



In and Out of Context

On the Reality Effect and Evidentiary Status of Home Videos

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Abstract. Based on Richard Chalfen's two basic types of contexts of home visual media: the private and the public, the essay analyses contexts that represent paradigms of the evidentiary status and production of meaning: the "what did they look like," the "open window" attitude and the "how they looked at" paradigm. One of the most characteristic situations for home videos, a primary context is when the people producing and watching the movie is one and the same. In this approach home movies show an affiliation to autobiographic texts. When used as an attribute of feature films or embedded in different contexts, the term home video bears different meanings which I discuss in the analysis of relevant cases.

The present essay discusses the roles assigned by the different theories/analyses to context in defining home movies, and to what extent this is an inherent part of the notion of 'home movie.' The analysis takes into consideration not only the scientific discourse on home movies, but also the scholarly writings on home visual media¹ which are in connection with each other based on the role they assign to context in defining the types of pictures. It is not a negligible viewpoint that the authors of these texts, although not always consciously, temporarily suspend the differences between

¹Richard Chalfen defines the following as home visual media: snapshots, picture albums, albums containing cut-outs from magazines or pictures, scrap-books, home movies/videos, video-mail etc. He treats these as a separate group of home media. Audio recordings (recorded phone conversations), written materials (diary, letter, email, postcard etc.) are also considered to be home media (Chalfen 2002, 143).

the two media, and instead of presenting their specific nature or discussing their differentiations, they mix them by referring to writings on family pictures in texts written on home movies and vice versa. Nevertheless the specificity of media is not at stake in such a definition which considers the creation of meaning as a contextual act. The contextual, cultural analyses perceive that the matter of the two media does not influence the possibilities of representation as much as their usage and function does.

A scale can be outlined based on the extent to which the context of production and reception is part of the intension of the notion of home movie. At one pole of the scale there are those definitions which differentiate home pictures/movies based only on their context. Most attempts to describe the phenomenon start from the community of users and define its methodology and field of study similar to the following: "In our research we have dealt less with the perceptual components of movie codes and mediation because we considered more important the analysis of those forms of social behaviour which produce these forms. We assumed that movies and pictures are formed rather by social than psychological or technical factors" (Musello 1984, 28).² Departing from Chalfen's socio-divistic theory, he uses and widens his system of description developed for home movies so that he can even more thoroughly describe the complex act of photography. The parts of the procedure are the following: planning, behaviour behind the machine, behaviour in front of the machine, processing, selection, and presentation. In his description these parts of procedure are connected to the following five communicational factors: participants, environment, theme, the form of the message, the code. The parts of procedure and the different procedures create a matrix-like system and can be interconnected in thirty possible ways (Musello 1984, 28). That is why all contextual factors are dissected and the least is said about the pictures themselves. This approach starts from the premise that this group of pictures can be differentiated from other pictures only through their usage, and this leads to the conclusion that by placing them into a different context, they could not be recognized as family photos. "On a formal, syntactic base family photos cannot be differentiated from other forms of photography" (Musello 1984, 48). Thus the meaning of the family photography does not emerge from its existence as autonomous photography, that is why it cannot be presented as such. The meaning is formed by other parts of the cultural system. "The popular readings of photography create a transcendental link between the sign and the sign vehicle, but it is not reduced to this completely. The

²Translations from Hungarian were made by the author of the essay.

photography is far from being interpreted as something meaning only itself and nothing else, but is challenged as the sign of something else, although it is not" (Bourdieu 1982, 240). Thus pictures are adequate to characterize communities, to present their features and systems of values to such an extent that they consider important to discuss the pictures only from the iconological point of view, and they are content with a catalogue of symbols or smiles. One can meet similar definitions: "the last part of the picture in the table, the 'form' and 'code' of the message can be dealt with briefly" (Musello 1984, 47). The picture in this case is not defined as an autonomous entity: its meaning is created from its context, from outside (in the process of their making and viewing). Departing from the impossibility to define the code of amateur photography, the author eventually states that "on formal, syntactic base family photos cannot be differentiated from other forms of photography," this can be done only "through communicational interactions, contexts and finite products" (Musello 1984, 48–49). As opposed to this, in the case of movies the movie styles and the forms of message can be characterized with filming conventions, routine as well as the schemes of behaviour in front of the camera (Chalfen quoted by Musello 1984, 48). Based on these arguments the theoretician does not consider photos taken by professional photographers as family photos, as their professionalism exceeds the popular concepts on the formal elements of family photos, and he excludes those art and consumption products (e.g. commercials) which deliberately mimic the style of snapshots, as the story behind their formation and usage is not the same as the main factor in the above definition: the home/private context. This approach very much tries to differentiate the topic of the study not from the viewpoint of form but that of social meaning; however, with the exclusion of the above mentioned picture types a paradox situation is created. The author speaks about the style of the photographs, the popular concepts of formal elements of family pictures, without giving any examples or attempting to define them, although he justified the impossibility of merely formal differentiation with the lack of form.

