

## **From home movies to lifecasting: archiving personal lives on film**

**Talk given at Digital Lives conference, British Library, 9 February 2009**

Luke McKernan

Curator, Moving Image, The British Library

I have a short space in which to cover the archiving of personal lives on film in the digital age. I use the term 'film' in the generic sense of a carrier of moving images, but I want also to consider what is meant by personal lives on film, and that means looking back over the history of moving image production for the past century or more, to trace both an impulse to record and a kind of filmmaking that differs significantly from that generated by the commercial sector. The cinefilm era also raises different issues when it comes to archiving, even digital archiving, from the digital moving image media created today. I will cover the definition of the personal film, the history of its production, the archiving of the cinefilm heritage in the digital era, and lastly the production, preservation and value of the personal film in the era of born digital media.

### **Definition**

The personal film and the amateur film are different entities. Amateur film can be any means of expression through moving images, the only difference to commercial production being that it is not produced by commercial or professional bodies. It mimics established genres. The personal film documents the individual, from that individual's point of view. It does not necessarily have to be amateur in production, but it is usually so.

There are, broadly, two kinds of personal film – one where the individual wields the camera, the other where the camera is turned upon them. The former is the creation of the analogue age, and gives us the home movie, which focuses on family, friends, localities visited – that which the person handling the camera has recorded of the domestic world that they inhabit. This form of personal film has of course continued into the digital age, through the ubiquitous use of the camcorder, but the digital age that we now inhabit has allowed the creation of a different kind of personal film which scarcely existed in the analogue period, where we film and then exhibit ourselves.

There are other ways of defining the personal film. It is the broadcast of non-events. Nothing happens in the personal film – that is the whole point. The home movie may show a family holiday, or the visit of a seldom-seen relative, a local parade, or reactions to the onset of war, but the personal remains the theme, the event itself tangential, merely a vehicle for occasioning the further documentation of the personal. What matters is not the event, but what exists between, or outside such events. Were

the film to be genuinely about some event, it would be something else – a news report, a phenomenon that belongs to another audience.

For audience is the other way to define the personal film. It is a film addressed to a particular audience, usually family or friends. It is so coded that it means something for a small group of people, and less, or different things, to any other group that witnesses it. This affects how we now view personal films which have made their way into archives and are now being presented to new audiences, and to scholarly enquiry. It also makes the personal film of today, that which we can find on social networking sites, all the more such an extraordinary phenomenon, because it is addressed both to the local and the general, to those who know the film's subject or creator, and potentially to the whole wide world as well. The *consciousness* behind the production of the personal film has changed utterly.

### **History**

The urge to record personal lives on film is as old as the medium itself. The first camera-projector for the home market, the Birtac, appeared in 1898, employing 17.5mm film. There were many in the first years of cinema who believed that the real money would be made by targeting the home market, much as the Kodak camera had shown where the real business lay for still photography. That turned out not to be the case, but numerous early attempts were made to establish the camera and projector system that could be readily employed by the amateur.

The Lumière brothers in France were behind the Kinora, a hand-held, flick-card viewer for which you could either have films made of your family as a 'portrait' in a studio, or film them yourself with camera using paper negatives. Though patented in 1896, the first Kinora camera for amateur use appeared in 1907.

Other such systems followed, employing narrow gauges (that is, narrower than the 35mm film employed in cinemas) which were cheaper and easier to handle. Initially the film used was flammable nitrate, but in 1912 there came the Edison Home Kinetoscope using 22mm safety film, and in the same year the Pathéscope using 28mm safety film. However, these were mostly for showing commercial films in the home, and it was 9.5mm film (introduced 1922) that was the format taken up most avidly by amateurs seeking to shoot their own films, though 16mm (introduced 1923) was used by the wealthy, and some of the first home movies in archives are those shot by the well-to-do upper middle class in the 1920s. A rival to 9.5mm that would soon overtake it in popularity was 8mm, introduced in 1932, at which point the boom in home movie production began, sustained by the appearance of Super 8 film in 1965.

Home videotape was cautiously introduced in 1971 with the first consumer videocassette recorders, using unwieldy U-matic tapes. This was followed by Sony's Betamax system in 1975 and VHS in

1976. However, it was not until the introduction of camcorders with reduced-size cassettes in the 1980s that cheap and easy home video filming became a possibility. The digital revolution in home filmmaking from in the mid-1990s introduced miniDV and Digital8 formats, which still persist, though the move is now towards tapeless system, with camcorders increasingly equipped with hard-disks or other solid state media.

Taken together, a vast body of work has been created which documents lives in forms very different to commercial cinema and television.

