

Family Film: From Family Registers to Historical Artifacts

Clarice Ehlers Peixoto

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This article focuses on the making of a family film and its transformation into a historical artifact. The conversations with my grandmother about her participation in the Gaucho Revolution (south of Brazil, 1923), which were recorded to be transmitted later on to our family, led me to research these historical facts in the public archives, sifting out documents from those days (newspapers, reports, and photographs) that could objectify her stories and her subjective images and especially allow the discovery of all possible relations between an individual memory and a collective memory. That implied building a speech and telling a story from only *one* family member's point of view, the grandmother's. More than that, it involved breaking with the family's inner-circle projections and presenting the film to a wider public, thus turning private images into public ones.

In the beginning, there was family . . .

The earliest cinematographic images captured the everyday life of the Lumière family, filmed by the brothers Auguste and Louis. It revealed the bourgeois practices of a French industrial family: Antoine, the father, playing cards with some friends while being served by the butler in the gardens of their *château* in Lyons; the sea baths in their beach house in Bandol, in southern France; family and friends playing *bocce*; Mme. Louis Lumière playing music to the family or feeding her baby; Auguste fishing with his daughter . . . The inventors of the cinematograph were already photography professionals and were fully aware of its importance in registering everyday practices, relating to family or not (like his workers exiting from the photographic plate factory). So, what were being filmed were not exactly individual performances from members of the family but their social roles. Slowly, the privilege of registering images (in movement) was extended to all well-heeled families, European or not; later on, the cinema began to produce its own fictional families, schematizing practices and behaviors of several families of different social origins [Journot 1995]. We could say that the development processes of photography and family films traveled along similar paths, due to the fact that the upper-class population pioneered access to such media. Little by little, they became more accessible to the lower classes in such

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a way that nowadays, with the popularization of technical procedures, the family practice (of adverting to images) is no longer singular to upper-class families. 35

Despite all technological advances in capturing images, family films initially established themselves, within the family portrait tradition;¹ as means to portray specific moments of the family life: (a) rites of passage (marriages, baptisms, birthdays, graduations, etc.); (b) a child's growth stages (first bath, first steps, first day at school); plus all trips and family reunions. The intention was to capture nice family moments that, being as ephemeral as they are, last for a short time. These film fragments, with no beginning or ending, are proof of "how happy we were!" because "happiness cannot be retold. Happiness hardly temporizes, it cannot be modulated and, therefore, it's hard to narrate it!" [Kuyper 1995: 15]. Because the happy moments that have been recorded in these photographs require an introduction if they are to be presented to the rest of the family, family tragedie (like fights and divorces) are rarely captured on camera. 40 45

A film is considered a family film when it represents images, elaborated by one of the members, regarding family happenings, behaviors, and all objects that might help constitute the family history. Add to that the private projection/reception, in which the family members recognize themselves as fictional characters, remembering all the happenings ("Oh, that's how it happened...") and commenting on all scenes with emotion or remembrance. Odin said, "the only thing that matters is that the object, the character or the happening in question, were considered worthy of figuring in the compilation of family recollections" [1995: 28]. Considering that these images are elaborated in order to be seen by one's own family and, above all, by those who were caught on camera, one of the main characteristics of this genre is that generally these people establish a direct communication with the camera-person; their glares are invariably directed toward the camera. Not only that, but also their gestures, conversations, jokes, waves, and "stop filming me" calls give away the relation of closeness (or intimacy) between them. It is exactly the opposite of what used to be taught in film school: Don't allow the person being filmed to look directly at the camera, so that the act of filming is not given away. 50 55 60

One other singular characteristic of family films is that their schemes are often poorly framed, the angles are not so good, and the images may be shaky, out of focus, or shot against the light, confirming the idea that amateur images are the best example of bad cinema [Odin 1995]. In addition, they show long sequences, several loops, and, especially, no editing to help organize them into a coherent narrative structure. That way, they are only appreciated by those implicated by the filming (the camera-person and characters), who are interested in making their image perennial. 65 70

Bourdieu was one of the first to point out, regarding photographic practice, that it is a rite of *the domestic cult*, "a private technique that fabricates private images of the private life," solemnizing and eternalizing the most important moments of the family life, reaffirming how the group sees their affective unity [1965: 39, trans.]. Aasman noted that "the family takes form in front of a camera; it is the camera's presence that stimulates the family to demonstrate their family unity" [1995: 108, trans.]. Chalfen goes even further by affirming that "the choice of what is symbolically represented in a family film varies very little from 75 80

generation to generation," pointing to the existence of "great scripts" or "imperative models" [apud Aasman 1995: 105]. Thus, "making a family film allows people to show that they exist not only as individuals, but also as culturally enrolled members of a society" [ibid.: 104].

