capture Michael's telephonic humiliation take on a voyeuristic and invasive tenor when he/she keeps Michael in frame as he attempts to escape underneath his desk. This voyeurism is not uncommon when it comes to depicting Michael's clandestine relationship with Jan; earlier in the episode the camera operator, ensconced in the backseat of a car, spied on the pair outside a restaurant where they engaged in an awkward kiss.

We find the sequence funny, of course, because of Michael's increasingly desperate attempts to both avoid the camera and rationalize the previous night's events to Jan. In some sense, it is a form of retributive karma, as he earlier in the episode boasted about the relationship. Moreover, we laugh at Michael because he is a character of fun, repeatedly shown to be ineffectual and insensitive while also completely blind to his shortcomings. He is a prime example of the contemporary comic type of the idiot boss, a figure that offers modern white-collar workers an outlet for their suspicions that their own bosses are overpaid malingerers.

The combination of voyeuristic aggression directed at a figure of authority in a comic context recalls Sigmund Freud's analysis of the structure of the joke. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud sets out to explain how joking works and articulate its social and psychological purposes. He makes a distinction between "innocent" and "tendentious" jokes, with the latter being jokes "that have a purpose [and thus] run the risk of meeting with

people who do not want to listen to them” (107). In other words, tendentious jokes make an argument or feature an imbedded critique, and bear their label because some people may disagree with the point made. Within that category, Freud furthermore subdivides into hostile and obscene jokes. Hostile jokes are the category I am concerned with, as they include those “serving the purpose of aggressiveness, *satire*, or defence” (115, *emph. mine*). As a satire of corporate culture, *The Office* can be understood in these Freudian terms.

The use of the conjunction “or” rather than “and” may mislead, as Freud argues that aggression is central to the tendentious joke: “[g]enerally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke’s aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled” (118). In other words, the three necessary parties are the teller of the joke, the person who hears it, and the butt of the joke, at whom the teller aims his hostile attitude. Given their ability to express sublimated hostility in verbal, rather than physical, form, “tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure” (125). Tendentious jokes are useful for expressing otherwise inadmissible feelings of hostility towards authority figures – like, for example, workplace managers and bosses. In *The Office*, the comic structure relates the videographic aesthetic to Freud’s theory of the tendentious joke.

The Office engages with different modes of voyeurism that address the audience in different ways, inviting them into its diegesis and constructing them as both viewers and participants, and even conspirators, in events. The videographic aesthetic is central to that project because of the way it aligns audience members with certain characters, namely reluctant

drones Jim Halpert (John Krasinski) and Pam Beesley (Jenna Fischer). One usually plays the role of joke teller, with the camera crew and audience as the hearer, while Michael and his goonish assistant Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson), who occupy the hierarchal positions in the office, the subjects of the jokes. *The Office* uses a videographic aesthetic because of its association with realism, suturing the audience into its position and making them complicit in the tendentious jokes.

Sympathy is elicited for Jim and Pam by having their relationship follow the formula of the romantic comedy. While there is no “meet cute” to introduce their pairing, the characters have an easygoing friendship and obvious sexual tension during the first few seasons of the show. Standing in the way of their relationship are a number of surmountable obstacles and misunderstandings, much like a typical romantic comedy: Pam’s boorish fiancé Roy, whom she obviously doesn’t love; the suspicions of their co-workers; Jim’s reticence to let his feelings known; his short-lived romances with other women, etc. Even in later seasons, after the characters begin dating, more stumbling blocks are thrown up: in season five, for example, Pam briefly moves to New York to take graphic design classes, and the distance is portrayed as a serious threat to their relationship, despite the fact that the drive from Scranton, PA to New York is less than three hours. The ultimate and predictable marriage of the pair gives viewers a standard romantic story arc to follow and characters to sympathize with: a formula they know well and which triggers the anticipation of a happy resolution.

