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The Domestication of Moving Image Technologies and Media Practices in Familial Contexts. An Anthropological Study.

PhD thesis

Abstract

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Keywords: home movie/video, private film, home movie collection, archive, media practices, media domestication, media genealogy, participative culture, intermediality, remediation, social representation, family history, micro historiography, contextual analysis.

Summary

Private film makers continue the line of the ancient cultural activity of observation, recording and contemplation: "home movies, also known as amateur films or private films are the continuation of the tradition of the bourgeois family portrait gallery, in former times painted, and from the last century recorded on photographs" (Forgács 1995. 109–111). This quotation is suitable for the introduction of the present dissertation's topic from several points of view. Péter Forgács in his essayistic writing formulated the idea, which had become the cornerstone of contemporary theories of media practices and media culture: new media build on older ones, that is to say, they function as a kind of media history archive and carry in themselves their own genealogy. In this conceptual framework picture usage at the beginning of the 20th century is connected to picture usage at the beginning of the 21st century: since the superimposition of media is not a new phenomenon, it offers a research direction and theoretical framework in which picture-making practices that are far from each other in time can be interpreted in their historicity. However, the term *private film*, gradually becoming out-dated, draws attention on the changing demands of filmmakers towards pictures in the new media age, and the social conventions and frameworks of media practices.

The author of this paper has experienced this change herself during fieldwork and research: during her research for her BA thesis defended in 2003 she analysed the video recordings of a family, stored on VHS tapes, in the context of "their home", namely a film collection that can be regarded as a population of objects that was produced and viewed in a close family circle and in a well-defined space (family home). While private filmmaking once signified economic status and the privilege of technical knowledge, furthermore, objects that could be stored in boxes and later on VHS tapes, or could be offered as gifts and projected at special occasions, nowadays anyone can become a filmmaker with a camera or telephone at hand. During her latest, 2011 research, the author could analyse

(also) situations in which family members stored their digital video recordings on different media, and made them public on different web interfaces, accompanied by photographs and texts. Thus, the changed contexts of everyday filmmaking/video watching and the new constellations of coexistence with media and technologies could both be observed.

In the initial phase of the research it seemed that the process of popularization of moving images, the social conventions and cultural functions of their usage had already been accounted for. However, the changed media age puts these questions on the agenda again, one might as well say that the researcher is in the lucky position in which he/she can observe the characteristics of changing media usage, and the dynamics of everyday life and technologies. In the new media age questions relating to the anthropological aspects of the usage of moving images become relevant again. How can communication attained through private filmmaking be described? Who are the people that make up the filmmaking community, and what kind of role distribution takes place during filming? What are the things that "must" be filmed? What kinds of expectations are there regarding the contents and rendering of images? What happens with the recordings after they are made? What kind of technicization characterizes communities that make films? In addition, how do generations socialised on "old media" switch to a new kind of practice, and how does that differ from the practices of others growing up in a different media age? How can the archiving tendency of the new media age be connected to the archiving urge that can generally be found in moving images (and in private films as well)¹ and with the endeavours to record and conserve time? Along the line of such questions one can outline the logic of the usage of moving images established in everyday thinking, and according to the given scale (the selected communities) in a given time period.

It is challenging to study the changes of the private usage of moving images in another respect, too: the contemporary discourses of media history and theory emphasize that, contrarily to technical determinism, media history and theory have been shaped by social needs. In this premise the history of technology and media cannot be separated from social history. Researchers tackling historical and theoretical questions, are in fact social historians, and in the same time anthropologists of media practices also explore a certain knowledge

¹ Mary Ann Doane claims that the moving image appeared in an era characterized by a "strong archiving desire". Films fulfilled the desire of recording and archiving the contingent, the time of history. (Doane 2002. 206-232).

connected to media history(ies) and theory(ies). The author of this dissertation wishes to follow the latter line of inquiry and examine what kind of media histories are outlined and what kind of media theories are revealed by everyday practices as compared to the big media histories and theories. The reason for which historicity is emphasized here is because private films are not only embedded in the life of the individual, but also in the time of everyday life, in the history of representational forms and in macro contexts. Thus, even a research examining present day filming habits will accomplish only a snapshot and will become a historical document.