This article intends to analyze the making of a family film and its transformation into a historical artifact. The conversations I had with my grandmother about her participation in the Gaucho Revolution (in the south of Brazil, 1923), which were recorded to be transmitted later on to the family, led me to research these historic facts in the public archives,² panning out documents from those days (newspapers, reports, and photographs) that could objectify her stories and her subjective images and, especially, allow the discovery of all possible relations between an individual memory and a collective memory. Thus, the film *Bebela e a revolução gaúcha de 1923* (Bebela and the Gaucho Revolution of 1923) is a key ingredient to this analysis.

FAMILY FILM AND HISTORIC ARTIFACTS

Family Images as Documents

In general, family films do not always portray public life, the personal trajectories or the working habits of their members (or of only one of them), since they capture images from common and collective places, usually from family gatherings. The innermost private spaces of the house (bedrooms and bathrooms) and their uses (except for child activities, like bathing and sleeping) are rarely filmed. Due to the capacity of revealing behaviors and values of family life, family films can act as historical artifacts in the ambit of the social and cultural history of a society. More than that, they are data sources of a regional history, revealing the cultural practices of a specific social group in a specific period [Aasman 1995].

The film that I made about my grandmother is not a reconstitution of her personal trajectory; neither does it show her family life in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The film objectively portrays her involvement in the Gaucho Revolution in 1923, as well as her father's and her husband's participation. The initial idea was to capture her story on the revolution, using the countless photos, documents, and newspaper articles that she kept for her descendants.

The first recordings started in 1991, when she was 90 years old and already a widow.³ These first moments were hard for both of us, for different reasons. For her, the projection of a remote past (she was only 22 years old in 1923) required a lot of effort, causing the process to become emotionally hard when trying to remember about family members who had already passed away, or forgotten dates and names: "You see, Clarice, how hard it is? I'm not so sure about my past anymore," she used to say. For me, it was the starting point of learning a new videographic technique,⁴ discovering several different mechanisms of a new video camera (a Hi8 5000). So, in the first shots I focused on the framing, disregarding the sound, which resulted in countless sound problems: sudden changes in sound volume, several noises, silent images, and so on.



Figure 1 In the center, Bebela's father, the leader of the "revolutionaries" in his city.

Therefore the first version presented some specific characteristics of family films, as identified by Odin, but not enough to let it be classified as one. What 125 finally defined it as a family film was the fact that, in addition to being shot by a family member, it ended up becoming a project for our whole family. Slowly, Bebela's two sons were captivated by the idea, starting to look for more documents and photos in their belongings, and asking relatives and friends who lived in Cruz Alta to do the same. Throughout the 12 years of filming, 130 Bebela actively participated in the historic constitution, gathering photos from lost albums and shoe boxes and searching for newspaper articles in her belongings. So, three different generations collaborated in making a film about a person

admired by all as a worthy representative of the family's participation in the Revolution of 1923 and, especially, as a character in regional Gaucho history. 135

When Bebela was about to turn 100 years old, we made a preediting of the copy to be screened at her birthday party. It was the first time she and her descendants had watched the recorded images. To Odin [1995], the family viewing (reception) of the images is the second aspect that characterizes a family film, it presents facts considered to be true while being supported by the actual character: "Hey, that's me!" she would say every time she saw herself on screen. In this way, the family actually believes the veracity of the facts, even if no other family member happened to be present at the time of the filming. That is how the effect of a "family film" is achieved: when one of the spectators recognizes him- or herself in the filming [Esquenazi 1995]. Furthermore, each time the film is watched by a group of family members, the bonds between them are reaffirmed, contributing to the formation of a family ethos and a certain global view, so dear to us as anthropologists. 140 145

What distinguishes this film from a traditional family film is that it has a narrative structure—Bebela's participation in the Gaucho Revolution of 1923—built up from a point of view regarding the Brazilian political conflict. More than that, it tells a story⁵ with a beginning, a middle, and an end, just as Rouch imagined an ethnographic film should be. It is, without doubt, an aesthetic production, but one that also intends to fulfill a social function comparable to a family's photo-album. So, while remembering and reconstructing Bebela's memory fragments through documents and photographs, this audiovisual work played an important part in helping different family generations to bond, so taking on a greater symbolic function [Allard 1995]. 150 155

