

Inherited Images: Reconfiguring Home Movies in Experimental Cinema

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines a subset of contemporary experimental filmmakers who incorporate their own home movies into their films and videos. Close analysis of Helen Hill's *Mouseholes* (1999), Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood* (2000), Philip Hoffman's *What these Ashes Wanted* (2001), and Jay Rosenblatt's *Phantom Limb* (2005) reveals tensions between the private and public functions of home movies as well as key differences between the reconfigurations of home movies and the appropriation of found footage. When experimental filmmakers use home movies, it is often a means of confronting issues of memory; also, the filmmakers most often strive to preserve the home movies because of their personal connection to them. The preservation and screenings of Hill's flood-damaged home movies (a result of Hurricane Katrina) also negotiate this tension between private and public. In 2007, Hill died during a home invasion in New Orleans. Paul Gailiunas's posthumous completion of Hill's final film, *The Florestine Collection* (2010), constructs a dual portrait of Hill and a deceased seamstress named Florestine Kinchen. Each of these five films and videos focus on the death of a loved one, exposing the absence of images of death and family strife in home movies. The study of experimental filmmakers' use of home movies provides valuable insight into both experimental cinema and home movies themselves.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	v
Introduction	Inherited Images: Reconfiguring Home Movies in Experimental... 1 Cinema
Chapter 1	Coping with Loss through Home Movies: <i>Mouseholes</i> , <i>Sea in the Blood</i> , <i>What these ashes wanted</i> , and <i>Phantom Limb</i>18
	Helen Hill's <i>Mouseholes</i>26
	Richard Fung's <i>Sea in the Blood</i>30
	Philip Hoffman's <i>What these ashes wanted</i>37
	Jay Rosenblatt's <i>Phantom Limb</i>45
Chapter 2	Let's Go Back to New Orleans: The Destruction, Preservation, and Repositioning of Helen Hill's Home Movies51
	Home Movies at the Museum of Modern Art52
	Preserving Hill's Home Movies59
	Screening Hill's Home Movies63
	Helen Hill & Courtney Egan, <i>Cleveland Street Gap</i>67
	Helen Hill & Paul Gailiunas, <i>The Florestine Collection</i>70
Conclusion	The Home Movie in Contemporary Experimental Cinema81
Bibliography	89
Filmography	94

FIGURES

Fig. 1. Animations of Helen Hill and her grandfather, <i>Mouseholes</i>	27
Fig. 2. The funeral, <i>Mouseholes</i>	28
Fig. 3. Home movies, <i>Mouseholes</i>	29
Fig. 4. Photograph of Richard Fung (left) and sister Nan, <i>Sea in the Blood</i>	33
Fig. 5. Distorted travel footage, <i>What these ashes wanted</i>	40
Fig. 6. Marian McMahon, <i>What these ashes wanted</i>	43
Fig. 7. Jay Rosenblatt (left) and his brother, <i>Phantom Limb</i>	45
Fig. 8. Rosenblatt (right) semi-playfully chokes his brother, <i>Phantom Limb</i>	47
Fig. 9. Shearing a sheep, <i>Phantom Limb</i>	49
Fig. 10. Home movies at the start of cinema, Louis Lumière's <i>Repas de bébé</i> (1895) ...	54
Fig. 11. Helen Hill's flood-damaged films after cleaning (Van Malssen "Preserving) ...	59
Fig. 12. Helen Hill and son Francis Pop (bottom right and left, respectively) with neighbourhood children in New Orleans, <i>The Florestine Collection</i>	62
Fig. 13. Wallace Kelly's <i>Our Day</i> (1938)	64
Fig. 14. Damaged home movies dissolve into present-day video, <i>Cleveland Street Gap</i>	68
Fig. 15. Close-up of the writing on Hill's house, <i>Cleveland Street Gap</i>	69
Fig. 16. Flood damaged celluloid, <i>The Florestine Collection</i>	70
Fig. 17. Hill finding a trash pile of dresses, <i>The Florestine Collection</i>	73

INTRODUCTION

Inherited Images: Reconfiguring Home Movies in Experimental Cinema

The incorporation of home movies into experimental films and videos constitutes a significant trend in contemporary avant-garde cinema. Though this reconfiguration aligns home movies with other forms of found footage, the highly personal nature of home movies causes the footage to seem more precious. Unlike other found footage films, experimental films that choose to reconfigure home movies – in particular, the filmmaker’s own home movies – approach the images with an aim to preserve them. Though they may also recontextualize and reconfigure their home movies, the filmmakers use of these images as pathways for exploring their own memory and personal history makes the original contexts of the home movies a crucial part of the final films and videos. The intersection of home movies and experimental cinema, particularly in the work of filmmakers such as Helen Hill, Richard Fung, Philip Hoffman, and Jay Rosenblatt, signifies a complexity of trying to deal with the unreliability of one’s memory and the images which attempt to document memories through intimate personal filmmaking practices; these filmmakers expose the contradictions between self-conscious representations of the family and the accumulated memory of the family. The films and videos that I will focus on – Helen Hill’s *Mouseholes* (1999), Richard Fung’s *Sea in the*

Blood (2000), Philip Hoffman's *What these Ashes Wanted* (2001), Jay Rosenblatt's *Phantom Limb* (2005), and Helen Hill and Paul Gailiunas's *The Florestine Collection* (2010) – all recontextualize home movies in order to address issues of grief and loss. Unlike the appropriation of other forms of found footage, the use of home movies by contemporary experimental filmmakers tends to privilege preservation and memorialisation over radical reworkings. The films and videos I have chosen to focus on, all dating between 1999 and 2010, are firmly within an era where home movies are made on video. However, all of the home movies in the films and videos listed above were made on film. Working in an era when all home movies are likely made on video, Hill, Fung, Hoffman, and Rosenblatt pick up and preserve this technology that has largely been abandoned.

The utilization of the same small-gauge film stocks or non-professional video cameras in experimental and home movie filmmaking has the potential to lead to a symbiotic relationship between the two seemingly disparate genres. Home movies, as a mode of familial documentation, can both uphold and challenge familiar codes of cultural representation. Scholars Patricia R. Zimmermann and James M. Moran both address the position of home movies within cinematic history. While both suggest ways in which experimental filmmakers could potentially reconfigure home movies, neither addresses actual film or video texts. Both Zimmermann and Moran position home movies in relation to the dominance of mainstream cinematic production. In the introduction to *Mining the Home Movie*, Zimmermann argues that, similarly to the avant-garde tradition, home movies oppose dominant modes of representation: “As first-person documentation of history and culture, home movies provoke reexamination of issues of identity, culture,

history, politics, and memory from the point of view of images made outside the dominant channels of representation” (20). Zimmermann’s argument about the home mode’s position outside of mainstream cinematic representation can extend quite easily to the avant-garde as another mode of production that exists outside the dominant channels.

Though home movies exist outside of the mainstream filmmaking industry, they tend to follow prevalent codes of how the family appears and behaves. In *Reel Families*, Zimmermann states that articles promoting home movie technology in the early 20th century emphasize “the significance of the happiness of memories” and often “directed amateurs toward creating a narrative spectacle of idealized family life” (45-6). However, the subjects of home movies are not passive: they know that they are performing a specific version of themselves and their family dynamics for the camera. Zimmermann also argues that home video’s dual function as a “leisure-time commodity” and technology allows for greater “production access, invention, and critique” which can become more apparent through their use in avant-garde film and video (*Reel Families* 152). The distinction Zimmermann makes between leisure and artistic inclinations in amateur filmmaking is more ambiguous if home movies are not merely manifestations of dominant codes of familial behaviour. In deliberately existing outside of mainstream industry filmmaking, home movies allow for the agency of self-representation (even if it is, like most behaviours, guided by cultural codes). The intersection of the home mode and avant-garde, while often present in the similar ideological implications in amateur practices in general, is more explicit in the inclusion of home movie footage in avant-garde filmmaking. Zimmermann addresses the possibility of the appropriation of home

movies for the purposes of critique, particularly in video. Her analysis does not, however, extend to the films themselves.

Home movies, as a means of familial self-representation, often appear to conform to an idealized vision of the nuclear, heteronormative family, but the potentialities of the medium do not exclude it from the realm of the avant-garde. Moran suggests, in *There's No Place Like Home Video*, that home movies, in general, do not explicitly interrogate the ideologies constructed in much of the mainstream media (66). Rather, Moran argues, home movies (like avant-garde films) construct social alternatives to the ideologies characterizing most popular media. For Moran, it is the “imagination of social alternatives” that allows both home movies and experimental films to bear an implicit critical function (77). As self-conscious documents of the families, home movies often stage an image of the ideal nuclear family for the camera; this deliberate altering of reality in order to (re)create an image of proper codes of familial behaviour suggests that the images of the idealized family (promoted, as Zimmermann argues, by home movie making guides and articles) are misrepresentative of actual everyday life. Most often, home movies only capture the family at play, during significant events and holidays thereby erasing work and conflict from the family archive.

The staging of an idealized image of the family in home movies complicates the relationship between one's memory of the past and the visual representation of the past. In “The Home Movie in a World of Reports: An Anthropological Appreciation,” Richard Chalfen argues “The people who came together to be ‘in’ a home movie shall stay together in a symbolic sense, in a symbolic form, for future viewings. The home movie collection can be understood as a visual record of a network of social relationships.”

(107). In home movies, these social relationships are almost always presented in a positive light. For Zimmermann, home movies are not only physical artefacts of past events and memories but also “political interventions, dreamscapes, and phantasms suggesting collisions among different spheres and contiguities across differences” (“Introduction” 22). However, the lost events captured by home movies are not unmediated segments of reality. The self-conscious portrayal of the family idealizes relationships amongst family members, crafting a “dreamscape” of an unattainable perception of what should be captured in home movies.

As home movies typically focus on happy images of the family, images of weddings, school events, and holidays abound while divorces and funerals are, unsurprisingly, absent. In “Home Movies of the Avant-Garde,” Jeffrey Ruoff argues that, while home movies typically avoid personal trauma or familial strife, the “viewers who are part of the intended audience of the home mode may read into the images just those emotions and incidents that the form systematically denies” (11). However, this kind of contextual understanding tends to be limited to the subjects of the home movie and their family and friends. The films discussed in this thesis all challenge, to varying degrees, the idealization of daily life in home movies by openly addressing the parts of life that are absent in their home movies. As I will discuss in chapters one and two, the filmmakers address the absence of death and grief in their own home movies primarily through the use of on-screen text and voice-over narration.

In an essay in *Mining the Home Movie* entitled “Remaking Home Movies,” Richard Fung addresses his own experience of using home movies in his videos. Upon reviewing the home movies of his childhood as an adult, Richard Fung describes feeling

transported backwards in time as “each luminous frame opened a successive drawer in an archive of memories” (29). This vicarious time travel through the images of home movies reinforces the function of home movies as memory-machines. However, the memory enacted in home movies does not necessarily coincide with one’s distanced remembrance of childhood: “I could identify most of the settings and events, and I recognized the actors as my family and myself, but these films contradicted everything I remembered of the tone and texture of my childhood” (Fung 29). The distinction between past and present, memory and image, complicates the desire to preserve the family through documentation. Through idealization, home movies function as an agent of self-mythologizing which causes them to fail in the preservation of memory. This contradiction leads to a recontextualization of home movies which further complicates the reliability of memory and the truthfulness of self-representation. Images of the family thus undergo multiple stages of restructuring through self-conscious construction and subsequent deconstructions of ideals.

In *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past*, Steve F. Anderson discusses the use of home movies by experimental filmmakers, using Péter Forgács *Private Hungary* (1988-94), Yervant Gianikian and Andrea Ricci Luchi’s *From the Pole to the Equator* (1987), Su Friedrich’s *Sink or Swim* (1990), and William Jones’s *Other Families* (1992) and *Massillon* (1991) as examples. Anderson argues that experimental films which reconfigure home movies fall into one of two different kinds of projects: “Films that attempt to negotiate individual or social group identity through collective or personal memory” or “Films that seek to come to terms with some aspect of personal or collective memory” (90). While the films I discuss in this thesis tend to fall

mainly into the latter category, there is – particularly in the case of Richard Fung – some slippage between categories in each. Anderson argues that, when taken out of the insular circuit of typical home movie production and exhibition, “appropriated home movie images become ‘declassified,’ that is, opened to a different kind of public scrutiny and historical revision” (90). When home movies become available for public viewing, they are introduced to a context that they likely were not intended for. This shift from public to private can place the home movies within a new historical or political context.

However, for outside viewers to fully understand the home movies, they often need the original contextual information. Also, according to Anderson, “Filmmakers who appropriate and recontextualize images of themselves take advantage of a situation that is unavailable to the traditional subject of ethnography, namely, the ability to say, ‘These images are mine—they are *of* me, therefore they *belong* to me’” (99). Unlike other found footage filmmakers, filmmakers who incorporate their own home movies into their films and videos can claim a sense of authorship over the original images by virtue of being the subject.

The use of home movies functions similarly, in some ways, to the appropriation of found footage; however, the incorporation of home movies in the avant-garde often attempts a sort of preservation of the original footage which is not necessarily the case in the use of other forms of found footage. Home movies (at least on celluloid) can have a sense of preciousness for the filmmaker by being both sentimental and irreplaceable. William C. Wees, in *Recycled Images*, separates found footage films into three categories – compilation, collage, and appropriation – but identifies a common political undercurrent: “By reminding us that we are seeing images produced and disseminated by

the media, found footage films open the door to a critical examination of the methods and motives underlying the media's use of images" (32). As home movies exist outside of the media in their production, Wees's political characterization of found footage films does not really apply to experimental films reconfiguring home movies. However, the use of home movies might similarly incite a critical examination of the *family's* use of images. In *Experimental Ethnography*, Catherine Russell argues "The techniques of appropriation, recycling, and re-presentation place the status of the past, the history of the referent, in question. As the aura of the filmmaker's 'having been there' is eclipsed, the media-scape of found footage filmmaking renders history itself as lost" (241). When filmmakers use their own home movies, their "having been there" is amplified, rather than eclipsed. The filmmaker's presence both within and outside the footage is ever-present. Though time separates the filmmaker from the history of the images, the filmmakers are actively trying to preserve this personal history.

Though home movies and avant-garde filmmaking represent two seemingly divergent streams of amateur practice, in some cases, such as Stan Brakhage or Jonas Mekas' films, the two modes may become conflated. David James's *Allegories of Cinema*, Paul Arthur's *A Line of Sight*, P. Adams Sitney's "Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film" as well as Ruoff's "Home Movies of the Avant-Garde," link the experimental film of the 1960s and 70s to both the technology and style of home movies. Indeed, in "Independence for independents," Jonas Mekas states that the term home movie was sometimes used in place of avant-garde or experimental up until 1967 (35). Addressing the potential confluence of home movies and the avant-garde, Moran argues that while home movies and the avant-garde "may surface within a single amateur

artifact,” critics most often “oppose the home mode as the avant-garde’s antithesis” (76). Although the aesthetic and ideological strategies of home movies and the avant-garde may be quite different, the impulses driving both modes of filmmaking can be similar. In both cases, the act of filmmaking is more personal due to the fact that both modes are the product of one individual rather than a collaborative body. Moran uses Stan Brakhage as the exemplification of the intersection between home movies and the avant-garde in his practice of integrating his everyday life into his filmmaking (74). As two modes of amateur filmmaking, both home movies and experimental film offer an avenue of self-representation (the results of this self-representation, of course, differ).

