

## **From *Repas de bébé* to *Tarnation***

Elizabeth Czach

### Abstract:

This paper examines some ethical issues arising from the re-contextualization of home movies in documentary film. Drawing upon Paul Arthur's observation that home movies engender a specific 'performative exchange' the author argues that the 'access' home movie subjects grant filmmakers (predominately family members filming each other) often exceeds other subject/filmmaker relationships. The familiarity between filmmaker and subject in home movies raises significant ethical concerns when those 'private' films are re-contextualized in a film meant for 'public' viewing. Jonathon Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003), a film that makes extensive use of home movies and home video, is discussed as illustrating of some of these ethical issues.

Keywords: Documentary, Home Movies, Performance, Ethics

### On Performance in Home Movies and the Documentary Film

In an essay entitled "Some Notes on the Home Movie" Fred Camper cogently argues for the necessity of a complete film history, one that would include all types of filmmaking including the home movie. The home movie, he suggests, has distinct characteristics and, like all films, "comes complete with its own varied set of stylistic motifs, even its own aesthetic, moral and cultural implications."<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I would like to gesture towards what some of the aesthetic, moral and cultural implications of the home movie might be giving particular consideration to those home movies that have been recontextualized within documentary films. What will become evident is the degree to which our understanding of how home movies function in documentaries relies upon a discourse of authenticity established not only on the identifiable aesthetic qualities of the home movie but also upon the privileged relationship between filmmaker and subject.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Camper, "Some Notes on the Home Movie." *The Journal of Film and Video* (Volume 38, Number 3-4. Summer-Fall 1986) 9.

Home movies engender a specific ‘performative exchange’ between filmmaker and subject, a relationship that raises specific aesthetic and ethical questions. To frame some of the aesthetic and ethical considerations of this ‘performative exchange’, I will turn to Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation* (2003) a film that makes extensive use of home movies and home video.

In recent years the inclusion of home movies in documentaries has become a relatively common feature. The use of home movies in documentaries ranges from the inclusion of short clips to entire films based on amateur and home movie footage. For example, Michael Moore establishes his connection to his hometown Flint, Michigan in *Roger and Me* (1989) by showing a short home movie segment of himself as a child there. At the other end of the spectrum, director Péter Forgács constructs documentaries such as *The Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle* (1997), *El Perro Negro: Stories from the Spanish Civil War* (2005) entirely out of other people’s home movie and amateur film footage. Forgács re-contextualizes the footage through editing and the addition of explanatory text and music. These are just two examples of the wide range of home movie usage in the documentary.<sup>2</sup> Whether a documentary uses a significant portion of home movie footage or just a few brief scenes it relies on being read as of a different order than that of other filmic material. Aesthetically, the home movie is usually hard to miss. It is marked by its grainy, hand held images, sometimes in vibrant Kodachrome and often replete with depictions of a domestic world of the everyday.<sup>3</sup> Generally, audiences are able to identify the stylized features of the home movie and recognize one when they see it.

The hand made characteristics of the home movie helps distinguish it from other modes or genres of filmmaking. Additionally, this rough-hewn aesthetic also functions to lend increased legitimacy to its content. Audiences are willing to engage with the discourse of heightened authenticity that such footage seems to engender. For example, Stella Bruzzi has pointed out that “Abraham Zapruder’s 8mm recording of the assassination of President Kennedy posits that there is an inverse relationship between style and authenticity: the less

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<sup>2</sup> For additional examples of films that recontextualize home movie images, including documentaries, see my filmography in *Mining the Home Movie* edited by Karen Ishizuka and Patricia Zimmermann (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of home movie aesthetics see Roger Odin’s “Rhétorique du film de famille” in *Rhétoriques, sémiotiques, Revue d’Esthétique* (No. 1-2 UGE, 10/18, 1979) 340-373.

polished a film the more credible it will be found.”<sup>4</sup> But the ‘authenticity’ that home movie footage espouses is not limited to the documentation of historical events. Domestic footage is often considered more real, unadulterated, and less fictionalized when viewed as a home movie. Archivist Micheline Morriset has suggested that home movies are: “Better than any photograph, they reveal the way people looked, lived and acted. They bring information we would have to gather from many different sources and reconstitute a way of life, a manner of being and the *true appearance* of individuals caught in the course of sharing a few moments of their lives with us.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise film critic Leonard Maltin has suggested that home movies provide answers to questions of social history. Home movies answer questions such as: “What do people dress like? How do people act? What does it look like in a typical American backyard, not the way Hollywood saw it, but a *real* backyard.”<sup>6</sup> The discourse of authenticity and the ‘real’ circulates heavily when discussing home movies.

