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Emotional Memory Forever: The Cinematography of Paul Ewing

Andrew Ewing

Abstract

Over a period of ten years Paul Ewing documented the life of his family on film – initially using Super 8 film and then converting to VHS with the advent of the new technology. Through the lens of home movies, autoethnography and memory I discuss his approach to amateur image making and its lasting legacy.

Home movies have been the driving force behind a number of autobiographical documentaries such as *Tarnation*, *Video Fool for Love* and *Stories We Tell*. Here I take an auto ethnographical look at the films my own father made over a ten year period, prior to my parents divorce, and examine their impact on my own life and look to see if there is any value to them outside of my own personal investment.

"Autoethnography is predicated on the ability to invite readers into the lived experience of the presumed "Other" and to experience it viscerally" (Boylorn and Orbe 15). It is a research method that connects "the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political" (Ellis xix). Autoethnography involves the turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (Denzin 227). Autoethnographers use their personal experience as primary data reflexively to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions.

Paul Francis Ewing was born in 1947 in Redhill in the United Kingdom. Inez Anne Taveira was born eight years previously in another part of the world entirely, Taiping in Malaysia or Malaya as it was known then. She immigrated to the UK when she was 21 to study acting and later teaching. She married Paul in 1970 and by 1976 they had two children – my brother Brendan and myself. Around 1978 Paul, or Dad, started to film the family. He wanted to "capture the moment. Like writing a diary".

Patricia Zimmerman writes, "Amateur film represents psychic tracings of diaries and dreams. The family, dreams, and nightmares create new hybrids, new discourses" (276). In the beginning of the last century Pierre Janet already noted that: "certain happenings ... leave indelible and distressing memories – memories to which the sufferer continually returns, and by which he is tormented by day and by night."

Janet, postulated that intense emotional reactions make events traumatic by interfering with the integration of the experience into existing memory schemes. Intense emotions, Janet thought, cause memories of particular events to be dissociated from consciousness, and to be stored, instead, as visceral sensations (anxiety and panic), or as visual images (nightmares and flashbacks). Schachtel defined it as: "Memory as a function of the living personality can be understood as a capacity for the organization and reconstruction of past experiences and impressions in the service of present needs, fears, and interests" (284).

The images captured by Paul Ewing are part of both my consciousness and unconsciousness. I have revisited them on numerous occasions for varying reasons. Amateur film's otherness requires analysis of active relationships between maker and subject (Zimmerman 277). When I questioned Paul in regards to this research, he suggested that screening the films was very important to him. "Mum and I enjoyed them and then later the grand parents. Also you and Bren." I found it more than interesting that he placed my brother and myself last in the list of those who enjoyed the screenings. As a student of film I have looked for the stories within these images, looking to understand whom the man behind the lens was: potentially who the men behind the lenses have been. Who was the man from my/our memories, who was the boy, who were the boys who became the man/men we are?

Van der Kolk and Fisler suggest that "dissociation refers to a compartmentalization of experience: elements of the experience are not integrated into a unitary whole, but are stored in memory as isolated fragments consisting of sensory perceptions or affective states" (510). Karen L. Ishizuka insists, "Within home movies ... lie hidden histories of the world." In this case, perhaps only hidden histories of myself. Given a consistent dissociative reaction to stressful situations my honest agenda in watching and re-watching my father's home cinema may indeed be to attempt to decode what Janet claimed people experience when intense emotions, memories cannot be transformed into a neutral narrative: a person is "unable to make the recital which we call narrative memory, and yet he remains confronted by the difficult situation" (660). This results in a phobia of memory that prevents the integration of traumatic events and splits off the traumatic memories from ordinary consciousness. Piaget claimed that dissociation occurs when an active failure of semantic memory leads to the organization of memory on somatosensory or iconic levels (201). It cannot be coincidence that these descriptors sound familiar to any student or practitioner of cinema. We, the automaton: a moving mechanical device made in imitation of a human being.

"The limbic system is thought to be the part of the central nervous system that maintains and guides the emotions and behavior necessary for self-preservation and survival of the species, and that is critically involved in the storage and retrieval of memory" (Van der Kolk 10). Of all areas in the central nervous system, the amygdala is most clearly implicated in the evaluation of the emotional meaning of incoming stimuli. It is thought to integrate internal representations of the external world in the form of memory images with emotional experiences associated with those memories (Calvin). In a series of experiments, J LeDoux utilized repeated electrical stimulation of the amygdala to produce conditioned fear responses. He found that cortical lesions prevent their extinction. This led him to conclude that, once formed, the subcortical traces of the conditioned fear response are indelible, and that "emotional memory may be forever".

Paul filmed us for approximately eight years. First using the Super 8 format and later straight onto VHS using a cumbersome, oversized camera that fed into a VHS deck carried over the shoulder in a plastic satchel. Zimmerman suggests that home movies graph the contradictions between the realities of family life bounded by class, race, and gender expectations and the fantasies of the nuclear family, and they also reveal the unfinished production of obedient subjects and histories (278). They create expectations that wrestle with the fragile nature of family.