According to Boerdam and Martinius, besides the context of the pictures their theme becomes a relevant aspect of definition as well, and consequently pictures are considered to be family photos: they can be named "together with their theme and the social environment in which they are used. Based on the first definition, all photos are family pictures which represent relatives or family members. Based on the second, all pictures which are preserved by the family and sometimes looked at are family photos as well" (Boerdam–Martinius, quoted by Bán 2000, 26). This definition does not exclude studio photos or

ordered wedding videos but can lead to further questions: what happens to the pictures in which the relatives and family members are present but not as relatives but as the characters in a fictive, staged story? Can we consider the media consumed at home as home media or the programme videocassettes, DVDs, films which are watched and preserved by the family as home video? András Bán – without the aim to contradict³ the arguments for these context-based definitions – presents a new dilemma within this anthropological frame of image studies. He objects the fact that the systematic analytical methods excluded from the discourse the idea of “functional aesthetics” (Jaques Maquet’s term): “the thing these texts do not speak about is the poetic, aesthetic act which happens nonetheless during the watching of these pictures (somewhere far from any interpretation of art), the moment through which, even if only for a glimpse of the eye, there is an ease in the congenital bad fate of man” (Bán 2000, 27).

The diversity and sometimes conflicting nature of the definitions can be explained in part by the fact that the underlying questions of these studies differ themselves: some of the answers imply the issues of “what is home photo/video,” some that of “when can a photo/video be considered as home photo/video.” Probably this can explain the terminological proliferation characterizing the way the scholarly writings define the topic of the study, often without explaining the choice of term: *amateur film* (Kuball 1984), *family movie* (Kuball 1984), *private film* (Forgács 1995). As I have presented in a previous study (Blos 2003, 319–321), in these cases different aspects of the topic are addressed with these terms. The *amateur* notion is present as synonym for low quality, rudimentary, dilettante, arbitrary and instinctive, the form referring to being outside of the canon to a certain extent, but the term is used also to denote some forms of institutional movie-making, its aesthetics and a certain type of publicity. The *family movie*, *private movie* terms do not refer to formal characteristics but to the environment of making and the social behaviours in connection with these. The enhancement of the family aspect raises some other questions: what importance do they have in the organization of small community identity, how is the self-image and the hierarchy of the

³He presents the main questions and results of the scholarly writings on family photos: “they studied questions like: to what extent the self-representation of the family, its inner system and hierarchy is present in these pictures (the answer: it was more explicit in the past, in the present it is less represented). They concentrated on whether the behavioural characteristics are present in these pictures (of course). They asked to what extent were the pictures, the objects, or the helpers the starting points of family story-telling (the answer: it depends on the story-teller)” (Bán 2000, 26).

family present? That is why they do not have the same meaning outside this community (it is private). The English term *home video* localizes the place of production and usage of these pictures and at the same time it refers to the rudimentary, simplistic means of representation (*home-made*, something makeshift or artisanship).