However, the question of how home movies have acquired such strong ‘truth value’ must extend beyond a question of simply aesthetics. A grainy hand held image is as much a staple of cinema vérité as it is of the home movie. Aesthetic qualities alone cannot account for the claim that the home movie image is perceived as more truthful than other types of documentary images—there must be something else. To elaborate on what this other quality might be it is necessary to look back at the beginnings of film history and the early Lumière films.

At the American Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, New York there is a small room in which early Lumière films are screened on a monitor in a continuous loop. French filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier provides narration that explains to the museum audience the significance of films such as *Workers Leaving the Factory* and *Train Arriving at Ciotat*.<sup>7</sup> When Tavernier comes to *Repas de Bébé*<sup>8</sup> he characterizes the film as cinema’s

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<sup>4</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. (London: Routledge, 2000) 6.

<sup>5</sup> Morriset, Micheline. "Home Movies" in *The Archivist: Magazine of the National Archives of Canada*. No. 108, 1995 pp. 28-29 emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Maltin, interview, *Keepers of the Frame* (Dir. Mark McLaughlin, 1999) emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Tavernier’s narration accompanies the Kino Video release *The Lumière Brothers' First Films* (1996).

<sup>8</sup> This film is known by a number of titles including *Le Déjeuner de bébé*, *Repas de Bébé* (my own preference), and, in English, *Baby’s Lunch*.

first home movie. This description of *Repas de Bébé* as cinema's originary home movie can also be found elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> What, however, distinguishes *Repas de Bébé* as a home movie from other Lumière actuality films such as *Workers Leaving the Factory* or the *Train Arriving at Ciotat*? It's evident that the actuality and the home movie share strikingly similar characteristics. So much so that Bruce Kawin has positioned the home movie as a form of actuality arguing that they both present "factual material without interpreting it" and are the "unbiased recordings of real objects and events."<sup>10</sup> But there is, I believe, a difference, and the home movie cannot simply be subsumed by the actuality. What differentiates *Repas de Bébé* from the other Lumière films is a matter of intimacy, familiarity and proximity evident between filmmaker and subject. Paul Arthur has noted that *Repas de Bébé* "stands out as out as at once visually distinct and remarkably prescient." He continues on to suggest that the "greater visual proximity of its subjects, along with their relatively subdued movements, their clothing, and their physical setting, allows viewers hints of the family's affluent social position. It is for this reason the only scene from the early roster of Lumière films whose aura of familiarity deflects the clinical chill of historical distance." But more pertinent to this discussion is how Arthur points to a "complicity between the social actors and recording process." Quite simply, there is a relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed subject. Uncle Louis is filming his niece. Unlike the moments where the Lumières are filming their workers or strangers at a train station, here the filmmaker and subject are shown to have a different, more personal relationship. Referring again to Paul Arthur, he describes this as "a performative exchange between observer and observed."<sup>11</sup> The 'performative exchange' captured in home movies is often different than in other kinds of filmmaking. It is at once personal and private. It often shows a proximity and familiarity between observer and observed that is otherwise rarely captured.

The familiarity between filmmaker and subject in home movies raises substantially different ethical issues from those of other documentary filmmaker/subject relationships.

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<sup>9</sup> See Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin's *A Short History of the Movies* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Kawin, *How Movies Work* (University of California Press, 1992) 81.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 24.

By and large, the relationship between documentary filmmakers and their subjects is not based on familial intimacy or proximity.<sup>12</sup> Home movies are defined, at least in part, by the familial relationship involved in their making—predominately, family members filming each other in a domestic environment.<sup>13</sup> The familiarity between filmmaker and subject is one of the defining characteristics of the home movie and the ‘access’ that home movies subjects grant the filmmaker often exceeds other subject/filmmaker relationships. However, the intimacy or proximity that is often achieved in home movies isn’t only a result of familial ties, it is also a result of intentionality. The intention of home movies has been, at least historically, that they will be exhibited privately.<sup>14</sup> The assumed potential audience, in part, dictates how a subject performs in a home movie. If the performing subject believes that only friends and family, in a private setting, will view the film their performance can be quite different from one recorded for a potential public audience. Where and to whom the films will be screened must be taken into consideration when accessing the type of performances that are produced within home movies. Home movies are made for, in, and about, domestic life. They are made for private exhibition and primarily meant for home consumption. This is an important difference between home movies and reality shows or documentaries. The former is intended for a private consumption, while the latter is intended for public exhibition regardless of whether it ever finds an audience.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> However, familiarity and intimacy between filmmaker and subject does often arise as a result of the proximity that documentary production necessitates. For example, when filmmaker and subject become friends during the course of filming as in the case of Nick Broomfield and Aileen Wuornos during *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992) and evident in *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003) These examples raise a series of ethical considerations that fall outside the scope of this essay.