The camerawork reinforces our conventionalized sympathetic response to Jim and Pam. Take the intimate conversation between Jim and Pam from late in the episode “The Client,” which is filmed in a typical shot-reverse shot, with effort made to minimize the movement of the camera. The show’s typical hand held camera work and its bobbing, continual movement,

intimates a fluidity that can move through and invade any part of the office at any time, resulting in the voyeuristic aggression of the scene with Michael discussed above. The steadiness of the frame during Jim and Pam's conversation indicates a desire to downplay that voyeuristic, invasive camera. The only noticeable movement is an occasional small zoom, which still frames the speaker's face and captures the nuance of the actors' performances and their reactions to the flirtation. Other formal elements also minimize our awareness of the videographic aesthetic: a standard shot-reverse shot editing structure, and a minimization of background noise on the soundtrack – a clear sign of audio mixing. The scene uses classical style, which is less obtrusive than that of the rest of the show, and serves to frame Jim and Pam in a non-voyeuristic, comparatively uninvasive manner.

While Jim and Pam are situated within conventional generic and stylistic terms, normalizing their heterosexual romance and aligning the audience with their subject position, Michael and Dwight's romantic misadventures are the subjects of humor and framed in a voyeuristic mode, emphasizing the ubiquity of the handheld camera and its invasive power. In "Email Surveillance," the camera takes an active part in Pam's discovery of Dwight and Angela's relationship. After having her suspicions aroused, Pam asks the camera during one of the interview segments, "if you guys see anything..." to let her know. In addressing the camera operators, who are hidden behind the lens, she appears to call us, the viewers, into her scheme as well. Later, the camera approaches Pam and, through movement and zooming, "ducks" and "points" with its gaze, at first getting her attention and then revealing Dwight eating a candy bar Angela purchased earlier. The viewer becomes aligned with Pam at Dwight and Angela's expense here, explicitly sharing her goals and finding humor in the idea that uptight Angela and obnoxious Dwight could sustain a romance. The viewer's suspicions are confirmed along with

Pam's.⁸⁰ It is almost as though “we,” through the camera, get to tell the joke to Pam, pointing to Dwight with “our” gaze, and observing her delight when her hunch is confirmed.

At first, the interviews might appear to interrupt the videographic aesthetic, but they actually bear a close resemblance to many home videos: consider that “David After Dentist,” for example, has David framed frontally in medium close-up, speaking directly into the camera, much like the talking heads of *The Office*. Many of us have experienced being recorded in such a manner on our own family videos. Furthermore, these segments are not the only moments where characters on the show directly engage the audience. They often wink to and react for the camera, acknowledging its presence and inviting the audience into the diegesis. This lends to a feeling of conspiring with the characters, like being one of the members of *The Office* staff, and might perhaps explain why the show has such a dedicated following. The “talking head” interviews emphasize the viewers’ connection with particular characters. Dwight and Michael, for example, are amusing in those moments because they perform for the camera, which highlights the distance between their egos and their behavior. In “Email Surveillance,” for example, Michael discusses his detachment from his co-workers, which he attributes to “intimidation” and concludes he must become “approachabler.” This is intercut with shots where he makes a nuisance of himself. Here, the joke circuit is between the audience and the camera, which “tells” us the joke to the degree that it shows the disconnection between Michael’s words and his actions.

⁸⁰ In some ways, this subplot is structured in the same way as some detective films, with the spectator and narrator in the same position of limited knowledge, uncovering the solution simultaneously. The difference here, of course, is that unlike the classical film where we assume a position of abstract omnipresence with the narrating camera, we are instead aligned with a gaze that is situated in diegetic space and recognized as such by the characters.