In avant-garde film and video, the private sphere of home movies enters the domain of public social critique and exhibition. The highly personal nature of home movie filmmaking combined with an artistic tendency towards social critique blurs the line between public and private. The conflation of home video and avant-garde practices “collapse the contested, problematized borders between filmmaker and subject, between amateur and professional, between documentary and narrative, between public and private. The amateur camera maps autobiography” (Zimmermann *Reel Families* 154). This collapsing of imaginary borders gives voice – and the agency of image – to that which is marginalized and concealed within the public consciousness.

The confluence of experimental film and home movies has been a notable part of North American avant-garde filmmaking since, at least, the 1960s: Stan Brakhage, Jack Chambers, and Jonas Mekas, for example, have all used actual home movies or (more often) drawn on home movie aesthetics and technologies in their films. In Brakhage’s *Sincerity I* (1973), childhood seems to be a place of innocence and purity. In this film,

Brakhage revisits Dartmouth College (which he attended for one year) and also utilizes footage of himself as a young man making an early (possibly first) film, childhood photographs, and home movies. Brakhage re-photographs his childhood photos in a way that emphasizes their texture and status as personal artefacts, creating a sense of nostalgia. In contrast, the images Brakhage films of Dartmouth in the present-day suggest a sense of plasticity through the use of brightly coloured filters. Thus, the film gives the past a sense of tactile authenticity to signify a subtle longing to return. According to David James, “Brakhage usually emphasizes that the personal engagement that prompts [home movies] supplies a point of liberation from the grammar of Hollywood” (*Allegories of Cinema* 35). Outside of the personal connection and negotiation between experimental filmmakers and their own home movies, there is this point of convergence between home movies and experimental film, in general, through their shared non-industry status.

Jack Chambers’s sprawling *The Hart of London* (1970) employs his own footage, home movies, and archival news images in a meditation on life and death, nature and the city. In the film, Chambers uses news footage and home movies differently: while the home movies are left largely intact, Chambers significantly alters the public forms of found footage through superimpositions, slowing down and brightening the footage to the point that some images are almost completely white. These two levels of mediation suggest that the footage produced for public consumption needs to be more clearly altered in order to change its context while the restructuring of home movies can occur in the shift from private to public consumption. The lack of overt mediation of the home movies suggests that the film deals with the home movies more as precious artefacts, due

to their intimate nature. This is in contrast to the radically altered news footage, a more impersonal medium that can be completely deconstructed without a sense of emotional attachment to the images themselves.

Jonas Mekas's *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) consists of three parts: footage of Mekas and his brother, Adolfas, shot during their first years in America; their 1971 return to their home village of Semeniskiai, Lithuania after a twenty-seven year absence; and visits to Elmshorn and their friends in Vienna. Mekas's filmmaking style is infused with the spontaneity of home movies but is characterized by a sense of loss that is atypical of traditional home movies. In *Allegories of Cinema*, James suggests Mekas's "affirmation of autobiography is undermined by a virtually unrelieved scepticism about art's ability to retrieve the past" (111). What all of the experimental films I have mentioned thus far add to home movies is this palpable sense of loss so characteristic to Mekas's films. Russell also argues that "Memorialization and loss are the defining characteristics of Mekas's diary films, and he renders them as features of the medium itself" (281). Similarly to the other films I discuss in this thesis, *Reminiscences* uses both the act of filmmaking and the style of home movies to explore and deal with this sense of loss.

The films and videos discussed in chapters one and two of this thesis, Fung's *Sea in the Blood*, Hoffman's *What these Ashes Wanted*, Rosenblatt's *Phantom Limb*, Hill's *Mouseholes* and Hill and Gailiunas's *The Florestine Collection*, all incorporate home movies in order to negotiate the filmmaker's memory and experiences of grief and loss. In *Sea in the Blood*, Fung uses incongruities between sound and image to suggest a misalignment between his own memory and the construction of memory in the home

movies of his childhood. While the video shows an image of Fung and his sister, Nan, swimming and playing in the ocean as kids, the voice-over track narrates Fung's mother's experience of watching Nan die. The bright, playful images of a happy family – particularly the children – from the home movies combine with the voice-over narrative of a life dealing with illness and death (Fung's sister's thalassemia and his partner's HIV/AIDS) to create divergent notions of life and the images of life in home movies. Fung uses the sound of a film projector as well as that of a slide carousel in the video when his home movies and photographs are on screen. Fung's narration and highlighting of the media he reconfigures emphasize the constructed nature of images of the family. In reencountering images of his childhood as an adult and incorporating them into his artistic practice, Fung creates a schism between documentation for the purposes of serving subsequent memory (through home movies) and the actual formation of memory over time.

Hoffman's *What these Ashes Wanted* combines home movies, found sound, and hand-processed footage as an expression of grief following Hoffman's partner Marian McMahon's death. The film is very fragmented and attempts to capture fleeting mementos of McMahon. Set against hand-processed images of Egyptian tombs, Hoffman's use of home movies in this film emphasizes the spectre of death within the quotidian moments of everyday life. *What these Ashes Wanted*, like *The Florestine Collection*, differs from *Sea in the Blood*, *Phantom Limb*, and *Mouseholes*, in the fact that its home movie images were shot by the filmmaker rather than the filmmaker's parents. This difference alters the context of the home movies, making the intentions of their production more ambiguous. However, the inclusion of these home movies, whether

made by the filmmaker or by someone else, is similar in the focus on the preservation of both image and memory.

Jay Rosenblatt's *Phantom Limb*, subtitled *A Film about Grief and Loss*, reconfigures his childhood home movies and various other forms of found footage. Using his brother's death at the age of seven as a starting point to ground and contextualize the film, Rosenblatt explores loss and its ramifications in a more generalized manner. The home movie images in *Phantom Limb* appear in only brief occurrences. While home movies do not occupy a large amount of screen time in the film as a whole, their fleeting brevity emphasizes their ephemerality. Rosenblatt loosely structures around the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – and suggests the theme of the preservation of memory through a strong emphasis on impermanence. *Phantom Limb*, as well as all of the other films discussed, uses voice-over narration to contextualize and draw the themes of grief, loss, and memorialization out of the diverse array of images.

Mouseholes, a film made by Helen Hill as a response to the death of her grandfather, Pop, uses Hill's signature animation style as well as home movies of herself as a child. Hill's cut-out animation is brightly coloured and bittersweet; the film contrasts its sombre themes of loss and grief with a whimsical animation of Hill's grandfather at a joyful tea party with other family members in heaven. At seven minutes, *Mouseholes* is, by far, the shortest of the films I discuss – the others range between twenty-six and fifty-five minutes. Despite its brevity, *Mouseholes'* use of home movies illuminates the use of home movies to connote nostalgia and preserve memories of an idealized past. Hill balances the sentimentality of the home movies with her own

animation. Though often playful, Hill's animations of her grandfather's hospital room and funeral add a sombre quality to *Mouseholes*. The addition of audio recordings of Hill's conversations with her ailing grandfather emphasizes the bittersweet undertones of the film.

In 2010, Hill's husband Paul Gailiunas completed her work-in-progress, *The Florestine Collection*, incorporating their home movies. Though *The Florestine Collection* is billed as a film by Helen Hill and completed by Paul Gailiunas, Gailiunas's authorial impact on the finished film is more substantial than the language of the credits suggests. While the images in the film are primarily Hill's, the structure and much of the sound – both voice-over narration and music – of *The Florestine Collection* are a significant contribution by Gailiunas. This film began as a portrait of a recently deceased elderly seamstress named Florestine Kinchen whose discarded dresses Hill found in a trash pile on the morning of Mardi Gras in 2001. After Hill's death in 2007, the film became a dual portrait of Kinchen and Hill by drawing upon the damaged physical remnants of each woman's life (Kinchen's dresses and Hill's flood-damaged home movies) as a springboard for a memorial project.

In the first chapter, I focus on *Mouseholes*, *Sea in the Blood*, *What These Ashes Wanted*, and *Phantom Limb*. Each of these films were made in response to the death of a loved one and they use home movies as a means of exploring the issues of grief and death, particularly in relation to memory. While these films all attempt to preserve memory through the inclusion of personal home movies, this preservative instinct does not preclude a critique of the images. Home movies are not necessarily accurate representations of the past. The films use on-screen text, voice-over, and, in the case of

Mouseholes, animation, to emphasize and remedy the absence of death and grief in the home movies themselves. These films and videos sometimes bring in additional stories of their own or others' experiences of loss to create both meditations on loss itself and deeply personal tributes.

The second chapter focuses on the memorialisation of the late Helen Hill through her home movies. The screening of recently preserved home movies, including Hill's, at the 2009 To Save and Project film festival at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) attempts to publicly redefine home movies as significant historical and cultural documents (this reframing of home movies also informed a similar 2000 exhibition and screening series at MoMA). This chapter also argues for *The Florentine Collection* as a memorializing project in which the preservation of Hill's home movies, damaged in the Katrina floods, becomes intertwined with the preservation of memory – of Hill and New Orleans. For family and community, preservation and appropriation become antidotes to the loss of memory and death, suggesting how the nostalgia often associated with home movies can function in an avant-garde context.

I chose to focus on these five films - *Sea in the Blood*, *What these Ashes Wanted*, *Phantom Limb*, *Mouseholes* and *The Florestine Collection*, because they each exemplify a personal approach to reconfiguring home movies through an experimental lens. Each of these films approaches similar themes and subject matter through their use of home movies but do so in differing ways. I focus on Helen Hill the most out of the filmmakers I discuss as the home movie question provides an excellent way into the playful, DIY spirit of her work; her films tend to straddle or evade characterizations, drawing upon animation, experimental film, documentary, and home movies all at once. Particularly in

The Florestine Collection, home movies and experimental films as categories align more closely than in other films. A few recent feature-length films, including *Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette 2003), *My Winnipeg* (Guy Maddin 2007), and *Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley 2012), experiment with both the documentary form and the use of home movies (real or staged). Caouette, Maddin, and Polley's films come more out of documentary and narrative traditions of filmmaking and point to other ways that home movies have become an important cinematic element beyond the small scale of experimental film.

The specificity of celluloid is something that underlies each of the films I have chosen to discuss. Partially due to the age of the filmmakers, all of their childhood home movies were made on Super8mm rather than video. While Richard Fung and Jay Rosenblatt use video, Helen Hill and Philip Hoffman animate or shoot on film. The aesthetic contrast between the Super8mm celluloid and the video in Fung and Rosenblatt's works also emphasizes the tactility and physical presence of film (they both use the sound of a film projector to accompany these images). Despite the different formats, each of these filmmakers emphasize the materiality of celluloid – its specific textures and vulnerabilities – in the ways in which they employ their home movies.

Within the home movie format and its adoption and repositioning by experimental filmmakers, contradictions tend to emerge as the documented images are often self-consciously staged versions of the familial dynamic and thus may not correspond to the “reality” existing in one's memory (though these images may also inform one's memory). The construction of a familial archive through home movies can make memory formation problematic; home movies can both produce or contradict one's memory when viewed retrospectively. Reconfigurations of one's own home movies in

avant-garde filmmaking – as in the work of Richard Fung, Helen Hill, Jay Rosenblatt, and Philip Hoffman – often attempts to emphasize these contradictions. As a type of found footage, the use of home movies often connotes a preservative instinct by the filmmaker even when they are deconstructed ideologically. The overarching themes of grief and loss which inform these particular recontextualizations of home movies places the construction and preservation of memory at the forefront of these films.

CHAPTER ONE

Coping with Loss through Home Movies: *Mouseholes*, *Sea in the Blood*, *What these ashes wanted*, and *Phantom Limb*

A confrontation with the realities of death is both common and potentially devastating. Within the repertoire of traditional home movie filmmaking, celebratory familial events and rituals figure prominently: weddings, birthdays, holidays, etc. This focus on the positive and idealized aspects of nuclear family life in home movies, as noted by Patricia Zimmermann in *Reel Families*, leaves melancholy events such as divorce and funerals un(der)represented (46). Helen Hill's *Mouseholes* (1999), Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood* (2000), Philip Hoffman's *What these ashes wanted* (2001), and Jay Rosenblatt's *Phantom Limb: A Film about Grief and Loss* (2005) each use home movies within the context of experimental films or videos that explore death and the process of grieving. *Mouseholes* is a very short (seven minutes and forty seconds) film that uses both animation and home movies in a tribute to Hill's recently deceased grandfather. *Sea in the Blood*, a short video about Fung's sister, Nan's, long struggle with fatal Thalassemia as well as his partner, Tim's, battle with HIV/AIDS, uses both Fung's own video footage and childhood home movies. *What these ashes wanted* was made following the 1996 death of Hoffman's partner, Marian McMahon. Though not as

directly as the other films, *What these ashes wanted* incorporates motifs and images that heavily reference home movies. Finally, *Phantom Limb* uses childhood home movies as well as appropriated found footage and Rosenblatt's own video footage to explore various facets and stories of grief and loss (including the early death of Rosenblatt's brother at the age of seven). Within the context of loss and grieving, the use of home movies in these works presents them as memories made physical. In relation to this representation of memory, the films, to varying degrees, call attention to the specific texture and physical deterioration of the home movie images. Also, all of the films use voice-over narration and/or intertitles to explicate the filmmakers' own experiences of loss. As death is visually unrepresented in the home movies the filmmakers use, audio as well as found footage or animation fill in this gap. In contrast, the incorporation of often-joyful home movies suggests a consistent drawing upon of happy memories and images to deal with grief and loss. Each of these films use home movies in order to negotiate and cope with the death of a close relative, thereby confronting and filling a void within the home movies themselves: the representation of death and grief.

Due to the memorializing qualities of home movies, the appropriation of home movies in experimental cinema often challenges representations of the self and memory both within and outside of the context of the family. In the introduction to *Mining the Home Movie*, Patricia Zimmermann argues that, as a "cinema of memory, home movies not only function as empirical evidence of otherwise lost events; they are at the same time political interventions, dreamscapes, and phantasms suggesting collisions among different spheres and contiguities across differences" ("Introduction" 22). However, the "lost events" captured by home movies are not unmediated segments of reality. The self-

conscious portrayal of the family idealizes relationships amongst family members, crafting a “dreamscape” of an unattainable perception of what should be captured in home movies. In the pursuit of an ideal image of the family unit, home movies tend to elide the grief and devastation of death. In *Reel Families*, Zimmermann notes “Home movies for memory documentation veered into the family equivalent of bomb shelters for civil defense—insurance against the insecurities of the future” (134). In using their own home movies in these works, each of the filmmakers actively preserve these home movies in a new form. The conscious selection of what should and should not be recorded for future viewing also suggests a deliberate shaping of future retrospection. Controlling representation in the present influences future remembrance. In her chapter on autoethnography in *Experimental Ethnography*, Catherine Russell argues “One often gets the sense that the filmmaker has no memory and is salvaging his or her own past through the recording of family memory” (278). Indeed, the seemingly overwhelming drive to preserve the memories embodied in the filmmaker’s home movies suggests a conception of memory as being extremely vulnerable. The filmmakers both flesh out and reinforce these memories by incorporating the home movies into their experimental filmmaking practices.