### **The archive**

The 'archive' of the analogue personal film is scattered. For cinefilm, much has been lost or remains in family hands, at high risk of physical deterioration. Few home movies were produced on 35mm nitrate stock, the inflammable medium on which most commercial cinema productions were produced up to 1951, but the acetate-based film stock that was used for narrow gauge home movie films from 1912 onwards are subject to a form of decomposition known as the 'vinegar syndrome', so named after the distinctive acetic smell given off by affected films. Optimum conditions can halt the process of deterioration, but cannot stop it. Without copying onto fresh formats, our cinefilm heritage, and the lives that it records, will ultimately decompose. Some home movie films have found their way into moving image archives, particularly those with a regional focus, where they represent a rich form of cultural memory but also a resource challenge as they need to be preserved and then converted into digital form for present-day access.

In the United Kingdom there is a strong network of regional film archives, such as Screen Archive South East, the Yorkshire Film Archive and the North West Film Archive, where they specialise in the care of home movies, while national collections such as the Scottish Screen Archive, the Imperial War Museum and the BFI National Archive include significant personal film collections. The BFI, for example, preserves the home movies of Noel Coward, Lord Mountbatten, Nancy Astor, Laurence Olivier, David Lean, Beatrice Lillie and Benjamin Britten, as well as numerous examples of less exalted figures, such as the Passmore family of Kent, subjects of what is perhaps the world's oldest surviving home movie, made c.1903.

Home video is less well represented in moving image archives. In part the camcorder generation is perhaps too young yet to have thought of passing in its videotapes to an archive for safekeeping, in part there is a lack of awareness of the instability of videotape formats themselves, coupled by a worrying belief that copying onto DVD somehow preserves the life of a film or video. It does no such thing – it merely passes on its fragility to another form, one with an equally short expected lifetime. We cannot expect our DVDs, particularly DVR-Rs and DVD-RWs to run twenty, perhaps ten or even fewer years from now. DVD rot, where the disc becomes unreadable owing to physical or chemical deterioration, is a phenomenon you can expect to hear more of in the next few years.

Digitisation of itself does not ensure archiving, and in any case most moving image archives remain highly suspicious of digitisation as an archival solution. No one knows how long digital artefacts will last, or rather the carriers on which they depend will last. Moreover, to copy onto digital formats is not to create a perfect clone, but instead creates something that is similar but not perfectly analogous to the analogue original. As digitisation for archiving becomes an irresistible force in the moving image archive world, questions have to be asked whether we want to conserve an analogue world, or re-convert it to a digital future, irrevocably altering its basis, its look and ultimately its significance.

### **The digital era**

Digital video arrived in our homes in a great rush in the mid-1990s, with the rapid appearance of DVDs for commercial consumption, miniDV for personal production, and the World Wide Web for distribution. Digital media players capable of showing video first became available in 1991, with the appearance of Windows Media Player and Apple QuickTime. Video online remained something of an indulgence while connection speeds were poor, but with the widespread introduction of broadband, as is well known, there has been an explosion of moving image content online. YouTube, created in 2005 and exploiting the now practically ubiquitous Flash video format, receives an estimated 65,000 new videos each day, or thirteen hours of content uploaded every minute,<sup>1</sup> and enjoys 100 million views per month. Yet, in terms of file size, YouTube is no longer the largest video site in the world – China's Tudou, which serves seven million users but whose videos individually much longer than those on YouTube, serves more than a Petabyte of content per day – five times as much as YouTube. Other significant video sites include Veoh, Vimeo, Daily Motion, RuTube, Metacafe, Truveo, Hulu – and hundreds more.

These sites are built upon the personal film, in all its forms. The videos document the creator's world – what he or she sees, the environment they inhabit – and, in a form that was seldom contemplated before the digital age, they turn the camera upon the creator. The personal video in the digital era is distinguished by its focus on the individual, by the forms in which the product exists within social networks, and by its address to multiple audiences. Those audiences may be the filmmaker himself or herself, those whom the filmmaker knows, and those whom the filmmaker does not know – potentially, a worldwide audience. The camera may represent all these things as the filmmaker addresses it, a window onto a wired-up world.

If there is a revolution in the form and distribution of the personal film, it remains the medium of the non-event. The videos we see of individuals on YouTube, video blogs (or vlogs), Facebook etc. record stasis, people caught between those points in their lives where nothing much is happening. Even if some crisis is occurring, if they are going somewhere, or if they are present at some

---

<sup>1</sup> As of May 2009 this figure has risen to twenty hours of video content uploaded per minute.

significant event, they themselves are separated from anything significant in terms of *happening*. The online personal video is essentially ruminative.