We are sutured into the diegesis through the Freudian joke structure of the show and its use of videographic conventions. This is further aided by the documentary crew's seeming incorporeality. Despite the many references to the camera and its presence in *The Office*, the crew seems to have no physical presence. Their voices are never heard, nor are there ever any clear indications of their equipment. When Michael attempts to hide from the camera beneath his desk, the scene is carefully lit to prevent a prominent shadow from the cameraperson. This invisibility is also apparent at the episode's end, when Jim and Michael share a look of exasperation in typical shot-reverse shot, except that the camera operator who should be present in each shot, recording the other one, is nowhere to be seen.

Given the structure of sympathy, joking, and audience suturing found in the program, the faux documentary aspect of *The Office* functions as an excuse for the show to use a style coded as realism. That style makes the audience complicit in its voyeuristic peeking into the various relationships in the workplace, and the aggressive joking that occurs as a result. Those characters who we identify with and who are the joke making subjects, namely Jim and Pam, are the protagonists of a conventional narrative often presented in a classically illusionist style that downplays the camera's voyeurism. Meanwhile Michael and Dwight, both of whom are the objects of much of the show's humor, conduct their personal relationships under the gaze of an obvious and intrusive camera that highlights the use of the videographic aesthetic. It would appear that *The Office*, by aligning the audience with a voyeuristic camera that exposes the foibles and awkward romances of a set of comic characters, makes them complicit in a form of aggressive comic cruelty that, through a self-consciously mobilized aesthetic, recalls criticisms posed at actual, non-fictional videos on television and the internet. Our laughs should be accompanied by a degree of uncomfortable recognition of our complicity.

This lesson is complicated by the moments where we do, however, feel some sympathy for characters like Michael. I already mentioned a brief sequence that links Michael and Jim in shot-reverse shot and in mutual, empathetic frustration. Giving Michael the chance to express his vulnerable emotional state on camera transforms him from someone who is solely the object of jokes to a well-rounded and even sympathetic character. At the end of “Email Surveillance” Michael crashes a party thrown by Jim and is greeted with awkward silence, compounded by his insistence on performing karaoke. After a painful moment where he cannot find a partner for a duet, Jim reluctantly joins him and defuses the discomfort. Although Michael is the cause of many of the show's uncomfortable situations, he is still sympathetically portrayed, and the fact that Jim, a character we are encouraged to identify with, is willing to forgive his faults is significant.

On the one hand, engendering sympathy for characters like Michael, who are the objects of jokes, seems to be an attempt at disavowing the equation of illusionism and sympathy on one hand, and videographic realism and cruelty on the other. What I would argue instead, however, is that it offers an object lesson in ethics for an aesthetic that dominates more and more of our visual culture and which, because of its association with “realism,” elicits less critical engagement from viewers and consumers. Our dialectical response of cruel laughter and uncomfortable sympathy with Michael highlights an important ethical responsibility we have to drugged children and other subjects of endless YouTube home videos. While we might laugh at their misfortune and embarrassing behavior, it is paramount that we continue to see them as worthy of, and engendering, our sympathy. Disregard for home video subjects is not uncommon on the internet (for an illustrative example, just take a look at the comments section of just about any YouTube clip), and by mobilizing similar stylistic conventions as home videos, *The Office*

reminds us that moving image aesthetics are not without ethical implications that must be recognized and contended with.

If we maintain a sympathetic eye towards the subjects of home videos, we avoid replicating the position of authority at which, Freud reminds us, we aim our most hostile joking. In sharing the perspective of the person behind the lens, the viewer is situated in a position of power vis-à-vis the subject recorded. They, after all, are subjected to our framing gaze, and we share in the camera operator's power to depict them as we desire.⁸¹ Rather than become authoritarians with jokes directed at us, by recognizing our complicity with the camera's gaze – especially one that masquerades as reality – we can at least disavow some of the power granted us, and place our recorded subjects on more level ground.