The interplay of home movies and experimental film has its roots in some of the North American avant-garde cinema of the 1960s and 70s. In his essay about autobiography in avant-garde film, P. Adams Sitney states that one of the primary strategies in experimental autobiography is to use home movies as the foundation blocks of the film (62). Sitney then argues that between the home movie images, the filmmaker “invents double-edged figures which obliquely represent the unfilmed past while

proclaiming the loss in continuity they would repair” (62). In the films under discussion in this chapter, the unfiled past most alluded to is the filmmakers’ experiences of a loved one’s death. As this past is in much closer proximity to the present context of *Mouseholes*, *Sea in the Blood*, and *What these ashes wanted* than it is in *Phantom Limb*, the former three films are able to employ emails, voicemail messages, and other audio recordings that directly address the imminent death. This creates a sense of immediacy that suggests the process of filmmaking is interwoven with the processing of grief in these cases. In the case of *Phantom Limb*, Rosenblatt’s reflection on a loss that occurred in childhood suggests a reworking of his experience of and relationship to grief. According to experimental filmmaker and writer Abigail Child, Stan Brakhage’s *Sincerity: Reel No. 2* (1978) and *Murder Psalm* (1981) “set up a provocative dialectic in Brakhage’s work, between the re-edited home movie and the re-worked found footage, between familial content and public reference, between lyric improvisation and what seems strongly a project set (however wide) of differentiated ‘found’ material” (197). Child’s suggestion that Brakhage deals differently with found footage than he does with home movies is relevant to the ways in which other filmmakers deal with their own home movies. The home movies become an extension of the filmmaker’s own work rather than something that also exists apart from it. The fact of the filmmakers’ (sometimes unwitting) participation in the home movies allows them to claim some authorship over them.

Home movies and experimental films are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories of filmmaking. In *There’s No Place like Home Video*, James Moran argues that the interplay between home movies and experimental cinema, such as in Jonas

Mekas and Stan Brakhage's films, does not compromise either mode of filmmaking in itself (69). Brakhage and Mekas more often employed the stylistic markers and subject matter (filming family, friends, celebrations, etc) of home movies than actual home movies themselves. However, the use of home movies by filmmakers such as Hill, Fung, Hoffman, and Rosenblatt builds more on this tradition of personal avant-garde filmmaking than it does on the tradition of found footage filmmaking. Paul Arthur, in *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965*, argues that films using footage from early cinema, home movies or fringe documentary advance the idea that, in eliding industrial codes through private production, these types of filmmaking "participate in the historical and aesthetic trajectories that culminate in the achievements of the American avant-garde" (66-7). Even when the filmmaker critiques home movies (as Fung does in *Sea in the Blood*), the shared context of the home movies and the filmmaker's own images suggests a continuity, rather than an opposition, between the different types of images. As I discuss later, the home movies used in *What these ashes wanted* slip between categories as they take on many generic traits of home movies but, being shot by Hoffman, may have different intentions in terms of aesthetics and exhibition. Though home movies often bear different aesthetic markers than experimental film, the two modes can both blend and contrast each other when used in one work.

With found footage filmmaking, the filmmaker is free to completely disregard or erase the image's original context. In *Recycled Images*, William C. Wees differentiates found footage films into three categories – compilation, collage, and appropriation – but suggests they all have the same political undercurrent: "By reminding us that we are seeing images produced and disseminated by the media, found footage films open the

door to a critical examination of the methods and motives underlying the media's use of images" (32). Unlike this mode of found footage filmmaking, the films under discussion here employ private images within a personal context. Even when *Sea in the Blood* veers into the politics of Tim McCaskell's HIV/AIDS diagnosis, it remains firmly grounded in the personal. In the chapter "Archival Apocalypse: Found Footage as Ethnography" in *Experimental Ethnography*, Russell argues "In the process of being appropriated, the original image gives over its meaning to the new text and is manipulated by the new filmmaker on the level of the signifier" (240). If treated as found footage, the filmmaker could overwrite the original context and meaning of home movies. However, the autobiographical drive of these films necessitates that the original context of the images be preserved. Unlike found footage, the filmmaker's own home movies are not being appropriated but rather reworked as visual evidence of the autobiography they are constructing.

The original context of the home movie images is crucial and necessitates that the filmmaker provide voice-over, on-screen text, or other visual clues to explain the images. In his essay "Home Movies of the Avant-Garde," Jeffrey Ruoff argues "Home movies and family albums call upon contextual information to produce meaning. To the intended audience of family and friends the significance of these documents is readily apparent, whereas they may appear repetitive or banal to outsiders" (10). Whereas found footage films reinscribe meaning onto the images, home movie images inscribe their original meaning onto the experimental films which employ them. Ruoff later argues that Mekas's films are reminiscent of home movies not only in their shooting style, incorporating "flash frames, in-camera editing, rapid camera movements, abrupt changes

in time and place, variable exposure and focus, and jump cuts,” but also in their reliance on the viewer’s knowledge of the New York avant-garde community (14-15). While one can be familiar with the people in Mekas’s films without knowing any of them personally, this is not often the case with home movies. The intimate knowledge required for an emotional investment in home movies grounds them firmly in their own personal context.

In using their own home movies in works about death and grieving, each of the filmmakers emphasizes that the home movie images themselves attempt to resist death. Péter Forgács, in “*Wittgenstein Tractatus: Personal Reflections on Home Movies*,” states that, of “the many things that happen in human life, most are not ‘suitable,’ not ‘fit’ for filming. It is not necessarily the costs of filming that account for the ‘missing images,’ but most probably what is considered taboo. While marriages on film are many, a home movie will never feature divorce—or abuse, aberration, or aggression” (51). Funerals, death, and mourning are also “missing” from typical home movies, though this elision is not due to funerals being considered taboo. Instead, the end of life contradicts the main function of home movies: to record idealized images of the family for posterity and stave off mortality. Forgács also argues “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.’” (52). If home movies allow everyday people to make themselves immortal through visual representation (or as immortal as the archival conditions of film storage allow), using these home movies in the more public medium of experimental films amplifies this sense of immortality by making it public. The tension

between the private and public is also present in how people deal with death. While images of death or funerals are notably absent from home movies, the recording (often for television) of large public funerals for state figures and celebrities is commonplace. Other experimental films, for instance Philip Hoffman's *passing through/torn formations* (1988) and Friedl vom Gröller's *Bliss* (2011), include footage of dying relatives (though not the moments of their actual deaths). These experimental filmmakers can represent and investigate issues of grief and loss in their films because, unlike the home mode, it is a public medium.

The films under discussion in this chapter construct oblique portraits of the deceased in their explicit memorialisation. In the chapter "Identity and/as Moving Image" in *A Line of Sight*, Arthur links personal avant-garde filmmaking to portraiture: "To expressively render the world of any portrait subject, and to embed in that display a gestural shadow of oneself and one's aesthetic project, is in some sense to concede the gaping existential chasm at the heart of all human consciousness. It is certainly no accident that the allegorization of death is a trope linked to portraiture" (36). The filmmakers craft portraits of their deceased loved ones around and through their home movies as a way of confronting the death and grief absent in the home movies themselves. Each of the filmmakers employs voice-over, on-screen text, conversations with family and friends, and substituted imagery of death (animation or appropriated found footage) as strategies for confronting mortality. In her essay "*Reminiscences, Subjectivities, and Truths*," Maureen Turim argues "The other can record the self or the self can record the other and the world, but the self cannot simply capture or control its own filmic articulation" (194). The filmmakers who employ their own home movies

exert some control over their filmed image through editing but ultimately only construct their own autobiographical portrait through the portrait of another.

Two of the works – *Mouseholes* and *What these ashes wanted* – were made on 16mm film while the other two – *Sea in the Blood* and *Phantom Limb* – are videos. In the videos, especially, the aesthetic of the Super8mm home movies contrasts with the other footage in its graininess and colour palette. *Phantom Limb* also appropriates 16mm found footage and thus has three distinct sets of visual texture. As the aesthetic markers of the different mediums contrast most heavily in the videos (grain vs. pixilation, etc.), the physicality of specifically the home movies is emphasized. In this chapter, I will show how the use of home movies in *Mouseholes*, *Sea in the Blood*, *What these ashes wanted*, and *Phantom Limb* exposes the gaps in what is represented in the home movies through their explorations of grief and loss.

Helen Hill's *Mouseholes*

Helen Hill's short film, *Mouseholes*, combines cut-out animation, models, paper and fabric dolls, audio recordings, and home movies to form a meditation on death. Hill's grandfather had recently died of kidney failure at the age of ninety-one and *Mouseholes* attempts to make sense of this loss. Through animation, Hill depicts her grandfather's final days in the hospital, death, and funeral. Audio recordings of conversations between Hill and her grandfather at the hospital as well as her brother's eulogy accompany her animations of these events. For the scenes of Hill's grandfather in the hospital, she uses a combination of paper cut-outs, fabric dolls, and models to create

versions of herself and her grandfather inside a miniature hospital room (see fig. 1). The mise-en-scène is stark and minimal: Hill's grandfather lies in the hospital bed on the left side of the frame underneath a small window through which changing light signals the time of day. Most of the frame is white or gray, thereby evoking the kind of cold and sterile atmosphere often associated with hospitals. At night, the darkness turns the walls a cobalt blue colour and brightens the grimness. Also, the handcrafted charm of Hill's animations, even within this muted colour palette, counters this sense of sterility.

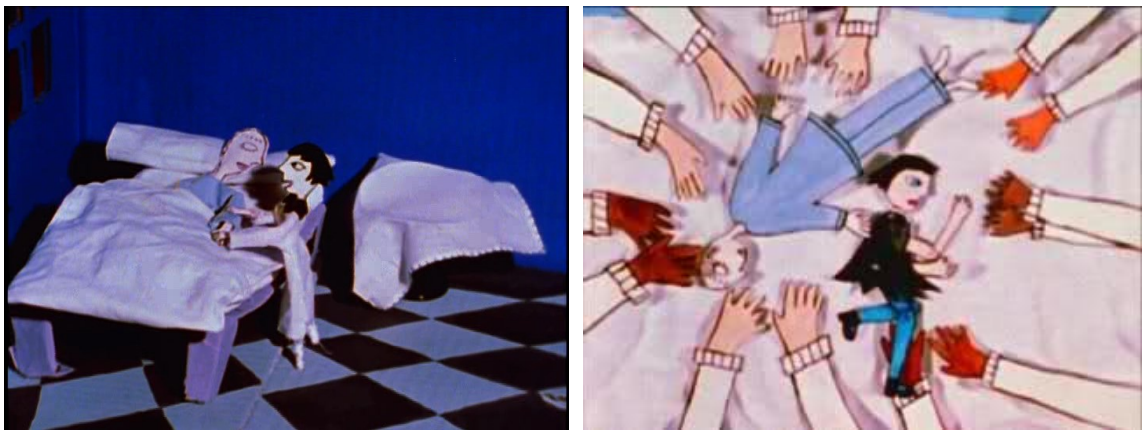


Fig. 1. Animations of Helen Hill and her grandfather, *Mouseholes*

Hill also animates her grandfather's funeral, using her brother's eulogy as well as her own voice-over narration on the soundtrack. In contrast to the images of the hospital, the animations of the funeral – all paper cut-outs – are much more bright and colourful. The multi-coloured stained glass windows of the church are quite prominent in this sequence. Also, the way in which Hill animates herself in relation to the other figures at the funeral is notable as her own figure is quite diminutive in relation to the others. Though an adult, the size of Hill's animated body appears childlike when placed next to her animated relatives (see fig. 2). The film, inverting the typical power dynamic of



Fig. 2. The funeral, *Mouseholes*

home movies to have the granddaughter representing her grandfather, presents Hill's grandfather as a larger-than-life, poetic presence. During the funeral sequence, Hill's voice-over explains that the pastors at her grandfather's funeral were sure that he was now in heaven. Hill goes on to say "I thought about what my mind could not imagine." Hill animates her grandfather at a tea party in heaven before returning to the days before he died. Using cardboard models and a white mouse, Hill animates both her grandfather's delirium (remembering his time working on trains) and her own hopes for him. She says: "He may be able to dig mouseholes and tiny passages so that by scratching and climbing he may be able to get back to everything." Throughout the film, Hill creates tension between whimsical optimism and reality. Just as the film veers into

imaginative fantasy, Hill pulls back and reinserts the unpleasant reality of her grandfather's death. As a work of memorialisation and mourning, *Mouseholes* captures a sense of bittersweetness in both celebrating life and grieving its end.



Fig. 3. Home movies, *Mouseholes*

The animated images of the funeral are intercut with the actual home movies of Hill as a child. In the home movies, Hill sits on the handlebars of a bicycle being peddled by her grandparents and, at a different time (the clothing changes), the grandfather pushes Hill and her brother in a buggy (see fig. 3). By combining animated images of the actual events captured in audio recordings, these animated images also stand in for home movies. The home movies stand out in the film by being the only live action images in

the film. However, the bright Kodachrome colour palette and grainy imperfection of the images aligns quite well with the aesthetic style of Hill's animation. *Mouseholes* is perhaps the most unabashedly nostalgic of the four films. Hill tends to celebrate, rather than problematize, her memories of her grandfather. As the images in the home movies are separated by decades from the event of Hill's grandfather's death, these images (unlike the other home movies I discuss later in this chapter) do not convey the same kind of melancholic context. Hill does not use these home movies to deconstruct or problematize them but rather to balance the happiness of the past with the sadness of the present.

Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood*

Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood* is the third video in an autobiographical trilogy that also includes *The Way to My Father's Village* (1988) and *My Mother's Place* (1990). *Sea in the Blood* uses home movies, photographs, and video footage to explore the effects of living with illness – through the stories of Fung's sister, Nan, and Fung's partner, Tim McCaskell – as well as the reverberations of colonialism and political change. Richard Fung writes that his use of home movies “maps a relationship among the personal, the familial, and the social within a transcultural context. There is a symbiotic relationship between the home movies as illustrations of ideas, and the ideas provoked by viewing and deconstructing the home movies” (30). Fung's deconstruction of home movies in his videos emphasizes the contradictions between one's memory and the images of the family seen in home movies. In *Sea in the Blood*, Fung uses incongruities between sound

and image to suggest a misalignment between his own memory and the construction of memory in the home movies of his childhood. While the video recycles an image of Fung and his sister, Nan, swimming and playing in the ocean as kids, the voice-over track narrates Fung's mother's experience of watching Nan die. The bright, playful images of a happy family – particularly the children – from the home movies combine with the voice-over narrative of a life dealing with illness and death (Fung's sister's thalassemia and his partner's HIV/AIDS) to create divergent notions of life and the images of life in home movies. In one sequence, a young Fung dances and smiles widely for the camera while his sister stands calmly next to him. In the voice-over, Fung states that, as a child, he was painfully shy away from his family. In this sequence and others, Fung repeatedly creates contrasts between private experiences and public appearances. *Sea in the Blood* suggests that the idealized portraits of the family do not adhere to the reality experienced by a family within both intimate and social contexts.