The anthropologist Richard Chalfen places the question of private pictures in a wider context as he broadens and gradates the discourse. He calls *home media* every representational form with the following characteristics: it is the significant part of everyday life, represented by the vernacular, the banality of free-time culture; it is firstly the product of a socio-cultural exercise and only secondly determined by technological or cognitive processes; and it is the combination of several forms of communication, may that be a phone conversation, a printed electronic letter, or family websites, within which the visual media forms a separate group. Compared to mass-media exercises there is an important difference in the relationship between the producers and consumers as well as in the social organization of the target community (Chalfen 2002, 143). According to this, the home visual media is determined by the private, personal ways of production and by the intention of private or personal consumption. The first criterion excludes the mass media products consumed in a private environment, at home, while the second factor integrates the visual forms which were intended for personal use and not created personally. The criterion of intention differentiates the home visual media from those which were created in a private environment, and yet they are to be considered art or experiment due to their intentionality. I consider part of this group the one-minute family scenes which are so frequent in early cinema, which were created for a wide audience with the purpose of attraction and not documenting family narratives (Gunning 1990). Most of the avant-garde creations can be included in this group: e.g. the silent footage recording the birth of the American avant-garde movie-maker, Stan Brakhage's child, the *Window Water Moving Baby* (1962), which was motivated mostly to subvert the conventional relation between picture and sound, and not an exercise to immortalize or remember.

Thus Richard Chalfen defines the adjective *home* metaphorically and by doing this he dodges the explanations needed when using the term in its verbatim meaning and the presentation of exceptions (Chalfen 2002). At the same time, unlike the above presented theories, intentionality and not context becomes the cognitive background. Another important statement of the author is that in the common sense the intentionality of the home visual media is connected to a specific notion of evidence which functions as the

driving force of the creation of home pictures (Chalfen 2002, 141). Pierre Bourdieu calls this popular attitude, which interprets the picture as evidence, the *social definition* of photography⁴. Nevertheless, probably because of its unconscious and achievement-like nature, which materializes in interaction, the term *social definition* is ambiguous to a certain extent. That is why, based on the theory of social representations,⁵ I consider the usage of the term *naïve picture theory* (Blos 2008).

In Chalfen's opinion the way a home video becomes evidence and the notion of evidence we apply in connection with it depends on the context and culture. It is important to consider how the situations and viewpoints differ in which these types of pictures acquire an evidentiary status and are considered to be documents. In his logical-analytical train of thought on the ways of documenting through pictures, Attila Horányi presents the following thesis: "in order for something to become the objective evidence of the thing (i) it needs to be an object; it needs to be (ii) symbolic, something which – in a specific context – can refer to something else (a picture can become a document only in the context of picture watching, as otherwise the relationship between the sign and the sign vehicle and thus its nature as a documented object is not determined), where the intention to prove, testify and certify must be part of the reference"; (iii) it needs to be genuine to give an external certification of this reference (Horányi 2000, 86). From the point of view of the connections between the evidentiary status of pictures and their context, the author presents some useful hints. He outlines three possible situations according to whether the picture/movie can fulfil the third criterion, that of genuineness. One of these situations is when the picture becomes the tool of transparency: pictures are seen not as the image of evidence but the evidence itself, this theory considers genuineness as something which is connected to the picture. In the following two cases its evidentiary status needs to be attested and this can be performed by introducing and following conventions outside and/or inside the picture. The external conventions are in fact contexts of attestation: for example the environment of its production is known. On-site identification pictures, when all phases of the production are conscious and

⁴"We consider the photography an absolutely realistic and objective recording of the visible world because (from the beginning) it was assigned social functions which were considered 'realistic' and 'objective' [...]when giving objective degrees to photographs, the society does nothing else but validates its tautological certainty that the picture of reality which matches its picture of objectivity is truly objective" (Bourdieu 1982, 226–228).

⁵The theory of social representation studies the processes in the course of which scientific theories, cultural objects stream back to the common sense as they become the leaders of everyday behaviour and the tools of commissioning of meaning (László 1999, 9–41).

controllable, are considered to be part of this group. In the interpretation of the contexts of home or private pictures the most usable handhold is provided by the distinction of the types of conventions within the picture. This group is formed by such visual conventions or markers which are meant to create an appearance of genuineness inside the picture. Such a sign is the haphazard, spoilt image which excludes conscious composition or the presence of elements which refer to randomness, which are incidentally connected to the theme of the picture. The appearance of genuineness can be achieved through the stereotyped, banal composition as well (Horányi 2000, 86–87).