<sup>13</sup> The French term for home movie, *le film de famille*, more adequately covers the familial relations at play in home movie making.

<sup>14</sup> Over the decades television programs such as *America’s Funniest Home Videos* and a precursor from the early 1960s *Your Funny, Funny Films* have eroded the tacit understanding that the home movie or home video is primarily for private exhibition.

<sup>15</sup> For more about how audiences perceive home movies as distinct from documentary and fiction films see Vivian Sobchack’s “Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, Jane Gaines and Michael Renov eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 241-254. Also see Jean-Pierre Meunier’s *Les Structures de l’expérience filmique* (Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, 1995).

To reiterate, the home movie is made primarily in the domestic sphere, implies familial bonds, displays proximity, familiarity, and intimacy, as well as being intended for private consumption. The intention of exhibition is crucial for the ‘performative exchange’ engendered between the subject and filmmaker within the home movie. This ‘performative exchange’ is crucial to how we as an audience ‘read’ a film as a home movie. If the home movie is identifiable by its formal qualities of shaky camera and grainy image, as well as its images of the domestic world of the everyday, it is also apparent in the performances of the subjects. Richard De Cordova, while not referring to the specificities of the home movie, has pointed out the relationship between performance and genre suggesting that, “performance manifests itself so differently in different genres.”<sup>16</sup> In the home movie we assume that the filmmaker/subject relationship is of a different and more intimate order, and that the performance is more truthful and natural. The home movie engenders a particular type of performance unlike other forms, modes, or genres of filmmaking.

To elaborate on the specific aspects of the home movie performance, let me turn to a recent documentary that incorporates ‘home movies’ as the backbone of its organizing structure--Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation*. An autobiographical film, *Tarnation* tells the story of the director’s difficult relationship with his mentally ill mother, Renee, coupled with his own queer coming of age story. The film is constructed from family photos, audio recordings, super 8mm films, appropriated television and film clips, and home video footage shot by Caouette as a young boy and teenager. This older material is augmented by contemporary footage and interviews also shot by Caouette. *Tarnation* was a success on the international film festival circuit screening at Cannes, Sundance, and Toronto. For a low-budget feature *Tarnation* received a surprisingly large commercial release in the U.S. and Canada. Critics repeatedly commented on the film’s low-budget, home movie aesthetic and the film embraced its home made roots claiming to have been edited entirely on the free digital editing software iMovie.<sup>17</sup> Caouette claimed the film cost a mere \$218.32 to

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<sup>16</sup> Richard De Cordova. “Genre and Performance: An Overview” in *Film Genre Reader II* Barry Keith Grant (ed.) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995) 129.

<sup>17</sup> An end credit makes note of film having been edited on iMovie.

make.<sup>18</sup> To varying degrees, *Tarnation* is positioned, by the filmmaker, critics, and film programmers, as a new hybrid home movie/documentary.

The characterization of *Tarnation* as, at least partially, a ‘home movie’ is understandable given the privileged relationship that Caouette has with his subjects—primarily his mother and maternal grandparents. The film displays many of the intimate moments of a privileged ‘performative exchange’ between Caouette and his familial subjects. For example, one scene shows Rosemary, Jonathan’s grandmother, without her makeup, partially dressed and afflicted with a hacking cough that she jokingly attributes to TB—tobacco and beer. She proceeds to get dressed, brush her hair, and put on lipstick while talking candidly to Jonathan and the camera. It is a frank and honest portrait. From the glimpses we catch of young Jonathan in the mirror it is evident that the footage was shot many years earlier. The access that Jonathan has to his grandmother, and the candidness she shows him, displays a profound degree of familial intimacy. Jonathan seems to have almost completely unfettered access to Rosemary. The only hint of any limit to his access is when she tells him: “I have to go to the bathroom. You can’t film me going to the bathroom.” A title later informs us of Rosemary’s death in 1995 long before *Tarnation*’s completion and exhibition.<sup>19</sup> We, as an audience, infer that these moments were initially recorded by her grandson for private use and were not originally intended for us.<sup>20</sup> Recontextualized within a documentary film and presented for public exhibition these intimate moments recorded on home video resonate with the privileged access they grant us to the private lives of strangers.<sup>21</sup> However, this making of ‘private’ images ‘public’ suggests a myriad of ethical questions

This older footage of Rosemary highlights the tension between *Tarnation*’s ‘archival’ material and its contemporary footage. The interweaving of older and newer material obscures the shift in the ‘performative exchange’ between the subject/filmmaker.