Often, when experimental filmmakers appropriate the home movies of their childhood, an inversion of the traditional parental/child power structure reevaluates representations of the family. Upon reviewing the home movies of his childhood as an adult, Richard Fung describes his experience as “each luminous frame opened a successive drawer in an archive of memories. From my present-day life in a gay, leftist commune in downtown Toronto, I was sucked back into the ‘60s to a Chinese Catholic home in suburban Port of Spain” (29). This vicarious time travel through the images of home movies reinforces the function of home movies as memory-machines. However, the memory enacted in home movies does not necessarily coincide with one's distanced remembrance of childhood: “I could identify most of the settings and events, and I

recognized the actors as my family and myself, but these films contradicted everything I remembered of the tone and texture of my childhood” (Fung 29). The distinction between past and present, memory and image, complicates the desire to preserve the family through documentation. Through idealization, home movies function as an agent of self-mythologizing which causes them to fail in the preservation of memory: “These images of a ‘right family’ were precisely what unsettled me when I first reencountered my family’s home movies as an adult. They contradicted what I remembered” (Fung 32). Fung’s appropriation of home movies thus complicates the reliability of memory and the truthfulness of self-representation. Images of the family undergo multiple stages of restructuring through self-conscious construction and subsequent deconstructions of ideals. Fung’s problematization of memory in *Sea in the Blood* – through the contrast between the images of happy, playing children and the context of Nan’s illness – reveals an attempt to cope with the fact of watching one’s child struggle with an incurable illness by consciously making, and recording, happy memories. Fung’s mother, who Fung says shot the majority of the home movies, counterbalanced her helplessness with respect to Nan’s illness by taking control over the visual representation of her family in these home movies.

In *Sea in the Blood*, Fung’s utilization of home movies and photographs exposes the mediums of familial documentation. In foregrounding the mediums he is appropriating, Fung emphasizes the constructed nature of images of the family. The use of the sound of a film projector as well as that of a slide carousel in the video places these images in a context of being outdated in terms of current technologies of familial documentation. Lily Cho argues that by



Fig. 4. Photograph of Richard Fung (left) and sister Nan, *Sea in the Blood*

emphasizing these older technologies of viewing within the space of the video, *Sea in the Blood* transforms loss not just through the ways in which video recuperates these images, but rather through making them new precisely by hanging onto the markers of their antiquity. These older images are not brought seamlessly into the video but are placed there, sometimes with just a thumb and forefinger holding up the slide, as disjunctive elements of the past which will have happened. (431)

Fung's emphasis on the past-ness of the images signifies the memorializing quality of attempting to trace and document personal history from the perspective of a child viewing his parents. The emphasis on the specific mediums that create these found

images of his family also draws attention to how one's perspective of family alters from childhood to adulthood. In reencountering images of his childhood as an adult and appropriating them into his artistic practice, Fung creates a schism between documentation for the purposes of serving subsequent memory (through home movies) and the actual formation of memory over time.

The visual texture of the Super8mm home movies, in contrast to Fung's video footage, emphasizes the physical deterioration of the home movie image. The home movie images appear less manipulated and aestheticized than Fung's video footage. Much of the video footage is layered in superimpositions and the handheld, fast-moving camera creates frame dragging. The markers of medium specificity are ever present in Fung's uses of both film and video. The material artefact of the Super8mm footage degrades over time, with scratches and debris accumulating over years of projections and storage. Fung exaggerates the deterioration of the footage by converting it to video: in the transfer process, the footage becomes blurry and pixelated. As documents of the past, these home movies are thus imperfect images as, over the years, visual information has been lost through this process of deterioration. By emphasizing the physical deterioration of the home movie footage, Fung suggests that these images are fragments whose present condition is discordant with their original context. The conversion process from film to video similarly emphasizes the distancing of the image as artefact from the past. Fung's use of this home movie footage thus constructs tension between memory and the image through the specific aesthetics of home movies. By emphasizing the deterioration and fragmentation of the image over time and through different technologies, Fung suggests that the memory of the past may not align with the images of the past. Over time, the

image moves away from its context in the past and its physical degradation suggests that the image itself is an impermanent, perhaps inaccurate, document of the past through the lens of the present.

Fung uses home movies when dealing with Nan's illness but not with McCaskell's. Thomas Waugh notes that, through the inclusion of Fung's own home movies, "the simple unaestheticized presence of another shamed queer school kid – Richard himself, the home-movie figuring of a slight and hyperactive boy – is returned to repeatedly. In this frenzy performed by the original school fag for his parents' camera we can trace the performance of his learning to be 'close to illness'" (74). In contrast to the home movie images of Nan, Fung shows his partner, Tim McCaskell, and the context of his illness through talking-head style close-ups and footage of McCaskell speaking at a PWA rally. In representing McCaskell, his experience of HIV/AIDS and PWA activism in a style similar to a documentary mode of filmmaking, Fung emphasizes the political implications of this representation. McCaskell also appears in vacation snapshots and video of he and Fung swimming in a lake, however these shots are associated more with Nan's illness as this is what Fung's voice-over focuses on when they are shown. Thus, Fung emphasizes the personal resonances of Nan's illness and death and the public and political resonances of McCaskell's illness. Fung seems to separate the personal story of his relationship with McCaskell from the political story of his HIV/AIDS diagnosis whereas his relationship with Nan and her illness exist in the same private realm.

Unlike the other films under discussion here, *Sea in the Blood* moves from the personal to the political in representing McCaskell's HIV/AIDS and PWA activism. Russell argues that much of contemporary autobiographical filmmaking comes out of

“queer culture, from the film- and videomakers whose personal histories unfold within a specifically public sphere” (278). Though Fung’s introduction of his relationship to McCaskell and HIV/AIDS is the point at which the personal becomes political, his focus is more on the personal ramifications of these relationships. The documentary-style footage is counterbalanced and outweighed by candid photographs of their trips and the lyrical footage of Fung and McCaskell swimming that reappears throughout *Sea in the Blood*. Linking home movies to portraiture, Arthur argues that portraits are often associated with death:

Since portraits in general limn an effort to establish some logic for beginning and ending, one that refuses familiar narrative devices of anticipation and resolution, the ‘arbitrary’ gesture of closure instates a condition that is both formal necessity and, symbolically, universal biological fate. Portraits made in the shadow of AIDS have managed to thematize this inherent problematic, with scrutiny of a subject’s face and manner, in a sense, overdetermined by the prospect of imminent death. (42)

While it is never suggested that McCaskell’s death is imminent, the connection of his story with Nan’s is a part of a genuine concern with his mortality. The parallels between the personal and political narratives of illness structures the film and suggests that Fung explores them in tandem in order to negotiate the sense of futility that can accompany incurable illness. Returning briefly once more to the political, Fung hints at his experiences of postcolonialism and diaspora, exploring them to a lesser degree here than in his other videos. Travel is also a structuring device in *Sea in the Blood*, though primarily through Nan’s travel to England for treatment and Fung and McCaskell’s

extended vacation in Europe and Asia. Russell notes “A prominent theme in contemporary personal cinema is the staging of an encounter with the filmmaker’s parent(s) or grandparent(s) who embody a particular cultural history of displacement or tradition” (278). Fung’s interviews with his mother introduce his familial and cultural histories of postcolonialism and diaspora, once again infusing his personal narratives with political and historical resonance. While Fung uses the autobiographical as a gateway to explore the political, at its core *Sea in the Blood* remains a primarily personal film.

Philip Hoffman’s *What these ashes wanted*

Philip Hoffman’s *What these ashes wanted* is a fifty-minute experimental film which explores ideas of death and grieving, focussing primarily on the death of Hoffman’s partner, Marian McMahon, while also including other stories of deaths as well. The use of home movies in *What these ashes wanted* is unique amongst this grouping of films because they were shot primarily by the filmmaker, rather than by the filmmaker’s relative(s) (as is the case with the other three works discussed here). Also, unlike the other films, Hoffman’s home movies have synchronized sound. Though they may have been shot with different intentions than the typical home movies, some of the images in *What these ashes wanted* display the same kind of aesthetic idioms of home movies. For instance, Hoffman shoots McMahon running around and playing in the snow. The sense of spontaneity, handheld, haphazard framing, and the way in which McMahon gleefully performs for the camera in this sequence are very reminiscent of home movies. The film also contains sequences shot in Egypt that are often similar to

home movies made on vacation. Unlike the sequence of McMahon in the snow, the images shot in Egypt are very aestheticized. The first shot in Egypt is a static extreme long shot of a stone building. Behind the pillars, a figure walks from the right of the frame to the left in slow motion. In the script posted on Philip Hoffman's website, he labels both of these images as home movies (Hoffman "What these ashes wanted"). Later, there is a rapidly edited sequence of handheld close-ups of screens (showing clips from various movies) in the Museum of the Moving Image in London, England. The shot which most resembles typical travel home movies is a medium shot of McMahon in Egypt, framed like a portrait. This is also the only one of the above shots which includes synchronized sound: McMahon talks to the camera, remarking on how she and Hoffman can get away with their filming because, as white tourists, they look privileged.

The images described above borrow from home movies in their subject matter and somewhat in their style. What sets them apart from typical home movies is their privileging of a stylized aesthetic over the subject matter. Thus, they belong more to the avant-garde tradition than home movies. With the exception of the medium shot of McMahon, it is often difficult to determine the precise subjects of the image. Similarly, *What these ashes wanted* contains a sequence – akin to the London footage – of very quick and moving shots at a market and a public skating rink. Rather than using actual home movies and making them avant-garde through editing and context, Hoffman infuses his quasi-home movies with experimental aesthetics.

Throughout *What these ashes wanted*, Hoffman uses recorded voice-mail messages as artefacts of daily life. Even more so than home movies, the voice-mail messages capture the everyday. The first voice-mail message heard in the film is the

voice of a friend of Hoffman's reading from a book. The other voice-mail messages used most often throughout the film are from health care practitioners calling to discuss McMahon's condition. The voice-mail messages are often layered on top of one another along with music and Hoffman's voice-over narration. This superimposition of voices and sounds sometimes builds into a cacophony of voices. The slight distortion of the voice-mail messages stands out from Hoffman and McMahon's voices which are rendered with more aural clarity. The layering of the voice-mail messages often obscures what is being said, making them disorienting and difficult to understand. Midway through the film, a cacophony of voice-mails accompanies a sequence of high-contrast hand processed images. This sequence is made up of shots inside and outside of Hoffman's home – including shots of changing light through windows and dead flowers in a garden – which are void of people. The abstraction of this sequence, combined with the disorienting effect of the multi-layered voice-mails, is evocative of the confusion and disorientation of grief and loss.

During a sequence which Hoffman shot sitting in the back seat of a car while McMahon drives, they have a discussion about the effect of the presence of the camera. McMahon explains that being filmed makes her uncomfortable because she feels as if she has to perform for the camera. She states that she is not able to have the kind of conversation with Hoffman that she would if she was talking directly to him without the camera. In response, Hoffman tells McMahon that he, too, is uncomfortable with the filming because the camera is heavy. After a brief argument over this response, Hoffman corrects his statement and explains that the camera makes him uncomfortable because the act of filming distracts his attention away from fully engaging in conversation with

McMahon. This exchange openly and critically acknowledges what most home movies (and documentaries, etc.) either ignore or suppress: the effects of the presence of the camera on behaviour and performance. While it is not uncommon for people being filmed in home movies to acknowledge the camera by smiling, waving, etc., McMahon and Hoffman's conversation emphasizes the elements of artifice in the footage used elsewhere in the film that appear more like traditional home movies.



Fig. 5. Distorted travel footage, *What these ashes wanted*

In the film, Hoffman uses hand-processed footage, footage shot in a malfunctioning camera, and still images of his dead grandfather lying in his casket. The still images were shot by Hoffman, at the time a young film student, at the request of his family. In *What these ashes wanted*, Hoffman explains in a voice-over that he placed the

undeveloped film in his freezer and did not develop the images until ten years after the funeral. The hand-processed, high contrast footage is somewhat imperfect, bearing the traces of dust, scratches, and uneven developing. The slight imperfections of this footage emphasize the organic nature and vulnerability of celluloid as a medium. Similarly, the use of footage shot in a malfunctioning camera also emphasizes that film is imperfect and subject to human and mechanical error. The images shift and jump around haphazardly, the frame out of control inside the camera, creating an optical effect that is likely the result of a broken pressure gate. This footage draws attention to the materiality of celluloid; film itself has a corporeal presence that can be changed, damaged, etc. (see fig. 5). Thus, in this film about memory and memorialisation through physical and mental artefacts, calling attention to the precariousness of film serves to emphasize impermanence and the (sometimes devastating) effects of the unexpected. Also, in freezing the still photos of his dead grandfather, Hoffman attempts to distance himself from the images while also preserving them. There is a sense of ambivalence attached to Hoffman's use of these photos in *What these ashes wanted*: the photos are preserved in order to preserve the memory of the person, though perhaps these are not the memories that he wants.

The use of film, both in moving images and photographs, to interrogate the way memory functions as well as its potential vulnerabilities is something that recurs in Hoffman's body of films. In "On Philip Hoffman," Andre Loiseau argues that Hoffman's films often stage "film's fundamental dichotomy as a device that records the materiality of existence and a window into memory as the elusive anchor of private and public identity" (10). The home movie motifs in *What these ashes wanted* suggests a

simultaneous creation and preservation of new memories. Mike Hoolboom suggests Hoffman “convenes the family as a way to contend with the death of too many around him. [...] He is determined to show memory at work, to make diary moments and stitch them together (his montage produces a family of pictures, a family album)” (6). Hoffman’s film diaries creates materiality from mortality; he not only records memories but also manipulates them with montage and visual effects. The idea of freezing a roll of film until he is ready to view the images it bears comes up both in *What these ashes wanted* and *O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (Hoffman 1986). Hoffman thus repeatedly errs on the side of preserving memory and images regardless of the difficulties of dealing with them.

Surprisingly, considering it is often the most abstract of the films discussed here, *What these ashes wanted* is the only film which overtly and directly appropriates images and audio from popular culture. The first occurrence of this happens mid-way through the film when Hoffman uses a clip from season five episode fifteen of the popular television series *Baywatch*. This episode, titled “Seize the Day,” originally aired in February of 1995. In the scene that is used in *What these ashes wanted*, presented without any of the original sound, Tracy (Rebekah Carlton-Luff), lying in a hospital bed, tells Mitch (David Hasselhoff) that she does not want to die in a hospital. He promptly picks her up and takes her to the beach as the sun sets. This scene clearly echoes the story that Hoffman’s voice-over narrates elsewhere in the film: he, too, had taken McMahon from the hospital to visit the beach (see fig. 6). Though the *Baywatch* scene parallels Hoffman and McMahon’s story, it heavily contrasts the rest of the film stylistically. The sound used during this sequence is a layering of Aimee Mann’s version



Fig. 6. Marian McMahon, *What these ashes wanted*

of the song “One” – notably used two years earlier in Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999) – with recorded audio of a doctor describing McMahon’s deteriorating condition and prognosis. In addition, the song “Down by the Water” by PJ Harvey plays during the end credits of the film. All three popular culture references were originally released in 1995, the year before McMahon died. This use of three cultural artefacts from 1995 suggests a kind of inside joke, a remembrance of a (very personal) specific moment in time through a specific moment in popular culture. The inclusion of the *Baywatch* scene, in particular, seems to be an odd choice in the context of the rest of the film. The cheap melodrama of watching David Hasselhoff carry an extremely glamorous dying woman on the beach at sunset reads ironically placed in the middle of an experimental film. It is a jarring and unexpected moment in the film; in its stark contrast to Hoffman’s own

images, this scene reinforces the emotionally moving and often sombre tone of the rest of the film.