The above classification of the document/evidentiary value of pictures suggests that the naïve picture theory described as the main driving force in the production of private pictures, the everyday notion of transparency of the medium is not at all homogeneous, it can be further articulated, or in some cases several types of convention can prevail. The category of the conventions within the picture refers to the fact that private pictures can not only be defined based on their context, but also based on certain formal features as well. This can lead to further questions: how do these pictures behave when uprooted from their private context? Based on what formal features can they be considered home visual media? In what contexts do they appear, in what way are the public presentations different from the private reception environment? And how can the conventions behind naïve picture theory be described, which are mentioned in context-based definitions (“common notions of the formal elements of family photos”), but are considered irrelevant in analyzing the semantic structures of pictures?

Chalfen’s metaphorically interpreted *home* adjective is adequate to describe not only those contexts which interpret pictures as documents, but it can also imply the naïve style of the pictures. Chalfen distinguishes two basic types of contexts of home visual media: the private and the public. These contexts also represent two paradigms of the evidentiary status and production of meaning, in the metaphorical language of the author the “what did they look like” (how these people appear) and the “how they looked at” paradigm (Chalfen 2002, 142). As one of the most characteristic situations for home videos, a primary context is when the people producing and watching the movie are one and the same. In this approach home movies show an affiliation to autobiographic texts.⁶

⁶Some of the criteria in Lejeune’s definition of autobiography – with the exception of the formal criterion (it needs to be a prose narrative) – can be applied to the home videos/movies: in some cases the illocutionary value assigned to them matches the criterion of the theme (personal life), the author (being identical with the narrator) and that of the narrator (being

Within these contexts the movie becomes for the viewers a kind of evidence for “how they looked,” “how was it then,” “what happened to us” (Chalfen 2002, 142). Thus the pictures merge in the perception of the initiated viewer and they create a symbiotic relationship with the experienced reality. That is why in this case it is not the picture that has document value as this document nature is not diegetically enclosed in the picture, but it emerges from the symbiotic relationship between the picture held up by the viewer’s knowledge and reality. The forms of this knowledge of the viewer are, on the one hand, the *narratives*⁷ or realms of implication, which incorporate the experiences connected to the theme of the picture into meaningful frames, but are not necessarily presented in a discursive form, and, on the other hand, the texts, *discourses*, which are formulated, textualized in a certain medium in the process of the viewing. In the contexts in which the pictures are used as evidence or for the purpose of memory, the information carried by the picture becomes not only medially articulated but is characterized by the *externality*⁸ of the creation of meaning.

identical with the character and the perspective of the narration). Gérard Genette gives a similar definition of autobiography in his work entitled *Fiction et diction* (1991) in which he tries to create a theoretical framework with the help of narratology and speech act theory to describe the differences between fictive and factual texts. Genette’s narratology is not only adequate to categorize written texts, it is a kind of meta-theory the film theory applications of which were encouraged by the author’s terms built upon visual metaphors, and it became the text of reference for the newest film-narration theory texts (cf. Branigan 1992). Such a visual metaphor is the term of focalization which studies the distribution of the knowledge transmitted through communication, the way the different levels and agents (focalizers) of narration provide the receiver with the information. In the case of home movies it could be an interesting issue to decide what kind of narrative information the medium focalizes if in the above named type of context parts of the narrative information are external. At the same time it could provide a uniform theoretical framework to describe the differences between the factual narrations created with a purpose of documentation and the private fictions (self-fictions?).

⁷Genette divides the elements of the narrative in the following way: story, discourse and narration. Edward M. Bruner studies the stories defined as syntactic structures which determine in a latent way the ethnological studies on the transformations of indigenous American culture. In his use of terms the narrative is an implicit structure behind the descriptions: “narrative structures provide an organized framework and meaning to experience, but there will always be such feelings and experiences which cannot be fully grasped by the dominant story” (Bruner 1999, 185).

⁸The externality of the relevant information was an important feature of early films in Noël Burch’s opinion, who defined this early period of cinema as a *primitive mode of representation*. He describes as primitive externality the early forms of film narration in which the film did not function as autonomous narration entity, the show was accompanied by the commentary of a lecturer and music, and a similar function was assigned to certain types of intertitles (Burch 1990).

In this case visual representation is nothing else but *real visual illocution*,⁹ in which the usage of the picture is an act in itself, may it be remembrance or proof.