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<sup>18</sup> Film reviews are quick to point out that much more than that was eventually spent for music clearances and film prints.

<sup>19</sup> *Tarnation* is roughly structured chronologically.

<sup>20</sup> Some material presented in *Tarnation* undertakes its filmmaking practice in a self-consciously for an audience—the super 8mm horror spoofs: *The Ankle Slasher*, *Spit and Blood Boys*.

<sup>21</sup> Of course this raises a central ethical question about whether Rosemary would have consented to having her image displayed in such a public manner.

To clarify, the early home video material offers candid, unfettered performances by the subjects that suggest they are unconcerned with making themselves presentable to a larger public--they are performing not for the big theatrical screen but rather for a private home video. It becomes evident in the newer material that Jonathan's mother Renee is aware of the shift from private home movie to potential public film. There are several scenes that explicitly illustrate the ethical problems inherent in shooting and viewing material as simply 'home video.' Situating footage as 'home movies' or 'home video' sets up an expectation of a specific performative exchange. What becomes evident is how Jonathan attempts to elicit this form of privileged interaction with his mother in what has now shifted from just a 'home video' to his 'film.' Let me elaborate.

In a pivotal scene in *Tarnation*, Renee is visiting Jonathan in N.Y. in 2000. She is seated in his apartment, interview style, facing the camera. We hear Jonathan's voice behind the camera asking Renee some questions (about her accident, her first memory of a mental hospital, etc.) that make her grow increasingly agitated. Renee attempts to withdraw at least once. There is an obvious cut but the interview recommences. Jonathan begins the same line of questioning again. Renee, frustrated, gets up and walks away. Jonathan continues filming while pleading with Renee.

J. (Voice getting louder) Tell me.(Camera pans to follow Renee). No, tell me. Tell me because it's not your fault Renee.

R. No it's not.

J. It's not your fault.

R. No it's not.

J. You have nothing to run away from.

R. I'm sick ok.

J. You're not sick.

R. Eww, yes I am. Now.

J. Will you just please help me with my stupid film. (Camera zooms into other room where Renee has retreated).

R. My stomach can't take this.



J. Talk to me. Mommy this is the kind of shit that you talk to me about all day. You bring this up and you recycle these stories to me all the time about Rosemary and Adolph and your doctors and how fucked up they fucked you up.

(End of scene.)

In this exchange Jonathan is trying to extract specific material for his film--a testimonial from his mother. When Renee proves resistant he first tries to coerce her by pleading for help in making his “stupid film.” But this merely confirms that he is gathering material for a proper ‘film’ that implies a broader canvas—not just a private recording for domestic use but rather a potential public audience. In this context, Renee is acutely aware that her status has shifted to ‘sick’ subject on display. Realizing this strategy is not working, Jonathan switches gears and urges Renee to simply talk in the manner that she does everyday. He appeals to a form of quotidian intimacy and frankness that is often evident in home videos. Jonathan wants an intimate performative exchange but it wants for public display. As Renee states in the next scene: “We can talk John. You don’t need it on film.”

What I hope this scene illustrates is the manner in which positioning footage as a ‘home movie’ or ‘home video’ implies a number of different conditions in which the footage was gathered. It assumes proximity between the subject and filmmaker, that facilitates a different performative exchange made possible by the knowledge that the footage is intended for private not public viewing. If the performative exchange is positioned as one of privileged familiarity but elicited with the intention of public exhibition—the dynamics and ethics significantly shift. Later in the film, after Renee has survived a Lithium overdose she is again filmed by Jonathan. She is clearly agitated. She dances around, sings, repeatedly caresses a pumpkin and laughs hysterically. The scene is unsettling for a number of reasons: it is difficult to witness the further deterioration of Renee’s mental health but there is also a sense that Jonathan’s ‘access’ to his mother, by virtue of being her son, enables him to film her in circumstances that would probably be unavailable to other filmmakers. The privileged intimacy enabled by the ‘home video’ can easily slip into an exploitative relationship.

My intention in this discussion of *Tarnation* has not been to definitively decide whether the film is a ‘home video’ or not, but rather to illustrate some of the issues that

arise when a film or footage is called a 'home movie' or 'home video'. As filmmakers, critics, academics, and audiences we need to interrogate the 'performative exchange' that such an appellation implies. What assumptions do we bring to the viewing of this material? What are the specific aesthetic, moral, and cultural implications of the home movie and home video? These thoughts are offered as an initial foray into elaborating a theory about the relationship between performance, the home movie, and the documentary.