The analysis of moving images in symbiosis with their environment and time has a twofold perspective in the present paper. It is challenging to examine what can be deciphered from private films, namely from the practice of mediatisation of everyday life, about those life-worlds that become observable on these films and through these films. Many generations have grown up with camera lenses directed towards them, and, from period to period, various amounts of photographic and film materials got accumulated throughout their lives. These private photographs and films have reflected/influenced lifestyles, relationships, the culture of remembrance, identity, and material and visual culture. In some cases it is the national, in others the individual or the group identity that is rendered on these visual representations. In close connection to this, I am also interested in what kind of meanings of the moving image as artefact are developed.

Moving images can find their place and become embedded in the fabric of everyday life in different forms that is to stay that the social life of films can evolve in different ways depending on their contexts. A group of trippers, a village, a class or work community, an informal community can occasionally become a mnemonic community, in which visual memorabilia may be forgotten, exhausted in a one-off watching, or may be transferred to other private or official archives. The family is a filmmaking and film consuming community that preserves and archives documents, objects and visual products belonging to it. Under the joint influence of all these factors I had decided to examine all the problems raised on the ways in which families use moving images.

The family is a social unit, a community within which one can examine the ways private filming becomes embedded in life-worlds and produces its effects on them. In this context the attitudes towards filming and the generational differences can be studied, and one can compare the adaptation of family members socialised on different media to the new media age. At the same time, the child's arrival into the family and becoming a parent, an event I consider to be also a pictorial turn, is also connected to family life and to the world of the "home". Home movies from different time periods have convinced me of the interlocking of this change in the family life with the disposition for taking photographs.

After the mapping of research perspectives, the **second chapter** surveys the private film's social and research history, after which it tries to place private filmmaking into theoretical frameworks that allow the examination of the social embedding and social representations of these phenomena.

I reflect on the associational fields of the terms *amateur film*, *home movie* and *private film* in a separate subchapter. I use the *amateur* attribute as a collective term, as well as to differentiate cases that can be characterised by a so-called, quasi institutionalisation: cases when filmmaking is connected to film clubs. Pursuant to this, the terms *home movie* and *private film* constitute subcategories, and do not refer so much to the textual characteristics as to the contexts of their production and usage, and the social attitudes related to them.

The chapter entitled *The social history of the home movie/video* is an overview of the changing status of the home mode. At the beginning of the 20th century home movie production was a marginalized phenomenon: private, therefore socially not remarkable, and amateur, therefore not professional, and aesthetically irrelevant. The social and historical significance of the amateur film and video production was acknowledged due to events such as the assassination of J. F. Kennedy in 1963, recorded with an amateur cine camera or the beating of Rodney King recorded with an amateur video camera. The latter proved to be paradigmatic, and became the emblem of the crisis of the documentary and visual representation in general. The status of the home mode was influenced by the shifting paradigms of historiography as well: with the collapse of the "grand narratives" the attention given to the alternative, localised histories and everyday life became intensified. The status of home movies changed consequently, home movie archives were established. By the year 2000 home movies were theorised and popularized as historical documents. The growing theoretical literature on the subject might be regarded as an effect of the new media age.

While at the beginning of the 20th century home movies were marginalized, the post-media age is characterized by the increasing mediation of the everyday.

The subchapter entitled *The home movie/video as the subject of social studies* starts with the summary of the statements of the anthropology of visual communication. When the first anthropological analyses of home photos and movies appeared, the examination of representations was dominated by constructivist, semiotic approaches which concentrated on images as systems of symbols, as artefacts. In comparison, the investigators of visual communication distinguished representation from its social use, and examined its semiotic aspects: what are the symbolic systems, what are the meanings that regulate the formation and interpretation of representations?

Richard Chalfen is less interested in the pictures themselves, much rather in the communication achieved by them, and its pattern created in the social space of the *home*, which he calls "home mode pictorial communication" (Chalfen 1987. 6–9). He analyses this type of communication by the methods of the ethnography of speaking. The French theoretician of home movies, Roger Odin, also applies Dell Hymes's communication theory, but he is not so much interested in communication forms within the family, but in the types of communication with moving images. The approaches of Chalfen and Odin identify the home movie with its functions, implying that cultural meanings are essential ingredients of this form of communication. The analysis of the context of communication remains in the background, the medial differences are blurred: Chalfen for example places home movies, snapshots and tourist photos next to each other in order to present home visual communication.