As with most amateur films, several formats were used: Hi 8,⁶ SVHS, 8 mm video, and finally digital (mini DV). That is because I got so involved with this project that I ended up using any camera I had at hand, so I wouldn't miss any statement, for these were becoming more fragmented each time. Some other technical problems had to be overlooked, or not, due to Bebela's visual difficulties: Shots were filmed against the lights so that she could see the photos in her album, and because she refused to accept a light spot to help illuminate her face because it bothered her fragile eyes. Besides all that, the restrictive space for filming (her room in the old persons' home) kept us from shooting from different angles, resulting in closed frames, continuous, with no descriptive plans; the monotony of the image is cut only by Bebela's enthusiastic speech. And as the "action moments" are rare, this film presents the Gaucho conflict through the dialogue between those who are in front of the camera—Bebela and her son—and the one who's behind the camera (me, her granddaughter). That way, by talking and looking at the camera (profilmic), the character creates a staring game and a direct communication with whoever is behind the camera, replacing a single-tone speech from the past with the joy of sharing her family history. 160 165 170

As we have already seen, the family spectator is the one who confirms the reality presented by the family film, he or she is directly touched by the images, emotionally discoursing about what is presented on film. Embedded in emotions and recollections, the viewer becomes senseless to the technical quality of the film, and often to the presentation the film makes of the recorded fact [Esquenazi 1995]. The projection of the preediting of the film, on Bebela's 100th birthday, 175 180

brought out only perplexity, comments, and questions regarding her political life, unknown to the great-grandsons until that moment— “Wow, our Great-Grandma was a revolutionary woman!”—and not even a single comment about the technical deficiencies presented in the film. That is because all documentary films that show a chapter of history through individual biographies present verbal and visual evidence that induces us to remember things we did not experience, helping us to comprehend what happened. More than that, through archived photos that were inserted on film, we can view images from the original scenery, leaving us with a strong feeling that we were part of what happened and are now reliving it through the experience of real actors. It is more than an attempt to interpret the memory on film. It is a different kind of knowledge, or a different way of evoking such history, that drives the spectator to relive the facts. During the projection, images and sounds go through “different cognitive registries in a familiar way, and, therefore, even if the person has never watched the film, it is understandable despite all narrative and editing codes, which Q4 happen to be singular to each culture” [MacDougall 1992: 79]. Those films about modern history are what Niney calls “the memory theater,” for they are remote to a collective past.

Using film documents, newspapers, photographs, drawings, or testimonies, they reenact a moment in history, talking about the past through “characters” who were confronted by their own memories.

About Memories and Images

A new field of interpretation that presents analytical resources generated from the social sciences is one that establishes correlations between intellectual trajectories and the formulation of thought-related theoretical matrixes. Such perspective is based on the idea that biographies can become extremely effective methodological sources to help comprehend the formation processes of a social memory. As Halbwachs noted,

if the collective memory is strengthened and preserved, it is because it is supported by a group of men who are, in fact, individuals that remember, as members of a group. A common memory set is built through the supporting of such memories, which, although not always presented with the same intensity, individually compose a singular point of view of the collective memory.” [1997: 94, trans.]

That is how the social memory is constituted, through the reconstruction of individual memories, which are understood as plausible versions of historic processes and cultural traces.

Reanimating a memory that creates permanent tension between past and present, private and public, is a way to comprehend or unveil the silence of a generation, of a certain place, of a certain social group In this drive through Bebelá’s live memories regarding women’s participation in the Gaucho Revolution of 1923, I tried, as Lapierre said, to “break the memory silence in which the past is hidden” [2001: 20, trans.]. Whereas the official history, based on it’s

register, talks about the male characters's actions on Brazilian political episodes, it relegates any female participation in such events to the background. In the conflict between the "libertarians" or "revolutionaries," group that contested 225 the results of the state election in 1922, and the "government groups," who supported Borges de Medeiros for his fifth term as governor of Rio Grande do Sul, women actively acted in the background, gathering money, food, and clothing and aiding those in need: "Hidden, we were able to send out everything to the revolutionaries: food, clothes; all right under the government's beard!" 230 according to Bebel. Living memory is like that, Lapierre noted, "like a whisper, a confidence [. . .]. Deepened in silence, she mumbles about, assuring the presence of whoever's absent, talking about all and parts of the past. On course, Q2 she awaits, counting on our attention" [*ibid.*: 20–21, trans.].