McMahon's is not the only death that Hoffman talks about in *What these ashes wanted*. In addition to discussing his grandfather and other family members' deaths, Hoffman also describes, in voice-over, the death of a film technician who had a heart attack while his wife was on the phone with Hoffman (discussing the processing of the footage shot in the malfunctioning camera) as well as the witnessing of the death of an old man on a train and an attempted suicide. In this way, the film returns to, again and again, the idea of making death a public, shared experience. At one point in *What these ashes wanted*, McMahon asks Hoffman if he could create his own ritual to follow death (akin to funerals), whether it would be private or shared. Hoffman answers that it would be shared. In making this film as a way of memorialising McMahon and processing his own grief, the film makes the privacy of a relationship, a death, and the process of grieving public. By including stories of death other than McMahon's, Hoffman creates a sense of universal grieving. At the beginning of the film, there is a title card with the lines of a poem by Mark Doty: "What these ashes wanted, I felt sure, / was not containment by participation. / Not an enclosure of memory, / but the world." Both this passage and the film as a whole suggests that death, like life, should be and is a communal/community experience. In not containing memory but opening it to the participation of an audience, *What these ashes wanted* allows the experience of grief to be transmitted and shared.

Jay Rosenblatt's *Phantom Limb*



Fig. 7. Jay Rosenblatt (left) and his brother, *Phantom Limb*

Jay Rosenblatt's *Phantom Limb* combines home movies, found footage, and Rosenblatt's own video footage to explore different iterations of grief and loss. The film is structured in twelve sections: separation, collapse, sorrow, denial, confusion, shock, rage, advice, longing, depression, communication, and return. The first segment of the film, "Separation," uses home movie footage of Rosenblatt and his younger brother (see fig. 7). Interspersed with these home movie images are intertitles that narrate the illness and death of Rosenblatt's brother at the age of seven (Rosenblatt was nine). Like *Sea in the Blood*, when Rosenblatt's home movies appear on screen, the sound of a running projector is heard on the soundtrack. This sound of a projector, however, does not

accompany the found footage that Rosenblatt uses later in the film. In this way, the film emphasizes the materiality of the home movies. Using the sound of a projector only with the home movie images suggests that Rosenblatt is attempting to mimic the experience of watching home movies; home movies are often viewed at home with the projector in the room, rather than its own separate booth as in typical commercial movie watching.

Phantom Limb is the only one of the four films under discussion to use a childhood experience of death as its focal point, though there is a significant gap in time between the deaths and the making of the films in the cases of *What these ashes wanted* and especially *Sea in the Blood*. In “Away from Copying: The Art of Documentary Practice,” Michael Renov argues that the fact of *Phantom Limb* being produced decades after Rosenblatt’s brother’s death is “a clue to the deferred or dislocated temporality that death and mourning can engender” (22). The conscious exclusion of death and mourning from the typical subject matter of home movies also constitutes a deferral. In preparation for future retrospection, home movies capture only what one hopes to remember. Thus, Rosenblatt bridges the gap between the past and present, between the represented and unrepresented, by substituting intertitles and archival images for actual images of his brother’s illness and death. Renov also argues that *Phantom Limb*’s use of text, “short, declarative sentences that provide a framework of past events,” intercut with home movies and archival images causes the film to navigate between “personal testimony and clinical description” (22). This tension between the personal and the clinical also plays out in the contrast between the home movies and found footage; the home movies overflow with (personal) context whereas the archival images function more as illustrations of Rosenblatt’s narrative that are emptied of their original context. In the

case of the home movies, the images and text do not align perfectly and thus simultaneously tell two different stories. Rosenblatt's appropriated found footage, in comparison, most often directly correlates with what is written in the preceding intertitle. For instance, a short sequence of black and white archival footage of a young boy in a hospital – receiving an injection from a nurse and lying in a hospital bed – follows an intertitle describing Rosenblatt's brother's illness. Shortly after, found footage of a funeral follows an intertitle in which Rosenblatt says he was deemed too young to attend his brother's funeral. Thus, these archival images are subsumed into Rosenblatt's personal narrative.



Fig. 8. Rosenblatt (right) semi-playfully chokes his brother, *Phantom Limb*

Rosenblatt frames his home movies with a sense of melancholy and guilt. In one sequence, Rosenblatt and his brother walk forwards on a concrete footpath towards the camera in a long shot. It cuts and then reframes the two boys in a medium shot. As they pose and look at the camera, Rosenblatt semi-playfully wraps his hands around his brother's neck (see fig. 8). This footage is slightly slowed-down, giving it a meditative air. This gesture, combined with intertitles describing Rosenblatt's childhood feelings of embarrassment because of his brother's illness and subsequent feeling that his own resentment of his brother had caused his death, suggests that these images do not carry a sense of joyful nostalgia for Rosenblatt. His use of home movies, in comparison to his use of found footage, emphasizes the specific context of the images. Later in the film, Rosenblatt appropriates footage from medical and educational films to stand in for images of his brother's illness and death. These found footage images are completely subsumed into Rosenblatt's own personal narrative and thus, unlike the home movies, do not seem to be in dialogue with the film. In the exactness of the parallels between Rosenblatt's text and the found footage images, this archival material becomes merely visual illustrations of Rosenblatt's story; in this way, Rosenblatt seems to spell out their meaning for the viewer. The archival images of a young boy in the hospital as well as a funeral become stand-ins for their home movie counterparts which do not exist.

Perhaps the most striking image of the film is a single, slow-motion long take lasting five minutes and ten seconds comprising the "Advice" segment. In this shot, which shows the shearing of a sheep from start to finish, a man carefully manipulates the body of the sheep with one arm (and often his legs) while the other arm is used for shearing (see fig. 9). The sheep flails around during this sequence but seems always to be

under the man's control. At the end of the shot, the man places his hand over the sheep's face in a caring gesture. The strength and precision of his movements, in contrast with the erratic flailing of the sheep, creates a sense of a parent-child power dynamic. During this sequence, the audio consists of sombre violins and the voice of a woman reading advice for parents who have recently lost a child. The woman's voice is gentle and measured, paralleling the careful movements of the sheep shearer. This sequence creates tension between control and chaos; the experience of death and grieving necessitates not only a sense of strength and stability but also messy and devastating catharsis.



Fig. 9. Shearing a sheep, *Phantom Limb*

By incorporating their own home movies in experimental, personal films exploring death and mourning, Helen Hill, Richard Fung, Philip Hoffman, and Jay Rosenblatt at once expose and remedy the gaps in home movie representation: the representations of grief and loss. In these experimental films, home movies act as physical memories made manifest. To varying degrees, the emphasis on the materiality of home movies also calls attention to their physical deterioration. Thus, the vulnerabilities of film as a medium parallel the vulnerabilities and inconsistencies of

memory. All of these films use voice-over narration and some use on-screen text; to varying degrees, this use of spoken and written text deconstructs or problematizes the images of the home movies. Hill's use of home movies emphasizes the happiness of the past in a celebration of her grandfather's life. Fung's narration of his memories contradicts his home movies and, in doing so, reveals how one consciously chooses how to represent the family according to what one *wants* to remember. Hoffman's home movies, being shot at the same time as the rest of the film, blur the line between the home mode and experimental film. Finally, Rosenblatt's use of home movies creates a dialogue between the image and the text that, notably, does not extend to his use of found footage. In different ways, each of these films create substitutes for the images of loss that are missing from the home movies themselves. Ultimately, *Mouseholes*, *Sea in the Blood*, *What these ashes wanted*, and *Phantom Limb* all circle around the tension between actual memories – which include, sometimes prominently, experiences of grief and loss – and the desired memories suggested by the idealized portraits of private life shown in home movies.

CHAPTER TWO

Let's Go Back to New Orleans: The Destruction, Preservation, and Repositioning of Helen Hill's Home Movies

Twice since 2000, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York has screened home movies, once in the context of an exhibition and film series and again as a part of its annual film festival celebrating recently preserved films. In 2000, MoMA organized an exhibition entitled *Home Movies* and a concurrent screening series entitled *Home Movies... and More*. This *Home Movies* series emphasized the importance of home movies to cinema history, deconstructed the division between public and private viewing practices, and framed home movies as significant cultural documents in contrast to the traditional conception of home movies as made for leisure and private viewing. The second screening of home movies at MoMA occurred in 2009 during the seventh edition of the *To Save and Project* film festival. This screening included home movies made by experimental filmmaker and animator Helen Hill in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina which were subsequently damaged by the floods. Helen Hill and others made tremendous efforts to salvage these films as documents of pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans. The 2009 *To Save and Project* screening of these home movies alongside more famous home movies, emphasizes Hill's home movies as part of a

cinematic history outside of the mainstream industry context. Also, as the screening occurred after Hill's sudden death in 2007, the screening of her home movies also functions to preserve and celebrate Hill's memory. The 2000 and 2009 screenings of home movies at MoMA reposition home movies outside of the home and thereby call into question the distinctions between private and public cinematic production contexts. The 2010 completion of Helen Hill's film, *The Florestine Collection*, by her husband Paul Gailiunas, utilizing her preserved flood-damaged home movies, draws these private movies further into the public sphere as a part of a memorializing project of the late filmmaker. MoMA's screenings and exhibitions of home movies redefine these private films as public documents and draws connections between home movies and other forms of cinema that experimental filmmakers have been exploring for decades. The screenings of Helen Hill's home movies at MoMA and the 2006 and 2008 Orphan Film Symposia as well as the incorporation of those same home movies into *The Florestine Collection* and Hill and Courtney Egan's *Cleveland Street Gap* (2006) act as tributes to both New Orleans and Hill, grounding political issues in a deeply personal narrative of loss.

Home Movies at the Museum of Modern Art

The Museum of Modern Art, since the creation of its Film Library, actively shapes both viewing practices and the perception of cinema in general. In *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema*, Haidee Wasson examines the cultural history of MoMA's Film Library and argues that the establishment of this circulating film archive changed how people viewed cinema. According to

Wasson, in “the most general sense, the Film Library was a powerful coordinator of resources and promulgator of discourses about cultural value and productive leisure” (7). Wasson’s book demonstrates how MoMA has, historically, shaped viewing practices and the perception of cinema’s cultural value. Though home movies have been screened outside of MoMA in contexts such as the Orphan Film Symposium (albeit infrequently in relation to other forms of cinema), MoMA’s historic importance in shaping the perception of cinema would, by extension, shape how home movies are perceived after being screened in this major art institution. The establishment of MoMA’s Film Library was a major factor in “the widespread institutionalization of select films and particular modes of film watching,” calling forth a new kind of cinema (Wasson 33). In my analysis, by adding home movies to the MoMA Film Library, both the 2000 *Home Movies* series and the 2009 screening of home movies during the seventh *To Save and Project* film festival attempt to legitimize the genre of home movies as both important to cinema history as well as culture in general. In addition, the 2000 *Home Movies* series provides context for the 2009 screenings by establishing a precedent for how home movies are framed within the museum context.

The *Home Movies* installation was a part of *Modern Living 2*, an exhibition focusing on post-World War II era domestic design. This installation incorporated a Bolex 8mm projector which projects a film loop that MoMA commissioned from various artists who work with found footage. The press release entitled “Four-Month Series at MoMA Explores the History and Influence of Home Movies” states that the *Home Movies* screening and exhibition draws upon the full scope of cinema history – beginning with Louis Lumière’s 1895 *Repas de bébé* (see Fig. 10) – during which many “amateur



Fig. 10. Home movies at the start of cinema, Louis Lumière's *Repas de bébé* (1895)

and professional filmmakers have used the medium to capture images from the private domain and display them in a more public context.” The exhibition of home movies in MoMA emphasizes the shift from private to public viewing. As Patricia Zimmermann argues in *Reel Families*, home movies are typically conceived as an amateur or leisure form of filmmaking and thus, by screening home movies in the context of an art institution, this context continues in MoMA’s tradition of changing viewing practices. This press release also states that the series explores how home movies document changing family roles as well as the changing status of moving images in general. By emphasizing the connection between home movies and not only cinema history in general

but also the cultural history of family relationships, this press release communicates the cultural and historical importance of home movies. In doing so, the press release frames home movies as having cultural resonance outside of their original private context and justifies the placement of a typically amateur/leisure filmmaking practice within the context of a major art institution. Patricia Zimmermann argues in *Reel Families* that the “proliferation of VCRs [...] and the increasingly high technical standards of amateur video may deflect montage from the text itself to the context of exhibition. Relocating the exhibition venue of home video may function as a montage strategy at the site of reception” (156). Home movies are perhaps as ubiquitous and familiar as mainstream industry cinema but exhibiting them outside of their usual position in the home defamiliarizes them. While experimental filmmakers aestheticize or recontextualize home movies within their own practices, exhibiting home movies within an institution devoted to modern art positions them as part of the history of the art of cinema rather than outside of it; experimental filmmakers and MoMA are accomplishing similar goals here but in different ways.

MoMA’s *Home Movies* press release also constructs a brief history of early home movie technology from the limited use of 16mm to the proliferation of 8mm and Super 8mm amongst the general population. Within this technological history of home movies, the press release suggests that, as film technology spread to those not professionally familiar with the medium, home movies developed new – distinctive – stylistic characteristics. These characteristics include amateurish camerawork, spontaneity, a technical avoidance of deliberate lighting and editing, and a sense of naïve self-consciousness. In outlining the characteristics often associated with the typical home

movie, this press release not only provides background information on the genre but also reinforces what may be expected from a home movie in order to challenge this through the works shown. As the exhibition and screenings include films made by artists as well as anonymous home movie makers, stating a set of clear stylistic markers of typical home movies in this press release functions to emphasize the differences between the two uses (artist or amateur, public or private) of the genre. The press release also states that, particularly “following World War II, the home movie functioned as an equalizing force, cutting across economic, social, and cultural boundaries as family units declared their uniqueness and celebrated their achievements, while the action of filming reinforced a common goal of personal documentation.” This emphasis on the democratization of the film medium through home movies highlights the idea that home movies serve to change the ways in which people interact with cinema (by making films themselves and viewing them at home).

By screening home movies at MoMA, the exhibition not only brings attention to the cultural importance of home movies but also questions how they are perceived. The press release quotes Jytte Jensen and Anne Morra, organizers of the *Home Movies* exhibition, as saying “in the hands of amateurs or professionals, whether designed for private or public consumption, the defining components of a home movie seem to be covered by notions linked to the intimate sphere: immediacy, familiarity, authenticity, accessibility, and artlessness.” Outlining these characteristics of the traditional home movie makes the concept and idioms of the genre explicit. By articulating the genre in clear aesthetic and thematic terms, Jensen and Morra thus provide a basis for the exhibition to then challenge these concepts. The organizers also state in the press release

that the “series will demonstrate the various ways these qualities have developed throughout the century, while also examining how these same qualities are being questioned, deconstructing an often static image of domestic tranquility and happiness.” As the series screens both traditional home movies and interpretations or appropriations of the genre by artists, the interplay of different styles of home movies emphasizes the differences and similarities between amateur and professional home movies. As I discussed in the previous chapter, experimental filmmakers frequently adopt the technologies and style of home movies. Indeed, in *Underground Film: A Critical History*, Parker Tyler calls underground film, as a collective movement, “a new, radically inspired revision of the home movie” (40). Though home movies and experimental films might be distinguished from one another based on the intentions of their production, placing both genres of filmmaking beside one another in this museum context emphasizes the fluidity of this distinction. This allows for a complex reading and questioning of both traditional home movies as well as films more typically screened in the museum setting (experimental films, for example). The screening of Helen Hill’s home movies at MoMA and the subsequent appropriation of these home movies into *The Florestine Collection* demonstrate clearly the slippage between the amateur and professional, traditional and artistically radical, connotations of home movies depending on their context.