Although it may seem that Hymes's pattern can be applied to social communication in general, it implies nevertheless the metaphor of the world as a text. The criticism of the visual culture reminds us that: "visual culture is a tactic with which to study the genealogy, definition and functions of postmodern everyday life from the point of view of the consumer, rather than the producer. The disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism is best imagined and understood visually, just as the nineteenth century was classically represented in the newspaper and the novel" (Mirzoeff 1999. 3).

The practice of home filmmaking is also structured by individual motivations, while at the same time the family community filters and integrates, in accordance with its own value preferences, the history of the conventions of home filmmaking, thus they subordinate their practices to functions which belong to other family communities as well, regardless of environment and class (Moran 2002. 56). Filmmaking is not merely a technological means used in a private context in communicative situations by the members of a 'speech community' (Hymes 1967); instead, this practice must be rethought as a mutual effect of technological, social, and cultural determinations, as a "liminal space in which practitioners may explore and negotiate the competing demands of their public, communal and private, personal identities" (Moran 2002. 60).

Several attempts have been made to grasp the passage to the age of social media by the description of the functions of the new media. According to this, the function of mediated personal memory objects (also) changes in the new culture: the primacy of memory preservation and storage is taken over by the function of making contacts and identity construction,² the practice of preservation and memory alternates and competes with the immediate sharing of experiences, as a performative mode.

I argue that, compared to the video practices of young generations preferred by new media research, home movies offer a field of research where one may even study questions of media history, since the habitus of home movies has a documented, theorised history, while at the same time the change can also be sensed in the practice of contemporary movie making families: they grew up on "old media", in contrast with the young generation socialised on new media. Paraphrasing James Moran, the habitus of the home movie is a discourse which also mediates the social representation of permanently changing media. From this point of view, home movies become the historical sources of social media, of participative culture. This source type then allows the analysis of everyday life experienced within community frameworks, as it increasingly becomes an object of mediation, while at the same time also offers the opportunity to research the dissemination of moving images.

Taking the previous propositions as a starting-point, in the third chapter I elaborate viewpoints which are perceptive to the visual experiences of everyday life and to the patterns of visual knowledge. I refer to Hans Belting's anthropology of images which is based on the distinction between image and medium. If images are made visible and transmitted to the

 $^{^{2}}$ In her book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (2007) José van Dijck analyses this transition, the shift of communication functions, starting from the example of three old media: the diary, the home photo, and the home film.

social space by media, it is necessary to examine how film functions as a medium in the case of home movies/videos. I revise the concept of medium in order to interpret the behavior of the medially acting subject, as well as the problem of medial perception and mediation across time.

The subchapter entitled *In and out of context: on the evidentiary status of home movies/videos* – through analyzing anthropological texts – discusses what roles can be assigned by the different theories/analyses to context in defining home movies, to what extent is this an inherent part of the notion of 'home movie'. It also presents relevant cases/contexts. The contextual, cultural analyses perceive that the matter of the two types of media does not influence the possibilities of representation as much as their usage and function does. Chalfen distinguishes two basic types of contexts of home visual media: the private and the public, these contexts also represent the two paradigms of the evidentiary status and production of meaning, in the metaphorical language of the author the "what did they look like" (how these people appear) and the "how they looked at" paradigm (Chalfen 2002. 142). Consequently Chalfen's metaphorically interpreted *home* adjective is adequate to describe not only those contexts which interpret pictures as documents but it can also imply the naïve style of the pictures.

The starting point of the subchapter entitled *Narrative and representation in home movies/videos* is the question: "when is a home movie/video?", which implies that private films should be regarded less a thing than an experience. This approach was formulated through different terminologies and analysed through diverse methods. According to the phenomenological model our engagement with the cinematic image is structured by existential knowledge and the forms of attention (Sobchack 1999). On the other hand, the researchers of the visual communication in the 'home mode', draw attention to the narratives and discourses in which the experience of the home movie viewer is occasionally externalized.