The logic of that non-event nature, as much as the capabilities of the technology, has pushed the personal film into the world of the webcam and the uninterrupted recording of one life on video, for online consumption. For the ultimate extension, so far, of the digital personal film is lifecasting. Lifecasting is literally making a broadcast of your life, 24 hours a day (or as much as possible). This you can achieve through a webcam, placed at some single point in home or office, or – in the most extreme examples, going about your daily routine equipped with a video camera at all times. The first experiments in lifecasting took place in the mid-1990s, often as conceptual experiments in seeing where the logic of the Internet, social networks and communication through video could take you. Celebrated examples include Steve Mann, who in 1994 took to wearing a portable camera to record his life 24-7; and Jennifer Ringley's JenniCam, started in 1996, which caused controversy and titillation by the degree to which she was prepared to record the entirety of her life online through multiple webcams. Web channels have been set up devoted to lifecasting, notably Ustream.tv and Justin.tv, the latter created by dedicated lifecaster Justin Kan in 2007. Some sort of dreadful logical extreme in lifecasting was achieved in November last year, when the nineteen-year-old Abraham K. Biggs from Florida committed suicide while webcasting through his Justin.tv channel.

### **The changing archive**

The archiving of the online personal film has not yet begun – or rather, we need to be asking question about the nature of that archive before we begin to take any action. What is it that we are seeking to archive? From a traditional film or video archivist's standpoint, the archive is not out there. Only two weeks ago, Google rather quietly announced that it would no longer be supporting the uploading of content to its Google video service.<sup>2</sup> It will continue to host videos already posted, but in a few months time it will be refusing anything new. Google Video is a separate service from the Google-owned YouTube, and the success of the latter is what has rendered the former redundant, but what has alarmed some users is the intimation that the web is not going to be a permanent archive of all media. Furthermore, Google had to point out that it does not host the original video files – nor, for that matter, does YouTube or most of the other online video services. If the user has not kept a copy of the original, then it will be lost. YouTube may be keeping a copy of every video hosted on its site, both published and those titles that have been withdrawn – as indeed it is – but the archivist looks for the original production elements, or a clone of these. Lifestreaming sites, such as Storytlr and Swurl, which promise to ring together all of the various bits of your online digital lives into one handy centre, may look like an archive of sorts, but in terms of video archiving it is an illusion. A mere access copy, which is all that the video files on such sites almost invariably are, is redundant in archival terms. But the originals remain in the homes or offices of their producers, if they remembered to keep them. Few have as yet found their way into moving image archives.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://googlevideo.blogspot.com/2009/01/turning-down-uploads-at-google-video.html>.

Yet this raises further questions, because what is it that we want to archive? The personal film of today does not exist in isolation. Its reality, its core meaning, lies in the network of which it is a part. Its meaning comes through comments, tagging, hyperlinks, channels, favourites, a *continuity of associations* which the individual video in its raw states loses. In this respect, the World Wide Web is the video archive we require. It is doing the work for us. But as that Google Video announcement reminds us, the web is not stable, and the world of web video particularly so. It is estimated that 60,000 videos are added to YouTube every day, but thousands are taken down at the same time. Might this be a reality that we simply have to accept, that the video we found yesterday may be gone today, that mutability is an essential part of the web, and to try and preserve it as a static entity is to be preserving something else, something false?

Such philosophical speculation will only take us so far. Of course we want to have copies of the videos of personal lives which are now proliferating across the web. We need modes of selection, we need to establish appropriate donor agreements, we need to access original production materials wherever possible, we need to archive both the experience of encountering such videos in an online environment as well as archiving the video as a separate entity. But we will have archived a shadow.

Shadow or not, we need to be archiving the web video phenomenon. JenniCam, one of the sensations of the internet in late 1990s, often cited as a precursor of reality TV, ceased broadcasting in December 2003. It was live webcasting from before the time when video capture tools were readily available to all. Consequently only a handful of brief clips seem to be available, along with frame grabs of the site. The thousands of hours that she broadcast, mundane non-event that it fundamentally was, are gone. It would be good to have an hour, half-an-hour even, just something to see.<sup>3</sup> The personal film is important to us, as historians and scholars, firstly as a phenomenon of the modern age, but chiefly because it documents the individual, in a unique way. It shows its subject captured in time. The written work, be it autobiography, diary, letter, email, is not constrained by time. It is composed, outside of real time. Of course films are compositions too, because their shots are selected and edited, and even the webcam, seemingly pure duration, is limited by where the camera is placed. But the capture comes in the points in between. It is when nothing is happening that the camera finds us at our most interesting, when we are caught between thought and action. It does many other valuable things, of course. It shows how we look, how we move, how we sound, how we dress, how we live, how we change over time. All of these the researchers of the future will value. But it is how we compose ourselves before a motion picture camera that is going to give that unique insight into our twenty-first century selves.

---

<sup>3</sup> Still image 'archives' exist e.g. <http://www.arttech.ab.ca/pbrown/jenni/jenni.html> and through the Internet Archive at [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/jennicam.org](http://web.archive.org/web/*/jennicam.org). An unofficial archive does exist of the JenniShow, a fortnightly half-hour webcast hosted by Ringley, at <http://worshiptheglitch.com/2005/08/jennishow-episode-1.html>.