The organizers of the *Home Movies* series, Jensen and Morra, also co-authored a short article on the series. In this article, Jensen and Morra state that the series aims to analyze and define the idea of the home movie and “includes but is not limited to traditional home movies, a term generally applied to movies by amateurs, starring family members, based on subject matter from the private domain, and intended for screenings

within the family circle as a document of family events, unity and bliss” (32). This definition of traditional home movies as documenting a sense of unity and bliss within the family highlights the association of home movies with nostalgia. Jensen and Morra’s definition of the traditional home movie thus suggests that this genre portrays an idealization of the familial unit. At the end of the article, Jensen and Morra reflect on the public/private dichotomy associated with home movies and argue that, by placing home movies within the context of a museum collection, they are therefore expanding and redefining the genre’s place in film history (33). While experimental filmmakers have long subsumed home movies into their own filmmaking practices, the screening of home movies in a museum context repositions the home movies themselves as aesthetically and historically relevant.

Paul Arthur argues that the adoption of a home movie aesthetic by experimental filmmakers suggests both “a desire to collate private depictions of everyday life with broader, collective experiences and events” and “the desire to discover formal or thematic connections between contemporary and silent-era, or ‘primitive,’ cinematic practices” (62). Recontextualizing home movies by screening them in a museum does much of the same work that experimental filmmakers do through editing and aestheticization. By crafting an exhibition and screening series around home movies at MoMA, this public context draws attention to how home movies are typically viewed – in the home. The act of shifting traditional viewing practices in this case allows for home movies to be viewed as important cultural documents (institutionalized in the museum) as well as potential material for artistic expression. In addition, Jensen and Morra argue that the act of an artist screening a home movie in a public forum radically recontextualizes the home

movie and invites a more complex reading, “further encouraged by the artists by framing it, altering it in any manner imaginable, or simply using the material-or for that matter various materials associated with home movies-as a point of departure for their own artistic expression” (33). This idea of reframing home movies in an artistic context returns in MoMA in the screening of home movies – particularly those of experimental filmmaker Helen Hill – during the seventh *To Save and Project* film festival in 2009.

Preserving Hill’s Home Movies

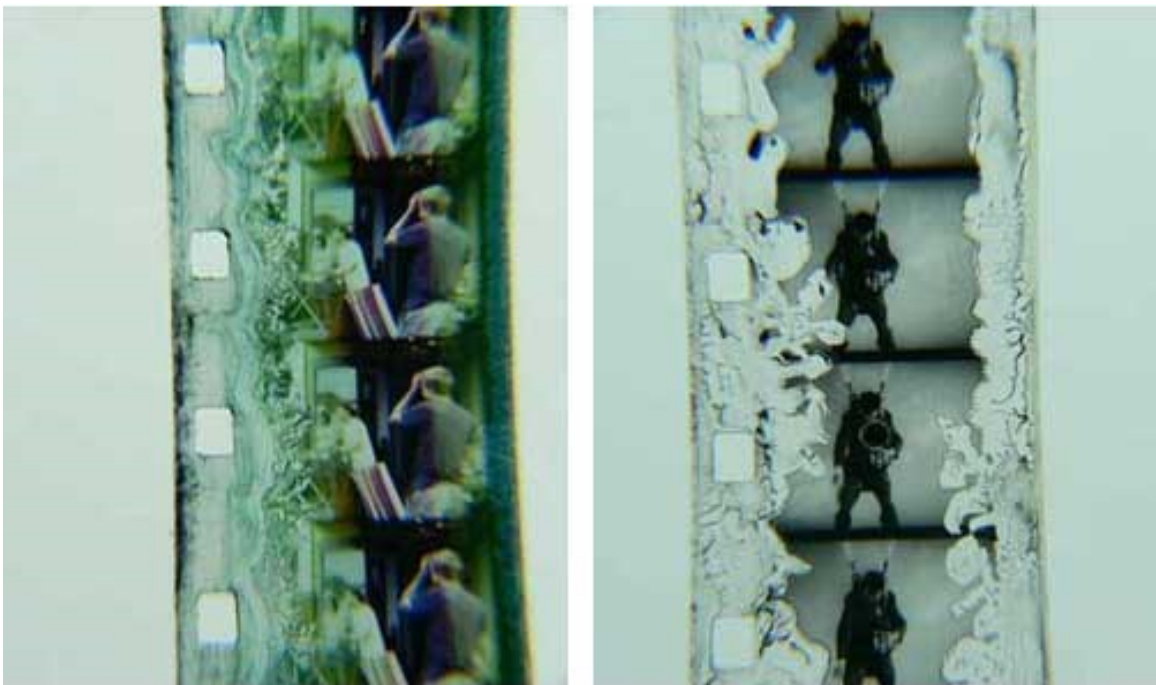


Fig. 11. Helen Hill’s flood-damaged films after cleaning (Van Malssen “Preserving”).

In a case study of film preservation, Kara Van Malssen details the efforts of herself, Helen Hill, and others to restore and preserve Hill’s experimental films and her home movies. Helen Hill was an experimental filmmaker and animator living and

working in New Orleans, Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Her home was flooded, thereby damaging prints of both her films and home movies. Hill worked to restore these prints until her tragic death on January 4th, 2007 when an intruder shot her in her home in New Orleans (Van Malssen “Preserving”). In addition to her experimental filmmaking and animation, Hill regularly produced home movies documenting the lives of her friends, family, celebrations, political events and protests. Consistent with typical home movies, when “son Francis Pop was born in October 2004, he became Helen’s favorite subject. The last Super 8 she shot, with Paul, recorded them at home on January 1, 2007, three days before her death” (Van Malssen “Preserving”). The focus on both experimental films and home movies in this particular case of film preservation suggests a dual effort of preserving artistic material as well as personal memories. In addition, Hill’s flood-damaged home movies also function both as records of pre-Katrina New Orleans – with the aesthetic imprint of the subsequent damage – and selective glimpses into Hill’s life – with the accompanying nostalgia of traditional home movies. The selection of Hill’s home movies that were able to be preserved and appear in *The Florestine Collection* show her private family life, her participation in a community of artists, and public parades and celebrations in New Orleans. The physical inscription of flood damage onto the celluloid emphasizes the nostalgic effect of the home movies. After the physical and social devastation of New Orleans, Hill’s home movies become visual records of both the city and the floods as the damaged emulsion transforms images of the city into celluloid palimpsests.

Although the flood damaged Hill’s 16mm (primarily animated) films and Super 8mm home movies, she became dedicated to trying to salvage everything possible. As a

result of the flood, many of Hill's films were completely submerged under water and accumulated mould growth over two months in a hot and humid climate (Van Malssen "Preserving"). According to Van Malssen, Hill's films sustained varying levels of damage depending on where they were stored, "from being completely submerged, to getting wet then drying, to remaining dry but baking in the September heat." Van Malssen also notes that Hill's home movies suffered the most damage as almost all of the 80+ Super 8mm reels were submerged in water, leading to the growth of mould spores which eat away at fragile film emulsion. As seen in the images both above and below (Figs. 11 and 12), this type of damage creates a distinctive pattern of decay in the remaining image. Therefore, Hill's salvaged home movies not only document the city of New Orleans before the disaster of Hurricane Katrina but also act as physical reminders of the extensive damage resulting from the floods.

After Hill's death, Van Malssen worked with Dwight Swanson, Dan Streible and Hill's family to catalogue and preserve Hill's home movies. Due to limited funding, while all of the home movies could be inventoried and identified, only 700 of the 6250 feet of Super8mm could be selected for cleaning, repair and duplication (Van Malssen "Preserving"). Since only a limited amount of footage could be preserved and made available for circulation, the selection of which home movies to preserve or not indicates what is perceived to be most important to both Hill's legacy and public interest. Gailunas, Van Malssen, Streible, and Swanson were all involved in this selection process. The reels selected "included footage of parades and other public events, images of Helen and Paul's neighbors and the Mid-City neighborhood of New Orleans. They were also personal memories chosen, such as Helen reading child care books shot the day

before Francis Pop was born, and footage of the couple cleaning out their flooded home” (Van Malssen “Preserving”). This selection of footage would later inform what was screened at the *To Save and Project* screening of home movies – which included Hill’s – as well as the posthumously completed film, *The Florestine Collection*. The choice of preserved home movies indicates both an interest in public events and Hill’s New Orleans community as well as important private familial events.



Fig. 12. Helen Hill and son Francis Pop (bottom right and left, respectively) with neighbourhood children in New Orleans, *The Florestine Collection*

Screening Hill's Home Movies

After their preservation, Hill's home movies screened in various contexts including the 5th and 6th Orphan Film Symposia (in 2006 and 2008, respectively). At the 5th Orphan Film Symposium, held in Columbia, South Carolina while Hill and her family were displaced there, Hill introduced the screening of her home movies. In an audio recording of her introduction, Hill describes the extensive damage to the home movies (one quarter to one third of each reel was completely unrecognizable), having them rejected by a film lab that thought they were beyond salvaging, and meeting the people who would later help her to preserve them ("Untitled"). Some of the Super8mm reels had been washed and blown up to 16mm but not yet properly preserved. Since this screening occurred before Hill's tragic death, the introduction of the screening focuses mainly on the city of New Orleans and the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. In her article, Van Malssen describes introducing Hill's home movies at the 6th Orphan Film Symposium as part of a tribute screening in honour of her ("Preserving"). After Hill's death, these same home movies take on another purpose in their cultural documentation: preserving the memory of Helen Hill.

The *To Save and Project* film festival is an annual event at MoMA that began in 2002. Each year, the festival screens a selection of newly preserved films and often works closely with the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF). In 2009, during the seventh edition of the festival, Film Collections manager Katie Trainor organized a screening dedicated to home movies:

For the first time in *To Save and Project*, we dedicate an entire program to home movies, offering an exciting glimpse into the private lives of Alfred Hitchcock and Joan Crawford; the New Orleans films of Helen Hill; small gems from Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame; and three home movies that have been named to the National Film Registry: Wallace Kelly's *Our Day* (1938), Robbins Barstow's *Disneyland Dream* (1956), and George Ingmire's *Think of Me First as a Person* (1960s–1970s/2006). ("Film Screenings")

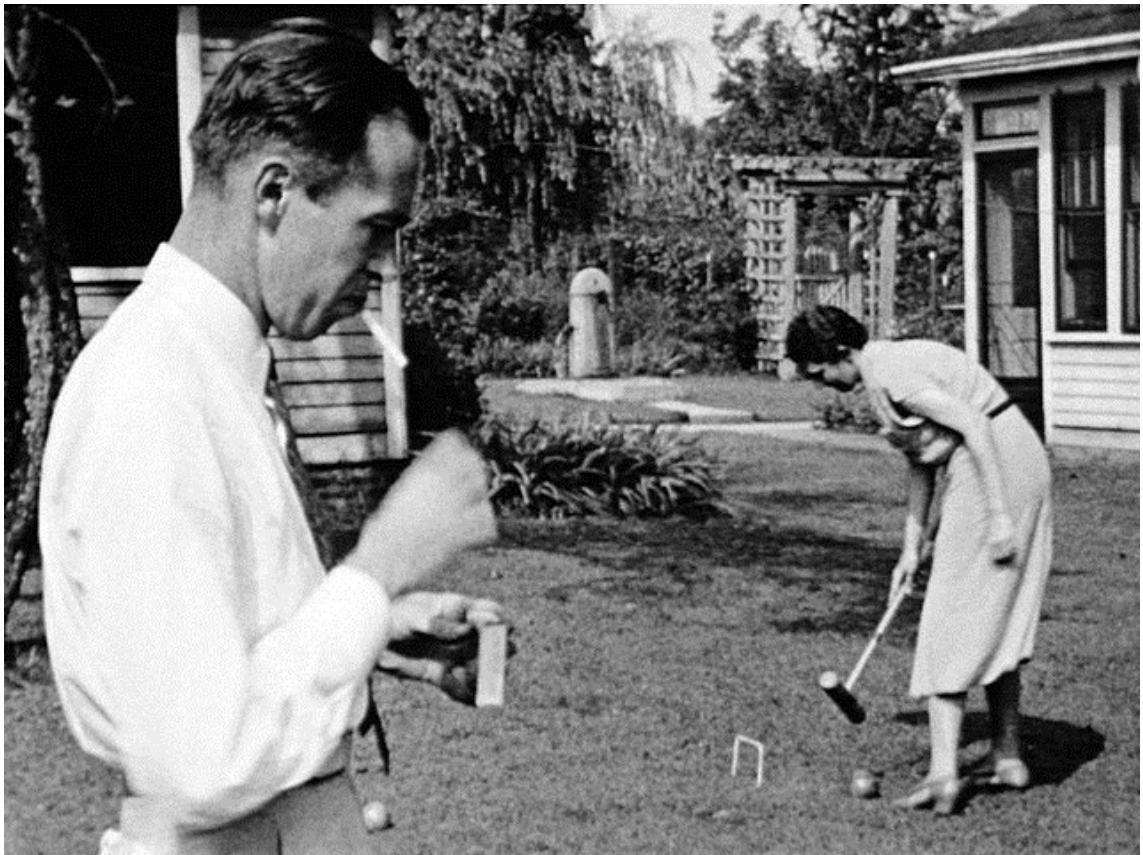


Fig. 13. Wallace Kelly's *Our Day* (1938)

Hill's home movies were screened alongside those of two Hollywood legends (Hitchcock and Crawford) as well as traditional home movies named to the National Film Registry

(see Fig. 13). By screening her films alongside these other, perhaps more well known, home movies, the *To Save and Project* festival canonizes Hill's home movies, framing hers and other home movies as part of a more mainstream (institutionalized) cinema history. Also, MoMA's framing of Hill's home movies as her "New Orleans films" frames their significance in relation to the city. The fact that they are glimpses into an artist's private life or images of New Orleans does not necessarily make them unique. What distinguishes them from other home movies and images of the city is the specificity of their decomposition. In light of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, her images of a pre-Katrina New Orleans can be imbued with a sense of nostalgia; in light of Hill's tragic death, the same can be true of the images of Hill's daily life.

Screening Helen Hill's home movies at a festival of film preservation at MoMA highlights Hill's efforts to salvage the films as well as the importance of her actions in doing so. Katie Trainor¹, organizer of the *To Save and Project* home movies screening, says that she "chose to screen Helen's home movies from after Katrina to show the devastation and the damage that occurred to her films being in the flood." What is unique about Hill's images of New Orleans is their degraded materiality; these mostly private images of her daily life in New Orleans now bear the scars left by natural disaster. This is significant because, in framing these particular home movies in this manner, Trainor and MoMA redefine private films as public documents. Trainor also writes that because "of Helen's untimely and gruesome death I wanted people to learn about her and her passion for filmmaking [...] and the way she captured New Orleans." Here, Trainor also touches upon the meaning which Hill's home movies took on posthumously. In light

¹ Quoted here from an email to me on August 17th, 2011

of her recent death, the screening of these home movies acts to memorialize the filmmaker. Thus, the festival not only celebrates the preservation of these films but also the preservation of Hill's memory.