What role do the naïve picture theories assign to the code of the message, how can we describe the medium of these phantom-like documents? This evidentiary status is paired up with a naïve picture theory/mode of perception which identifies the product with the subject of the picture, the portrayed instead of the picture as object. Barthes calls this coming into power of the sign-vehicle *magic*. The picture is no longer sign, it becomes the object itself. Another metaphor of this viewpoint is the window-metaphor, based on which a picture is transparent; it is like an *open window* which one can see through. A family photo is capable to evoke because seeing through its margins we identify the image as something non-mediated, non-transmitted.

Another different situation would be when the viewer of the private pictures has no knowledge (or disregards it) about the reality of which the film can be considered an evidence (in the above presented meaning). In this case he/she will consider the picture a document based on a different notion of evidence. While in the previous situation the pictures witnessed how somebody “looked like,” here one can discover “how they looked at.” The picture can become a document of the beholder, of the act of image creation. In this case mediation is emphasized and the attention is shifted from the represented to the way of representation. The extent the viewing of the picture as object differs from the “open window” perspective can be best presented through old pictures that can be found in almost every album which represent our ancestors the name of whom we do not know, or the part of the family he/she belonged to, and still we hold on to these as beloved items. The connections between these pictures and the reality they represent cannot be reconstructed any more; there is nobody who could free the world or the great-grandmother from the frames of the picture. What remains is the anonymous face in the picture, the “what did the past look like” and “how they looked at people with cameras back then.” According to this notion of evidence a home video can create, for example, the atmosphere of an age in a movie. But there are experimentations which create independent films from home movies using the collage-technique. An example of this is Péter Forgács’s serial documentary entitled *Private Hungary* (1988–2002), which groups the home movies created at the turn of

⁹In David Novitz’s opinion the pictures depending on their contexts can be used with different illocutionary values and such usage is “nothing else but visually representing something – depending of course whether the acts of illocution in which they are used are meant or refer to something the pictures of which they are” (Novitz 2003, 380).

the century thematically or by their authors. The director – according to his personal testimony – is interested in the *language of the subjective diary*, the pictures as found objects not only make possible the reconstruction of the life of the filmmakers but present the themes they were interested in, the personal filming techniques, the paradigms of looking. That is why he does not try to reconstruct personal life stories and the symbolic relations between the movies shot in the course of 20-30 years, which would make the films transparent. He presents only crumbles of the filmmakers' lives, the ones recorded by them and we can see only those events which they considered fit to become parts of their movies. In the movie called *Bartos Family* (*Bartos család*, 1988) besides its "family novel"-nature the following questions become important: "How did Zoltán Bartos look?" and "what does the world look like with the eyes of Zoltán Bartos?" Or in the film called *Dusi and Jenő* (*Dusi és Jenő*), what kind of gaze is characteristic of Jenő König, the filmmaker? While Zoltán Bartos, who was the buffoon of the family, liked to construct his images, to interact with everything through his camera and to instruct the family members as if they were actors, Jenő König's view is that of a gentleman: he prefers to gaze from a distance and to observe with resignation.

These movies incorporate also the ways in which the past "looked like." From this point of view the part of the series entitled *Bourgeois Dictionary* (*Polgári szótár*, 1992) is important as it is the thematic collection of all those topics the filmmakers considered intriguing: coffee-shop, street scenes, the stories of smiles, homemade erotic. The only reality which – in the first meaning of the notion of evidence – can be assigned to the images could only be the topics of history lessons. Partly because of the lack of context can the texture of the image be felt, and the dialectical nature of movies becomes possible to be observed as opposed to the institutional film language. In addition to this, Péter Forgács continuously provokes the viewers in the "how they looked" paradigm: he artificially interferes, slows down, stops the pictures, and repeats them. We think of the same "how they looked at" type of evidence when we call a style of representation home video-like. In these cases we think of the clumsiness of the image quality such as bad composition, the lack of sharpness, grainy pictures, abundant colours, the rudimentary representation (e.g. important events remain out of the picture or redundant images remain, which have no narrative logic). It is as if these objects were randomly created. That is why because of the naïve filmmaking style the unprofessional films seem more genuine. The "open window" perspective can be simulated as well without any known people to be in the pictures. Most of the mock-documentary films mimic the cliché-like settings of documentaries or in order to exclude

intentional composition, make mistakes so that we accept it as a mimesis of an objective reality.