The exercise of remembering leads to a subjective and partial report, for memory here refers to the past in an affective manner because, in order to remember 235 something, it is necessary to have lived it. For the reason that the report of the subject/character, while talking about her personal experience, is told in the present—I remember—it is different than a *once upon a time* account that, in general, has its argumentations founded far from the events, since *they* took place 240 in the past. Therefore Rousso said that *I remember* forcibly belongs in the present

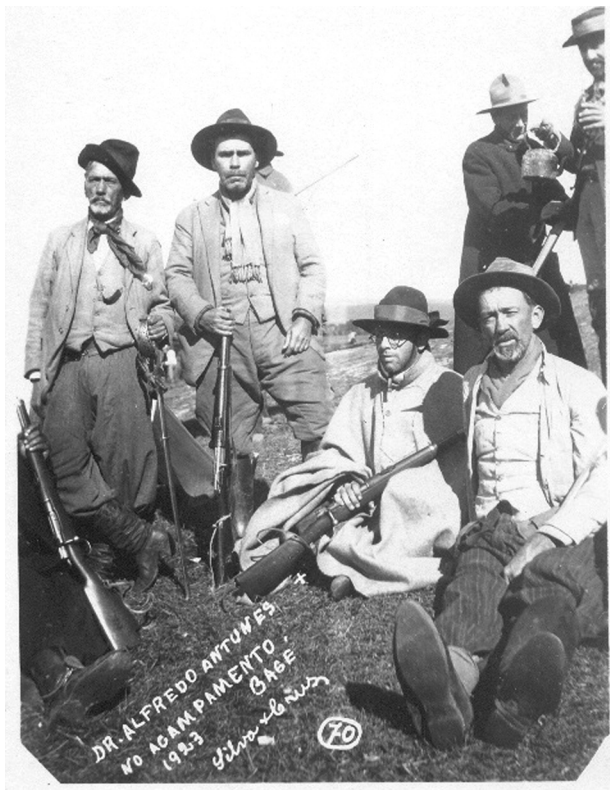


Figure 2 The revolutionary soldiers.



Figure 3 *The military forces who arrived to finish off the revolution.*

time, since “the operation of memory consists in referring to the past in the present; whilst the historic operation consists in trying to think about how people thought back then; so the principle is trying to talk in the past” [2003: 63, trans.].

The film *Bebela and the Gaucho Revolution of 1923* captures her conversations 245
with her son and her granddaughter behind the camera, recording the tone in
which things were said and the expressions associated with the accounts. The
film also intends to reveal several artifacts (documents and photographs) that
testify to the unwinding of the story, building up sources to be remembered later
on. For Proulx and Laurendeau, 250

the social scientist researcher’s eyes are oriented towards a kind of document that captures
the expressions and emotions in the discourses or gestures of historic actors, who might be
either a political personality or an amateur actor caught in his everyday life, [...] allowing
a new form of historic descriptions, a new manner of introducing historic reports. [1997:
10, trans.] 255

We know that the memory of images, sounds, and meanings is built and
fixated throughout life. That memory is a strange mixture of the sensorial and
the verbal, which

offers us a fragmented past or something like a confused set of a mental “media.” We have
the impression of seeing images, understanding sounds, using words that were already 260

used, and experimenting, once again, with physical sensations such as tension and
 Q4 movement. [MacDougall 1992: 68]

Films (and photos) have this effect of activating the memory, giving us the
 strange feeling of (re)living situations that were registered throughout our lives.
 They are memory films that, escaping from a fictional narrative, intend to create a
 self-narration, staged in a certain historic period, or in a political matter, or in the
 character's life, or even in any given place, neighborhood, or city. 265

For the French historian M. Ferro,

the joining of everything that has been shot since the start of the century (macro- or micro-
 history, circumstantial or not, document or fiction) constitutes, today, a considerable
 archive stored on the *Blockhaus* of the film collections, private collections, television, and
 people's memories. After a while, people's relation with their past—their memory—is
 no longer clearly distinguished from its relation to such an archive (its "film memory"
 in a way). Then, naturally, some sort of cinematic mass was created. [*Cahiers du Cinéma*,
 1975, trans.] 275