In “David After Dentist” the befuddled child asks at one point, “is this real life?” At the moment, for him, it undoubtedly is; he actually experienced the events that his father cannily recorded and turned into a representation that would become an Internet meme. On the other hand, our experience of his disorientation is not; it is shaped by a particular perspective, regardless of the realistic immediacy of its long take, synchronous sound, or shaky camera movement. David, luckily, had a father there to reassure him and to enable us to empathize with him while laughing. Critiques that focused on DeVore were somewhat misguided in choosing him as the person through which to condemn YouTube videos and their potential for exploitative comic cruelty. *The Office*, by demonstrating how viewers can both laugh at and sympathize with the targets of our laughter, amends Freud's theory of the joke by balancing it with an appropriate dose of sympathy for those who are captured in the camera's gaze and subjected to its controlling representation. Home video, when simultaneously mobilized as “real” and “comic,” calls upon

⁸¹ Obviously this idea is highly reliant on Laura Mulvey's observations in “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema.”

us to abandon our critical faculties and representational responsibilities, though some exemplary texts – such as “David After Dentist” and *The Office* - remind us of them.

What videos like “David After Dentist” and other YouTube comic sensations provide us with are examples through which we can see the continuing importance of the home mode as a site where the borders between publicity and privacy are contested. If home movies and home videos have always been about delineating the private (and by extension the public), then there has always been an ethical imperative associated with them. But there is still one objection to address: Michelle Citron’s criticism of *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, which now feels prescient with the increased monetization of amateur video content in the age of YouTube. Television programs like *America’s Funniest Home Videos* demonstrate some of the problems of home video publicity in a neoliberal society, enabling the objectification and monetization of memory. This process eliminates the subjective dimension of the home mode, reducing it to its exchange value. And although “David After Dentist” provides us with an ethical model for sympathetic response to comic cruelty, David DeVore has attempted to monetize the video, for example, by selling t-shirts on his website. Of course, YouTube transformed its business model in the period since “David After Dentist” was first uploaded, including advertising both on the site and imbedded in videos themselves. Now watching an ostensibly “free” video comes with a price. Corporate media has begun profiting off the public dimension of digital home videos, perhaps eradicating the last vestige of privacy those images bore.

Is this what home video has accomplished, then – the transformation of private memory and experience into more fodder for a society that has become rapacious for images and indifferent to their source and quality? I hope this dissertation, while suggesting that home video has had such an effect, has also staved off some of that quasi-Frankfurt despondency. Close

consideration suggests, as with most of our experiences with media practice, the truth is better apprehended at a more granular level. It is true that texts like *America's Funniest Home Videos* and the commercialization of YouTube threaten to reduce home video to the pure exchange value into which the neoliberal public sphere aims to transform everything. However, there is still the possibility for opposition and negotiation, as modeled by the texts analyzed in this dissertation.

Michel de Certeau has analyzed the interactions between institutions and individuals in terms of strategies and tactics. Institutions use strategies to shape the social (the public sphere), while individuals utilize tactics to negotiate with those strategies and resist their effects. If major media organizations like YouTube have begun modeling and instituting strategies that are anathema to the private interest in home videos, there are still tactics that can be used to resist those strategies of social enforcement.

Films like *Rachel Getting Married* remind us that despite the power home videos have to represent our pasts in realistic terms, they do not fulfill the narrative expectations of audiences and thus, their appeal may ultimately be limited. *51 Birch Street* shows the requirements necessary to form a narrative from home videos depends on access to specialized knowledge, which almost no home video, regardless of how sophisticated, can fully provide. *Family Viewing* recognizes how pervasive the strategies used by patriarchal society can be, but still holds out hope for individual resistance; while *Ararat* models a way for individual video production to resist the strategies of mass media productions. And *sex, lies, and videotape* prompts us to remember that, despite the seductive power of the videographic, the filmic remains the frame of reference for our experience of the media. Perhaps it is most important to pay close attention to home movies and home videos themselves, for by doing so we can recapture some

sensation of the individual perspective behind the camera and resist the totalizing impulses that the digital may be enforcing on us.

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