While the screenings of Hill's home movies and their later use in *The Florestine Collection* focuses primarily on the personal story of Hill's life and death, the politics of Katrina and its aftermath as well as the violent way in which Hill died instills her home movies with a political undercurrent. Writing for *New Orleans Magazine*, Jason Berry states that six other murders occurred on the day of Hill's death and that, "Days earlier, violence also claimed Dinerral Shavers, a 25-year-old snare drummer for the Hot 8 Brass Band, a popular local act. An anti-violence protest on Jan. 11 drew 3,000 people to City Hall, calling for the resignations of Mayor Ray Nagin, District Attorney Eddie Jordan and Police Superintendent Warren Riley" ("Helen Hill: An Unfinished Story"). While *The Florestine Collection* addresses the increase in violent crime in post-Katrina New Orleans, the film is not as overtly political as other Katrina documentaries such as Spike Lee's documentaries *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) and *If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* (2010) or Tia Lessin and Carl Deal's *Trouble the Water* (2008). However, the issues of race and the role of government that became inseparable from the narrative of Katrina seems to make the politicization of Hill's story inevitable. What distinguishes *The Florestine Collection* most clearly from the aforementioned documentaries is its experimental style and personal focus; I discuss this as well as the politics of *The Florestine Collection* in more detail later in this chapter.

By simultaneously documenting pre-Katrina New Orleans in content as well as the extensive flood damage in the aesthetic distortions left behind by mould growth,

Hill's home movies become clear historic as well as artistic documents. In 2009, after Hill's murder, MoMA screened her home movies as part of a program dedicated to home movies during the seventh *To Save and Project* film festival. This screening re-emphasized ideas of the importance of home movies historically in addition to serving as a means of preserving Hill's memory after her death.

Helen Hill & Courtney Egan, *Cleveland Street Gap*

In 2006, while Hill and her family remained displaced in Columbia, South Carolina, she collaborated with Courtney Egan on *Cleveland Street Gap*. Using some of the same black and white home movie images revisited later in *The Florestine Collection*, Hill and Egan made this short video in which Hill's pre-Katrina home movies dissolve into Egan's graphically-matched video images of the same location – Hill's former home on Cleveland Street – after the floods. The first shot is of three young children laughing and mugging for the camera on the sidewalk. Both edges of the image have been eaten away and the images that remain are in high contrast black and white. A cross dissolve transitions this image into its video counterpart. This image, in colour, shows an empty sidewalk bordered by overgrown grass on one side and piles of garbage and debris on the other. The next shots are of Hill's house: the home movie of Gailiunas spinning a child in the air by her arms dissolves into video of the house in the present (see Fig. 14). In the video footage, there is now a spray paint tag from an SPCA house check. The video then cuts to a close up of a message written on the house by Hill and Gailiunas stating that they, their baby and their pets are okay (see Fig. 15).



Fig. 14. Damaged home movies dissolve into present-day video, *Cleveland Street Gap*

The endtitles of the video explain that the home movies were shot in the summer of 2003 and recovered by Hill two months after the flood in October of 2005. Egan's video footage was shot ten months after the flood. Formally, there is a very stark difference between Hill and Egan's footage. Though the shot composition is the same, the visual texture of the film versus the video sets the images apart. The damaged black and white Super8mm footage appears to be eras apart from Egan's video images; Super8mm, by being associated with a previous generations' home movies, can appear anachronistic in the digital age and the effects of flood damage on Hill's footage set the aging process of celluloid into hyper speed. Hill's home movies act as a kind of before

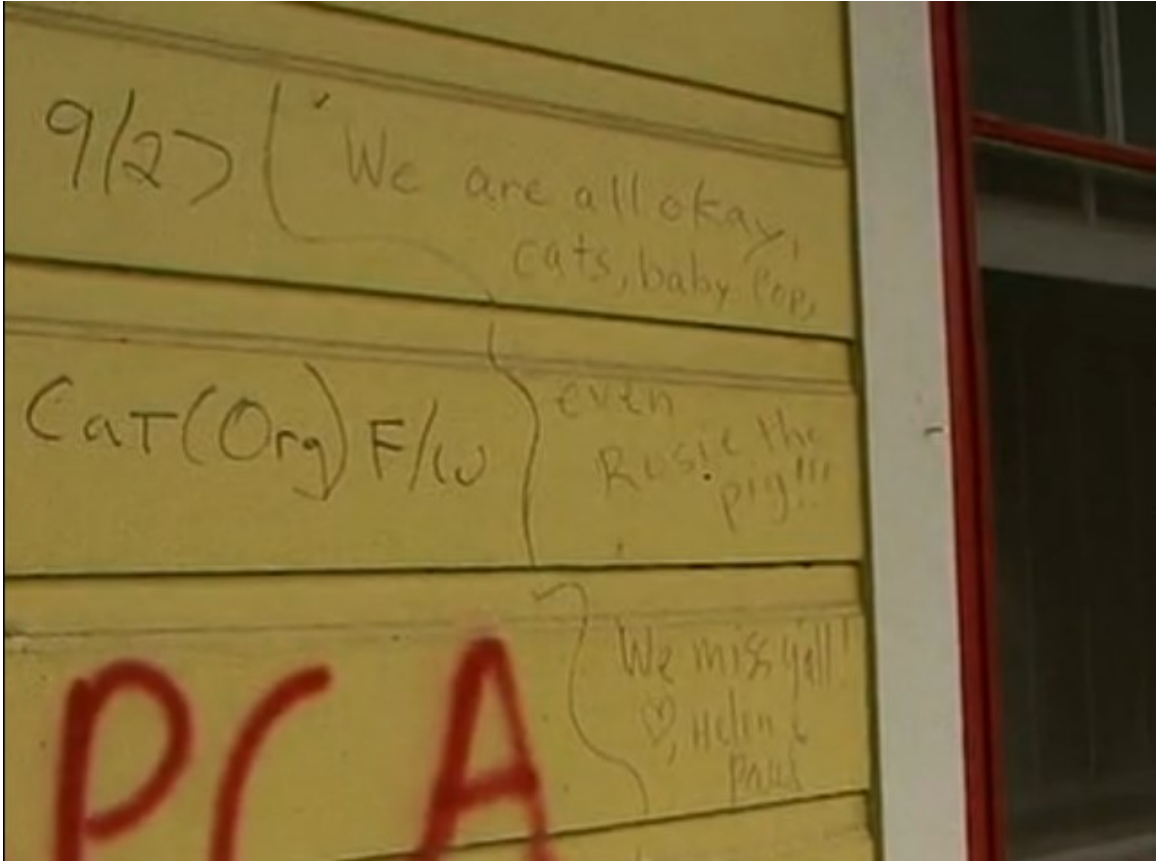


Fig. 15. Close-up of the writing on Hill's house, *Cleveland Street Gap*

and after shot in one as the hurricane and subsequent floods are visually inscribed on the images of the city by physically degrading its images. Another notable difference between Hill and Egan's footage is the presence and absence of people. In Egan's images, overgrown grass and weeds, piles of garbage, and the spray-painted tags of post-Katrina cleanup efforts replace the images of joyful, playing children. The erasure of film emulsion in Hill's footage and the presence of people in Egan's is a powerful visual signifier of the damage caused by the floods to both the property/physical environment and the people.

Helen Hill & Paul Gailiunas, *The Florestine Collection*

In 2010, Hill's husband Paul Gailiunas completed her work-in-progress, *The Florestine Collection*, incorporating some of the same home movies that screened at MoMA and the Orphan Film Symposia. Though *The Florestine Collection* is billed as a film by Helen Hill and completed by Paul Gailiunas, Gailiunas's authorial impact on the finished film is more substantial than the language of the credits suggests. While the



Fig. 16. Flood damaged celluloid, *The Florestine Collection*

images in the film are primarily Hill's, the structure and much of the sound – both voice-over narration and music – of *The Florestine Collection* are a significant contribution by Gailiunas. This film began as a portrait of a recently deceased elderly seamstress named

Florestine Kinchen whose discarded dresses Hill found in a trash pile on the morning of Mardi Gras in 2001. After Hill's death in 2007, the film became a dual portrait of Kinchen and Hill which appropriates the damaged physical remnants of each woman's life (Kinchen's dresses and Hill's flood-damaged home movies) as a springboard for a memorial project.

The first sequence of the film, lasting one minute and twenty-seven seconds before the opening credits, transitions from badly flood-damaged celluloid to intact cut-out animation. The initial glimpses of the damaged film are completely abstract and textural (akin to Stan Brakhage's painted films), as the images have been eaten away, leaving only fragments of sepia-toned emulsion with no discernable images (see Fig. 16). The soundtrack here consists of the sounds of a projector and rushing water, calling attention to both the physicality of the celluloid as well as the cause of its near-destruction. After a fade out, a sequence of cut-out animation begins with a medium shot containing the solid black silhouette of a trash pile over a textured blue background. A car pulls up in front of the trash pile and the passenger, presumably Hill, gets out of the car before it pulls away out of frame. As Hill's own voice explains how she found this pile of discarded dresses on the soundtrack, the animated figure picks up the dresses one-by-one. After picking up each dress, the garments flutter and float upwards as if blown away by the wind. Following another fade out/in, Gailiunas's voice takes over from Hill's and begins to narrate, providing his own perspective of the event being animated as well as contextualizing both Hill's unfinished project and this completed film. As the voice-over changes from Hill to Gailiunas, the animated tableau cuts from a medium to a long shot. Now, a tree and the edge of a house with a rocking chair on the porch are

visible in the left side of the frame. Hill continues to pick up dresses and release them into the wind. She stands, walks towards the house and knocks on the door before the image fades out and the opening credit sequence begins.

This opening animation sequence introduces the viewer to Hill's unfinished project whilst also contextualizing the film's posthumous completion. The sequence also sets up the film's thematic and narrative drives toward memorialization by introducing the idea that Hill was attempting to construct Kinchen's biography around and through these found dresses. Thus, this opening sequence of the film, in establishing the premise of Hill using the physical artefacts of the discarded dresses as a jumping off point for learning about (and crafting a film around) the maker of the dresses, presents the idea of memorialization through the posthumous appropriation of what someone leaves behind. What Hill does with Florestine Kinchen's mouldy dresses, Gailiunas does with Hill's flood-damaged home movies. In this way, *The Florestine Collection* functions as two parallel narratives interwoven into one. Where the two parallel narratives converge in *The Florestine Collection* is in the appropriation of objects connected to the deceased subject which have taken on the markers (in both cases, water and mould damage) of time and a harsh environment. That both the dresses and Hill's home movies suffer such damage may suggest an element of neglect. However, both objects were treated with care by their owners and have partially disintegrated due to the unavoidable absences of their caregivers. As the care of the dresses transferred, indirectly, from Kinchen to Hill (she cleaned and mended over 100 of them), so has the care of the home movies transferred from Hill to Gailiunas as well as film preservationists and archives such as the Harvard Film Archive. In this film, Hill's animation and appropriation of the dresses – in



Fig. 17. Hill finding a trash pile of dresses, *The Florestine Collection*

combination with her voice-over – enacts a process of memorialisation in which Hill begins to see herself through the lens of Kinchen’s legacy. This opening sequence, as well as the musical credit sequence which immediately follows, displays the kind of whimsy and exuberance, using bright colours and playful animation, which is characteristic of Hill’s earlier films. Though the spirit and handmade aesthetic of Hill’s earlier films is carefully upheld in *The Florestine Collection*, it is also very much Gailiunas’s film, particularly in its use of sound.

After the animated opening sequence of the film, there is a sequence of home movies that bridges between the opening introduction of Hill and Kinchen and the more extended narration of Kinchen’s life and dressmaking. Gailiunas’s voice-over

accompanies this home movie sequence, contextualizing the images and his relationship to Hill and the city of New Orleans. Gailiunas speaks about Hill's eclectic, independent spirit and her love for the city of New Orleans and the handmade; his descriptions of her life and personality support the image of the artist intimated by Hill's own audio recordings and animation style. What follows this home movie sequence are the fragments of the film Hill was making about Florestine Kinchen: Hill's interviews with Kinchen's pastor and friends, animations of the dresses and stop motion deconstruction of the actual dresses, reversed so that the scissors put the dresses back together and reveal their unique details. Halfway through the film, the narrative switches back to Hill with the introduction of Hill and Gailiunas's experience with Hurricane Katrina. The images that accompany the narration of this story are of close-ups of the fabric of Kinchen's dresses cut together in extremely fast succession (each patterned fabric appears for only one or two frames at a time). This onslaught of visual information contrasts the pacing of the rest of the film and creates a sense of disorientation that mirrors Gailiunas's recounting of the sudden and unexpected flooding. The latter half of the film uses home movies from both before and after Katrina, showing the cleanup of their house, their year spent displaced with Hill's parents in South Carolina, and images of different parts of the city in various states of disrepair and rebuilding. Though the narrative of *The Florestine Collection* is determined by loss and violence – loss of their home, loss of Hill and Kinchen, loss of images – Gailiunas continually shifts the focus back to a celebratory tribute to Hill's life and work.

The soundtrack of *The Florestine Collection* combines voice-over narration and music, including several prominent songs written and performed by Gailiunas (one of

which is co-written by Hill). The most memorable songs, “Let’s Go Back to New Orleans” and “Hallowe’en,” are mostly light-hearted and whimsical with serious undertones occasionally bubbling to the surface. Gailiunas’s songs are analogous in tone to Hill’s animations while his voice-over serves a documentary function to complement and contextualize Hill’s home movies. These songs and Gailiunas’s voice-over narration (in addition to the final structure of the film) are his primary authorial contribution to the film, turning Hill’s last film into a film about the late filmmaker. This use of sound in *The Florestine Collection* creates a sense of thematic and tonal cohesion between the film’s somewhat disparate elements: Kinchen’s story, Hill’s animation, the home movies, and the overarching historical circumstances permeating both image and sound. The songs emphasize the exuberance of the animation and home movies in a manner which is consistent with the style of Hill’s previous works. Building out of this context, the voice-over situates these images in relation to the historic trauma of Katrina and the personal trauma of Hill’s death.

In “Media Artists, Local Activists, and Outsider Archivists: The Case of Helen Hill,” Dan Streible notes the significance of the medium of Hill’s home movies – super 8mm instead of digital video – and that, as “a film purist, Helen chose not to take up the more convenient video camera, the home recording device of choice for a generation. As an artist, she was cognizant of how spontaneous shooting was part of her aesthetic” (159). While Hill’s spontaneous shooting style is consistent with the traditional aesthetic of home movies, her choice to use film instead of video reflects her own artistic sensibility. To use film in a digital age suggests an aesthetic and artistic consistency with Hill’s experimental animation oeuvre; as the aesthetics of traditional home movies are often a

secondary by-product of the technology of the time, the decision to use a medium that, due to a decrease in popularity and availability, is often more expensive and less convenient suggests that Hill's home movies were produced to be as much a part of her artistic corpus as they are moving snapshots of her private life. After the introduction of home video, the act of shooting home movies on Super 8mm constitutes a specific aesthetic choice by the filmmaker. As Hill also chooses to do her animation by hand, mainly working with paper cut-outs, models, and stop motion, there seems to be a deliberate tactile relationship between Hill and her films that video cannot provide. This sense of a material, tactile link between the filmmaker and the film itself intensifies the personal nature of her films. Several of the home movie images included in *The Florestine Collection* provide glimpses into Hill's private family life. Standing over baby Francis Pop, the camera angled towards the floor, Hill repeats the action of turning the baby onto his back and rubbing his stomach multiple times (he keeps trying to roll over) to pose him for a portrait. This action is repeated so closely that the footage almost appears to be looped. The intimacy of this image is set against many of the other home movie images in the film that record public events (parades, Mardi Gras celebrations, jazz funerals). A highly personal portrait of Hill is situated within the context of her community and the historical and political context of post-Katrina New Orleans.