The cinematographic language allows the reconstruction of a historic narrative,
 leading us to the recognition of the passing of time if we consider, above all,
 as does Ricoeur, that "time becomes human when it is articulated in a narrative
 manner; but discourse is only meaningful when it draws the traits of a temporary
 existence" [*apud* Delage 1997: 19, trans.]. 280

While biographical films evoke a social memory by narrating a certain period,
 photos and family films maintain the memory of the family group, registering
 daily moments as well as important family ceremonies like birthdays, anniversar-
 ies, weddings, and Christmas parties. Photos that are hung on walls or placed on
 a bedroom balcony, or even carefully kept in the family photo album, as well as
 videographic registers, constitute the family treasure, a heritage for future
 generations. Besides that, all commentaries, stories, and memories that are
 brought up by such images present the youngsters with a story that they did
 not experience but are part of, inviting them to join their family history. The
 social usage of such images allows the creation of a true rite of memorization
 and integration of the generations, both on and off the screen [Peixoto 2001]. 285

The concept of memory within images has been well explored by anthro-
 pology, in particular by visual anthropology, through the feedback procedure,
 and a lot has been written about it [Deshayes 1996, Peixoto 1995]; an instrument
 that incites whoever has been filmed to consider the projected images: images
 from the other, images from the self. Films are visual, audible, and verbal images.
 They are narratives and mostly representations. That way, the researcher high-
 lights the social universe of the film and develops the central argument among
 the agents of history, constantly working with the relations of time and history,
 the history of time, and time and memory [Peixoto 2001]. 290

Regarding the insertion of archived images in the documentary film, it 300

allows the process of memorization within the sequences of animated images, blending
 values and usages of photographic media. At the same time, it surpasses the problem



Figure 4 “This woman with a white hat, behind the leader of the revolution, is not me? Because I was there when the leaders arrived at the Cruz Alta station.”

Q5 of opposing photography to film, based on their respective relations with time: exposing a certain writing complexity in images of a certain memory. [Peldon 1997: 101, trans.] 305

More than that, all photos that were put into a film point toward the language matter and the complex matter of images in movement (continuous) that contain fixed images (fragmented). That is why, according to the author,

the production of a heterogeneous visual set might mean a new way of relating to memory, with more variables and more dynamic: if each type of image implies a specific 310 memory level (interconnected with the representational method of a referent, in a given space/time), an organized rotation of images would demonstrate a complex work of constituting, or reconstituting, the memory. [*ibid.*: 106, trans.]

CONCLUSION

The insertion of photographic images [Figure 4] and newspaper headlines in 315 Bebela’s film is much more than just a need to illustrate the filmed interviews. Besides being historical documents, they allowed a focus on important facts from the past that Bebela kept only in photographs, demonstrating how her memory was directly connected to those photos. In this case, the photos and the newspapers from that age contained information that, alongside the speeches caught on 320 film, improved and enriched the historic and videographic narrative.

In the process of elaborating this project and acquiring images, the family's involvement was fundamental, making this project a family production. In the editing of the film, the acquainted filmmaker edited the images with a clear objective: turn the family film into a historic artifact. That implied building a speech and telling a story from only *one* family member's point of view, the grandmother's. More than that, it implied breaking with the family's inner circle projections and presenting the film to a wider public, thus turning private images into public ones. 325

NOTES

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1. Thanks to Fabiana Rocha and Silvia Aguião, both social science students, who participated in the researching of public archives and Internet sites and in the editing of the film.
2. Before the 19th century, all well-heeled families portrayed themselves through paintings. With the invention of photography and the rise of photographic studies, such a practice was extended to all other social classes [Odin 1995]. 335
3. I am referring to the teachings of the Nanterre school, where I started my initial apprenticeship in cinema, one that condemns the *profilmic*. See in C. Peixoto [2000] the analyses on "pose," "natural attitude," and "natural ostensible."
4. National Library, Ministry of the Army Archives, Army Museum, and CPDOC/FGV. 340
5. By then, I did not know much about that part of her life, so I missed the opportunity to capture statements of my grandfather, who also participated in the Revolution as a member of the Health Corps of the revolutionary troops of Cruz Alta.
6. Due to my formation in the "Jean Rouch School" (Paris X—Nanterre), until then I had only worked with an 8 mm camera. 345
7. According to Odin, a family film does not tell a story but only fragmented aspects of the family's life [1995: 29].
8. Because the Hi 8 cameras worked under the Pal-G system, all images were converted to NTSC, resulting in a small quality loss.

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