In this summary I arrived to the following conclusions: the forms of knowledge of the viewer are, on the one hand, the *narratives* or realms of implication, which incorporate the experiences connected to the theme of the picture into meaningful frameworks, but are not necessarily presented in a discursive form, and, on the other hand, the texts, *discourses*, which are formulated, textualized in a certain medium in the process of the viewing. In the

contexts in which the pictures are used as evidence or for the purpose of memory, the information carried by the picture becomes not only medially articulated but is also characterized by the *externality* of the creation of meaning. In this case visual representation is nothing else but *real pictorial illocution*, in which the usage of the picture is an act in itself, may it be remembrance or proof.

In the subchapter *Home movies/videos as the nomads of media history* I map out the viewpoints applied by contemporary approaches to the historicity of media. Media genealogy has elaborated an interpretative model for grasping the processes of media history. The genealogy of the increasingly familiar (home) movie can also be relevant in theorizing the dissemination and the chameleon-like aspect of media. The theory of remediation also models the interdependence of media within the framework of communication theory. Remediation can be relevant from the viewpoint of home movies/videos especially when it reflects on the relation between media and reality: all mediation is real (not a simulation) and the end-products are real as artifacts. We can also examine remediation as a social phenomenon with historically changing aspects (see media genealogy). A medium can mediate not only images and other media, but – as a part of reality – it also mediates certain norms and decisions made and written into its material by other people.

If we focus on the meanings of the moving image within the space and reality of home, the domestication of objects and technologies can also be relevant. While social representation examines the everyday variants of certain concepts in a more theoretical manner, the researchers of media domestication study the way in which different information and communication technologies become part of households: why family members choose a certain technology, how they harmonize it with their everyday environment and habits and what kind of power structures, task distributions and rites appear as a consequence.

Looking at the various research directions presented above I consider media genealogy to be a theoretical framework which can hold together the collected data and films. The naïve theories of media, domestication, remediation, intermediality and convergence are concepts and at the same time media historical and social perspectives which can further refine the reflection on the practice of home movie making.

The purpose of the fourth chapter entitled From the appearance of amateur technologies to the emergence of media practices is an overview of the history of technologies designed for amateur or home use. With this chapter I do not intend to practice factual historiography, or to build a "grand narrative" of private films, still the appearance and the accessibility of technologies cannot be overlooked in the analysis of particular cases and their context.

The fifth chapter presents the resources and methods used in the research for this paper. It discusses the preparation of research, the techniques (survey, interview) and media (audiovisual forms, internet, digital tools) used during data collection.

The sixth chapter entitled *The social representation of moving images and photography* uses the methods of the social representations theories to examine the ways in which visual media are represented in the common sense, and explores the so-called 'naive media theories'. The chapter starts with the analysis of phrases collected from everyday language use, in which – through comparison or metaphors – experienced or seen events are associated with moving pictures. On the basis of these examples one can conclude that with comparisons like: "it was just like in the movies" we categorize impressions, events considering them as characteristic to these visual media. The second part of the study presents the qualitative conclusions of a research based on a survey (conducted in Cluj-Napoca and Târgu-Mureş): the way in which concepts implicitly present in speech integrate into discourses and practices. The results of the survey reflected the fact that photographs became a model of remembrance and documenting, while moving images constitute a model of fiction. Yet, the most illuminating result was a methodological one: the interpretation of home movies should take into consideration the relation between private films and photos (or other media used in the home mode).

In the seventh chapter I contextualize and analyze home movie collections; actually it was the research on the use of these movies which led to the theoretical framework and the present structure of the thesis. I approach the three collections from the following perspectives: the genealogy of the family and family life, the media practices of the family, the content and the structural, formal aspects of the collections and the habits of preserving them. By placing the collections next to each other I will also highlight diachronic relations and local variations due to the fact that the movies were made in Cluj-Napoca and Târgu-Mureş in different periods. This segment results in a chronological series of data from which the specific historical periods can be unfolded together with the analysis of technology –

family – everyday life – home movie/video. In this case the focus is on the practice of the respective family embedded into the context of everyday life. I examine the way in which technologies of film-making became part of and structured a community's life (both in a physical and metaphorical sense) in a given period. What kind of identities did families construct for the media they used, what sort of media practices characterized their everyday life in a given period of social history? How did home movies/videos connect people in the process of making, watching and archiving them?