In Hill's home movie images of public events such as parades, protests, and Mardi Gras celebrations, the home movies collide with an experimental documentary style that is emphasized by the voice-over narration. Referring to 1960s and 70s experimental film, David James argues "the central beat priority of an aestheticized daily life provides the ethical basis for the production of the artist's autobiography—the

portrait of the artist—as the work of art” (111). Hill’s home movies of public events and the communities of artists she participated in, in Halifax as well as New Orleans, follow this tradition in experimental filmmaking although she did not exhibit them as she did her animated films. Gailiunas’s voice-over narration that accompanies the images of their artistic community describes his and Hill’s activism, for instance working with organizations such as Food Not Bombs, and grounds the political undercurrents of Katrina and the city’s surge in violent crime within the personal story of Hill’s life and work. *Florestine* incorporates the political into the personal and celebrates New Orleans while also expressing unease at its problems. Dan Streible situates the independent and experimental film productions made in New Orleans after Katrina as a response to depictions of the city in the media, arguing “they are part of an alternative media community’s efforts to rebuild and fortify itself. Against all expectations, they confront the monsters of despair that threatened the returning diaspora and resound with the genuine cheer and optimism of a New Orleans that plays on while national media dwell on the desolation” (157). *The Florestine Collection* takes a more celebratory attitude, though no less political, regarding Hill’s home movies. *The Florestine Collection* also uses home movie images of a jazz funeral that documents a ritual particular to the New Orleans community and references Hill’s own jazz funeral. Streible notes that not only the activist and artistic community but also the media used Hill’s death in order to galvanize the community and create awareness for the issue of post-Katrina violent crime (160). Thus, the appropriation of Hill’s home movies emphasizes the idea that they have become inseparable from their public, socio-political context and the memorialisation of the woman behind the camera.

The historical contexts and themes which Gailiunas's voice-over narration makes clear and overt are also present in the particular aesthetic of the flood damaged celluloid of Hill's preserved home movies. Particularly due to the personal nature of home movies – often made to document the family in order to have physical mementos of the past/memory – the, even partial, loss of these images becomes analogous with the (potential) loss of one's own memory. These home movie images have not been completely degraded beyond recognition: the preserved home movie images which have been appropriated in *The Florestine Collection* range from complete obliteration to images which have missing emulsion only at the right and left edges of the frame or just the marks of dust, scratches, and fading. Though images do remain, time and circumstance have permanently altered the home movies from their original form. As an explicit memorializing project, the preservation of the image becomes intertwined with the preservation of memory. The documentation – and protection of those documents – of loved ones becomes an antidote to the loss of memory and death. Home movies, like family photographs, often function as means to physically capture memories – “Kodak moments” – and thus the preservation of these images is also an attempt to preserve memories.

Just as much of Hill's animations emphasized and celebrated the fact that they were made by hand, eschewing a highly polished or digital aesthetic in favour of a DIY one, the use of this damaged celluloid here does not attempt to hide its imperfections. Instead, the partial erasure of the home movie images creates a kind of inverse palimpsest in which the missing image stands in for the addition of a significant historical event. In her essay “Culture as Fiction: The Ethnographic Impulse in the Films of Peggy Ahwesh,

Su Friedrich, and Leslie Thornton” Catherine Russell argues the use of a home movie aesthetic in experimental films can do two things: “Formally, [the home movie aesthetic] constitutes a challenge to the aesthetics of mastery implicit in more high-tech film forms. Secondly, it offers an ethnographic specificity of the once-only that defines the home-movie” (368). In *Florestine* as well as Hill’s previous films, Hill’s favouring of a DIY, handmade animation style does work as a similar challenge to the “aesthetics of mastery.” In choosing to make her films by hand – much like Florestine’s hand-sewn dresses – Hill creates an intimate connection between herself as an artist and the finished work. In his voice-over, Gailiunas states that Hill thought Florestine’s hand-sewn dresses were possibly the product of necessity but that she also saw a connection between the necessary handmade and her DIY artistic philosophy. It is therefore no surprise that the film embraces the haphazard, imperfect aesthetic of the damaged home movies. Much of the narrative and aesthetic of *The Florestine Collection* is defined by circumstance and chance: the flooding of New Orleans, the unique patterns of decay caused by mould growth on celluloid, the random home invasion which resulted in Hill’s death. At the end of the film, Gailiunas refers to *The Florestine Collection* as “an incomplete film for an incomplete life.” *The Florestine Collection* is foremost a tribute film, memorializing Hill in finishing her last film and contextualizing her life and death. The fact that history and politics have inflected meaning onto her home movies is indeed present in this film but is emphasized by the screenings of them at MoMA and the Orphan Film Symposia.

In terms of the blurring of lines between public and private, *The Florestine Collection* not only inserts the typically private home movies into the more public form of the documentary/experimental film but is also a part of the reframing of Hill as a public figure. She was relatively unknown as a filmmaker prior to her death and has become more widely known posthumously as her death was somewhat politicized as a symbol of post-Katrina instability and violence. As Dan Streibel also notes, both Hill's animated films and home movies have been taken up by archives, museums, and festivals to form a kind of unconscious larger memorial project. The aesthetics of the damaged home movies are emblematic of the idea of home movies or photographs as guarantors of memory which themselves can be fragile, ephemeral, unreliable. It is in this light that Hill's home movies have been incorporated into both films and exhibitions. The screening of Hill's home movies at the Museum of Modern Art positions these films within an institutional history of MoMA's exhibition of home movies. MoMA's 2000 and 2009 exhibitions pluck home movies out of the home to place them in a public, artistic, and cinematic historical trajectory thus counteracting their historical connotation as private ephemera. *The Florestine Collection* negotiates and capitalizes on this tension between the public and private spheres in so openly sharing this personal tribute to Hill.

CONCLUSION

The Home Movie in Contemporary Experimental Cinema

Home movies and experimental filmmaking converge within a trend in the avant-garde in which filmmakers incorporate home movies, often made by their family members, into experimental films and videos. Helen Hill's *Mouseholes*, Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood*, Philip Hoffman's *What these ashes wanted*, Jay Rosenblatt's *Phantom Limb*, and Helen Hill and Paul Gailiunas's *The Florestine Collection* all fall within this trend. In each of these films, the use of home movies emphasizes the idealization of the family and the focus on documenting happy memories. The films construct this emphasis by placing the home movies in the context of personal, experimental films about the death of a close relative. In this way, the five films under discussion in this thesis confront not only issues of mortality and grief but also the porous division between the public and the private. Although using home movies in experimental films and public exhibitions alters their viewing context and thus their meaning, the home movie images tend to be treated with a sense of sincerity. Thus, incorporating home movies in a new context attempts to preserve, rather than manipulate, the images.

Most research on the confluence of home movies and the avant-garde focuses on experimental films that adopt the style of home movies. Referring to 1960s experimental

film, Parker Tyler calls experimental films a “radically inspired revision of the home movie” (40). While this style of experimental filmmaking is indeed interesting and influential on the types of films under discussion in this thesis, my research is primarily interested in the incorporation of home movies made as home movies into experimental films and videos. As the two modes of filmmaking are conflated in one work, the distinction between home movies and the avant-garde can become blurry, especially in the cases of filmmakers who also shoot their own home movies (such as Helen Hill and Philip Hoffman). What differentiates these films from experimental films made using a home movie style is that the sequences of home movies stand out aesthetically from the rest of the film. In addition, the films discussed in this thesis display both a preoccupation with issues of memory and a tendency towards preservation (of both images and the past); the use of home movies personalizes these issues, thus setting them apart from much of found footage filmmaking.

All of the films under discussion in this thesis – *Mouseholes*, *Sea in the Blood*, *What these ashes wanted*, *Phantom Limb*, and *The Florestine Collection* – use home movies to confront and negotiate issues of death and mourning. Also, all of these works are personal, relating the stories of the deaths of close family members; *Sea in the Blood* and *The Florestine Collection* also veer into the political, dealing with issues of postcolonialism and PWA activism as well as post-Katrina violence, respectively. Within this context of personal loss, the home movies become physical objects of memory. Thus, the preservation of the home movies is an important aspect of their use in these films; though the deterioration of the celluloid is often apparent or emphasized, the images do not appear to be aesthetically altered by the filmmakers. The sincerity with

which the filmmakers treat these home movies contrasts with the sense of irony found in some of found footage filmmaking.

As each of the works revolve around the death of a loved one as a focal point, this confrontation of grief and loss reveals the avoidance of these issues within the home movies themselves. All of the films and videos under discussion utilize voice-over narration or on-screen text (and often both) to contextualize the images. The use of voice-over and text reinforces the personal nature of the home movie images; these are not generalized, prototypical home movies but the specific, personal home movies of the filmmakers. In this way, the private becomes public, collapsing the fragile distinctions between home movies and experimental film. The home movies may stand out stylistically from the other types of images in the films but they are ultimately subsumed within an experimental framework. Also, in exposing the gaps in representation that exist within the home movies as texts, there is a tension between the home movies and the films themselves in the way they address issues of death, grief, and general melancholy.

As *The Florestine Collection* is both Helen Hill's (previously) unfinished project and a posthumous memorial of her, the film's use of Hill's home movies acts as a memorial project within a larger network of using her private home movies for public remembrance and mourning. The exhibition of Hill's home movies posthumously at the Museum of Modern Art and at the Orphan Film Symposia bridges the public/private divide in a way that is analogous to the incorporation of home movies into experimental film. In this case, however, the divide is crossed at the site of exhibition rather than production. The unique circumstances of the destruction and preservation of Hill's home

movies makes them historical palimpsests on a much greater scale than the home movies discussed earlier. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath were given a significant amount of media attention and became a very politicized disaster. Though there is an abundance of images of New Orleans both pre- and post-Katrina (including documentaries such as Spike Lee's 2006 *When the Levees Broke*), what makes Hill's home movie images of the city significant is the combination of personal and public tragedy physically inscribed in them. *The Florestine Collection* acts as a memorial not only for Florestine Kinchen and Helen Hill but also for the city itself. The exhibition and reappropriation of Hill's home movies suggests that the privacy of the images was also washed out in the floodwaters. Like the films and videos in the first chapter, *The Florestine Collection* uses home movies to confront and cope with death, thereby exposing and remedying the gaps in home movie representation.

For the scope of this thesis, my research has focused on only a selection of filmmakers whose experimental films and videos incorporate home movies. In addition to the filmmakers already discussed in this thesis, a provisional list of experimental filmmakers and video artists who also use or have used home movies in their work includes: Su Friedrich, Alan Berliner, Elida Schogt, Rick Hancox, Stephen Connolly, Robert Todd, Ken Jacobs, Péter Forgács, Gustav Deutsch, Matthias Müller, John Price, Charlie Egleston, Rea Tajiri, Michelle Citron, Abigail Child, Phil Solomon, Mike Hoolboom, Peter Tscherkassky, Karen Shopsowitz, Daniel Reeves, Marjorie Keller, Marian McMahon, Ann Marie Fleming, and Louise Bourque. The limitations of experimental film cataloguing and distribution make it extremely difficult to produce an exhaustive list of the filmmakers who have used home movies.

In general, experimental films incorporating home movies (especially the filmmakers' own) tend to have a preoccupation with memory. Some filmmakers, for instance, portray memory as vital, emphasizing the need to remember history or, in more personal films, the life of a deceased loved one. Other filmmakers suggest that memory is unreliable, shifting and changing over time. A few examples of such contemporary films include Louise Bourque's *Fissures* (1999), Elida Schogt's *Zyklon Portrait* (1999), and Robert Todd's *Flowergirls* (2004). *Fissures*, visually, is very different from the other films discussed in this thesis because of its radical manipulation of the home movie footage. Bourque manipulates and distorts the home movies images through contact printing and hand processing, solarizing and colouring, allowing the image to shift wildly in the frame. The images, sometimes barely or briefly visible, evoke traces of the past to suggest processes of memory and forgetting. *Zyklon Portrait* approaches the traumatic memory of the Holocaust through Schogt's own family's experience by combining home movies, family photos, archival educational films, underwater photography, and hand-painted images. Schogt makes the historical personal – there are no images of the Holocaust in *Zyklon Portrait* – and creates tension between the necessity and difficulty of remembrance. *Flowergirls* combines images of the flower girls from two different weddings at the same church in Germany. Though shot on the same camera, Todd's images are from a wedding in 2003 while his Uncle-in-law's (the original owner of the camera) home movies are of a wedding in 1974. Todd's own lyrical, precisely composed images of the present-day flower girls (in the beginning third of the film) do not resemble home movies. Rather, as the film progresses, the images begin to display more and more characteristics of the home movie (such as a shaky, handheld camera) until, at the end of

the film, the 1974 home movies are shown. On the audio track, the four flower girls (two from the 2003 wedding and two from the 1974 one) recount their experiences of the wedding. The now grown-up flower girls' commentary focuses on small, sometimes conflicting, details of the past. Though *Fissures*, *Zyklon Portrait*, and *Flowergirls* approach memory from different angles, the prominence of memory as a theme in both these films and the ones I discuss in chapters one and two indicates that the reconfiguration of home movies in itself invokes the issue of memory.

Sarah Polley's recent documentary, *Stories We Tell* (2012), incorporates home movies – both real and staged – as well as talking head interviews with family and friends in order to tell her family's story. This story focuses on Polley's mother, Diane Polley, and the events surrounding Polley's birth and, later in life, the discovery of her actual biological father. The talking head interviews, by asking each participant to tell the same story in their own words, reveals differences and, sometimes, conflicts in the memories of each storyteller. The documentary, in a broader sense, interrogates the reliability of memory, particularly in relation to storytelling. *Stories We Tell* frequently calls attention to its own storytelling devices by showing Polley directing her interviewees. At the end of the documentary, we see Polley directing many of the "home movies" that have been interspersed throughout, with actors portraying her mother and other family members. Polley's staged home movies are almost indistinguishable from the real ones. This blurring and merging of the past and the recollected or dramatized past calls into question the authenticity of the home movie itself (the filmmakers I discussed in chapters one and two did this through voice-over and on-screen text). *Stories We Tell* places many of the

same patterns and themes seen in experimental reconfigurations of home movies on a much larger scale – both in terms of running time and, especially, distribution.

Other patterns, in addition to the ones discussed in this thesis, exist within this trend in experimental filmmaking that offer potential for future research. For instance, Fung's *Sea in the Blood*, Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* (1990) and Matthias Müller's *Final Cut* (1986) are all interrogations of home movies shot by the artists' parents in films or videos made by queer artists. Each of these films explores and critiques the construction of familial relationships. These films also bring identity politics into question as they investigate the self in relation to the family (and thus ethnicity, heredity, etc.). Also, with the 2012 release of home movies of the British royal family (narrated by Prince Charles) and the home movie images of Queen Elizabeth II in *Sea in the Blood* and Stephen Connolly's *Two Coronations* (2010), research into the representation of the British Monarchy in these texts could be fruitful. In addition, a larger comparison could be made between the use of home movies and other forms of found footage filmmaking.

The use of home movies in the experimental films under discussion in this thesis suggests that they are memories made physical. The focus on idealized visions of daily family life in these home movies both helps with and contrasts the experience of coping with grief and loss. In using home movies to confront mortality, these films and videos do something that home movies themselves almost never do: represent common melancholy events such as funerals and divorce. Even when deconstructed by the filmmaker, home movies continue to carry a sense of intended nostalgia; the focus on an idealized version of family life suggests an attempt to create happy memories for future reminiscence. By using their home movies in the context of experimental films and

videos about death and mourning, Hill, Fung, Hoffman, Rosenblatt, and Gailunas complicate the emotional meaning and privacy of the images.

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