Paul wasn't the only "cinematographer" in the family. The camera was often passed to Inez so that Paul's presence in family occasions could be authenticated. Eventually both Brendan and myself were allowed moments of seeing the world through the black and white view finders. Perhaps those early cinematographic moments started me on the path to today. The picture as a model of reality. The "real" and the "performed" act is twofold in the home movie. Our many different roles exemplify the separation and interrelation of our public and private lives. The act of mimesis seems to signify "I exist" or, rather, "I represent myself here for immortality." This imitation of ourselves is an authentic "copy" of the original, since actor and role are identical (Forgacs 52). Identical yet problematic: dissociated?

Merilee Bennett's 1987 film, *A Song of Air*, is a compilation film composed of home movies shot by Merilee's father, Reverend Arnold Lucas Bennett, who regularly filmed his family with a Paillard Bolex 16mm camera between 1956 and 1983.

I saw *A Song of Air* as an undergraduate and it has never left me. It did not occur to me until years later to work with my own family's filmic archive but Bennett's work is undoubtedly a key influence. The film invites two levels of reading: first, the level of the home movies made by the father; second, the analysis made by Merilee of her father's home movies through her own reediting of the images and her omnipresent commentary in the form of a letter addressed to her father (Odin 256).

No other types of films evidence as much direct address as the home movie. The family filmmaker's camera functions first as a go-between and only secondly as a recording instrument. To film is to take part in a collective game in the family domain.

These familial interactions are not always peaceful. In a personal letter, Merilee Bennett recounts one of these conflicts. "The shot of him [my father] talking directly into the camera with a tree and blue sky behind him was shot by me when I was 12 years old and he is actually telling me to stop, that it was enough now. I remember holding my finger on that button knowing that he couldn't get really mad at me because I would have it on film, so he had to keep smiling even though he was getting cross." Merilee reclaims her identity through editing, imposing her own order on her father's films. The father, "like an omnipotent God," uses cinema to mold his family.

Paul Ewing may have been doing the same – he was the only one aware of how fractured the family, his family, our family, my family actually was.

In her autobiography *The Words to Say It*, Marie Cardinal explains to her psychoanalyst that after clinical treatment she had the strength to undertake a search for the origin of her trauma. I had a similar experience in that I was encouraged by a therapist to ask my father about the reasons behind his infidelity and what he felt were the grounds for his divorce. I had for many years believed it was because of me, that I had disappointed him as a son. Cardinal remembered her father filmed her pissing in the forest. Conscious that her urination has not only been watched, but also filmed, she felt traumatized and thought, "I want to hurt him. I want to kill him! (151)" Shooting a home movie does not always have such dramatic consequences, but it always carries a risk for the subjects filmed, especially children. Parents are not aware of the psychic consequences of a seemingly harmless act.

Paul Ewing filmed my brother and I in the bath. I was using the toilet as the filming started and jumped, laughing into the tub with my brother. There is nothing suspect in this description. As a father myself I can understand the desire to film all aspects of my child's life. At last count I have approximately thirty thousand digital photos and videos of my five year old son and the numbers are rising for his one year old sister. As Paul films us, my brother and I, playing with action figures and acting up for the camera, I laugh at my father. Some days later we were assembled to watch Paul's latest film. The family convened in the living room, along with our maid Yolanda. When the image came on screen, it seemed to slow down. All I saw was my bottom and then as I entered the bath, my penis. And I saw it being seen by Yolanda. I was devastated, ashamed and furious at my father for showing this private moment. I ran off in tears.

Unlike traditional cinematographic projection, to watch a home movie is to be involved in a "performance." Boris Eikhenbaum proposed the notion of "interior language": "The process of interior discourse resides in the mind of the spectator." This interior language can be understood without referring to a context because it is located in the Subject. With the home movie, the context resides in the experience of the Subject. This model explains how completely banal images can refer to representations far removed from what is represented. Contrary to the generally euphoric collective experience, this process of returning to the self often conjures painful memories.

One image, of Inez, my mother, comes up in my mind a lot. She stares into the camera as my Father films her. She appears to be engaged in a non verbal conversation with him, with the camera. She doesn't smile but looks ready to resign, the request to stop filming that is present in so many other instances of her in Paul's films is absent – it seems to suggest there is no point in her asking. Shortly after the date stamped onto the video image, she revealed to my brother and myself that Paul had been having an affair. "Your father does not love us anymore". In therapy I have explored both moments – the memory and the video taped image. Something in my mother's gaze suggests the break, the end of the illusion Paul had crafted both on film and video, and in life.

Pierre Bourdieu, discussing family photography, argued that nothing could be filmed outside of what must be filmed. The same ritual ceremonies (marriage, birth, family meals, gift-giving), the same daily scenes (a baby in his mother's arms, a baby having a bath), the same vacation sequences (playtime on the beach, walks in the forest) appear across most home movies. Discussing "common things," Georges Perec contended the difficulty is "to free these images from the straitjacket in which they are trapped, to make them produce meaning and speak about what they are and what we are." Home movies are precisely "common things." Erving Goffman terms the process of "shifting of frame." A film of minor importance can suddenly become a fabulous document when the historical context of reading changes. Every old home movie that operates within a different spatial, cultural, ethnic, or social framework will benefit from de-framed readings. Even if these images were not documents and were stereotypical home movies, they become precious because they look new. Hungarian filmmaker Péter Forgács "creates masterful reflections on the notion of the document itself: why one makes films; the language of the images and language itself; and the possibilities that the image holds for cognition" (Odin 266). The cinematography of Paul Ewing remains a source of possibilities.

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