The eighth chapter includes the conclusions. The most important statements of the thesis are the following:

1. *The concept of the medium*. I found the key to the emic perspective of everyday (media) history and to the understanding of film-making practices in a concept which does not make a hierarchical distinction between the history of media and the study of socio-cultural contexts. Through the concept of the medium a complex system of relations can be revealed in which narratological questions can also be examined. A medium is not a neutral vehicle, narratives are shaped by the specificities of the medium in which the narrative is constructed. In this way not only the collected stories, memories, experiences but also their historically changing media become visible.

2. *The home movie/video is not the recycling of an institutionalized medium* but the "other" of the moving image having a relatively autonomous habitus. The appearance of technologies is part of media history: it shows how the moving image did become a medium of domestic communication in a participative culture.

3. *Media are objects and consolidated human relations at the same time*. Consequently, the home movie/video can be not only a film but also an object, it can mirror the symbiosis with media technologies, it can connect the intimate sphere and the formal frameworks of our everyday life and it can be about friendship, motherhood, fatherhood, community life and genealogies.

4. The history of home movie/video is inseparable from *the history of families*. In the thesis I analyze three family collections in which the history of the family holds a mirror to the media history of the moving image and vice versa: the moving image is the medium through which I try to reveal the life-world, the changing structures and the genealogy of the families.

5. The research of home movies/videos can disclose "*micro-worlds*", histories of human relations. Home movies are not merely representations of easily recognizable life-scenes but – from an adequate viewpoint – they seem to be part of a complex system of relations which can reveal life-worlds.

6. In the films we can decipher the stories and *the periods of paying attention to each other*, as well as the scenes of familial life. To put it more concretely: we can follow the story of the father observing his children (in a further research one could examine how this turns into the story of the observing mother). More rarely the lens of the camera is directed towards the generation of the film-maker's parents. It seems that children represent a different social order, and for this reason they are regarded as photographic and filmic themes in different periods. At the same time we can witness how film-making becomes part of parental duties and how the recording of childhood becomes a social requirement.

7. Domestication. By tracing the stories of families and individuals we can reveal the way in which the camera penetrates into the intimate sphere, becomes part of the home and harmonizes with familial habits. The story of the three families' home movie collection displays different variants of domestication. From a photography shop in Cluj-Napoca a Cine Kodak camera (commercialized worldwide since 1923) got to the courtyard of a middle-class family (and sometimes to the street) at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. The gesture of the dancing-master who filmed his children in 1962 is singular, but it represents the story of a media user acting under the control of state institutions. In the stories of the cameras acquired by his son in the 1970s we can trace the continuation of the previous story. In the "adventures" of second-hand cameras and hardly purchasable raw materials we recognize the story of an increasing control over the means of representation, which could force individuals to use tactics. Compared to this, the story of the Keresztes family (making films at the end of 1989 and from 1990 on) exposes the perspective of an individual who escapes the magic circle of trade union film clubs and sets out on the road to professionalization.

8. *The periods of intermediality*. The home movie/video changes together with the practices of other domesticated media and is constantly in the state of intermediality. The recordings from the 1930s were influenced by the practice of photography and drawing. This tendency continues in the 1960s and 1970s when the use of photo camera seems to be more intensive

then the use of cine camera. The film-making practices of the 1990s are very much shaped by television and video rental, nowadays the use of computers is a determinative factor.

9. The movie collections represent the process of *informalization*. In the movies of the 1930s the staged, prearranged aspect and the behavior addressed to the camera are more visible. In the 1980s the pose assumed for the camera and the performance aspect were replaced by the ideal of naturalness, as if the camera were only a voyeur in the untouched scenery. This tendency can also be observed in the child videos shot at the end of the 1990s and in 2000. Looking into the camera became a taboo, whereas in the movies of the 1930s it had been quite frequent.

10. *Archiving* and accumulating are characteristic of the different periods of home filmmaking. These situations can reveal the changing meaning of the archives, whereas the different periods of archiving can expose changes in experiencing time and temporality and can certify that home movies construct their community differently in given historical periods.

11. In the age of new media the use of moving pictures infiltrates more and more the lives of film-makers, their media practices rearrange the life-world in which new scenes appear. Filming has become part of the strategies of everyday life and this communicative attitude has redefined *the forms of attitude to the past* and to time in general.

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