The Reality Effect and the Evidentiary Status of Home Videos Taken out of their Contexts

What do we understand by the term home video when used as an attribute of feature films? How can something simultaneously be called *home*, *video* and *cinema*? What is in a ‘home video’ as opposed to the institutionalized modes of representation? What can private films signify when embedded in different contexts? The following discussion of feature films will attempt to reveal different types of hybrids formed due to an intentional overlapping of the cinema aesthetics with that of the home made.

Tarnation (2003)

The seemingly strange title (being a colloquial euphemism for damnation) is actually appropriate for designating the motivations of the filmmaker when making an autobiographical documentary based on his own home videos spanning over 20 years. The film is based on the life of Jonathan Caouette, directed by Jonathan Caouette and acted by Jonathan Caouette. The experimental, underground character of this documentary lies mostly in this narratively and texturally performed solipsism or self-absorption. In concordance with Michael Renov’s remarks regarding the new subjectivities on display in contemporary documentaries, this self-inscription in *Tarnation* “enacts identities – fluid, multiple – while remaining fully embroiled with public discourses” (Renov 1995). The presentation of the autobiographical story becomes an exploration of different identities: gay identity, personality disorder, a middle age-crisis, and the relationship with a heterosexual schizophrenic mother.¹⁰

¹⁰Michael Renov regards this type of autobiographical work as a schema or trope: “Frequently, these works attempt to situate the artist-subject in the familial order, to witness or account for the difficulties of accommodation of rigid family structures to queer sensibilities and life choices. [...] Sexuality and its sources or aetiology are only occasionally the overt subject matter of such work. Instead, these films and tapes affirm the degree to which the (queer) identities of the makers are bound up with those of certain special (but “straight”) family members. These mothers and grandmothers, heterosexual but unerringly eccentric, have helped create the people the artists have become. [...] These works are perhaps the next generation of the new queer subjectivity on film and tape. Janus-faced, looking behind

The autobiography begins with the re-enactment of a recent event: Jonathan Caouette gets informed about the lithium overdose of his mother, Renee Leblanc. This event urges him to embark on a journey to find his mother and in the same time to set out on a visual journey into his past. The autobiographical flow, the remembrance gradually becomes a performance, an act of defence, as suggested by an extended shot of a dilapidated wall with the following inscription (a paraphrase of a famous line by the poet George Santayana): “those who remember their past, are not doomed to repeat it.” The filmic narration follows the chronological logic of the autobiography and it is constructed as a collage of different types of home media: family photos, home videos, found footages, private fictions (home made amateur movies), and records of telephone conversations.

Tarnation shows an interesting interplay between two paradigms for looking: the “open window” attitude and the “how they looked at” attitude. On the one hand, we know that these are genuine home videos, we watch them as we presume their author watches them: in this regard the film becomes a window on the life of Caouette, which was opened by the author/character himself. This “what did I look like, what happened to me?” aspect becomes emphasized by the intertitles interrupting the flow of images. The contents of these intertitles share with the viewer the knowledge which only the filmmaker and the participants of his recordings can dispose of. However, this knowledge, which is being made public, has its boundaries. The knowledge of the viewer cannot become the contextual knowledge of the participant: we are nothing but tourists in somebody else’s visual life path and we are in need of guidance. These intertitles convey even the most shocking information in an objective, detached manner (although this is somehow motivated by the story about depersonalization and psychosis): these items of information are phrased in third person singular¹¹ without the slightest hint to subjectivity or emotions. So, on the other hand, the viewer must take into consideration, and interpret

as well as ahead, personal yet embedded in the commonality of family life, these are works which bridge many gaps of human difference - those of generation, gender, and sexuality” (Renov 1995).

¹¹In Gerard Genette’s categorization those factual narrations where the author and the character (persona) are the same, but the author and the narrator and the narrator and the character are different entities, constitute a separate type. Genette calls this type of narration heterodiegetic autobiography (Gyimesi 2000, 342). According to this theory, two types of opposed focalizers are distinguishable in this film: an extradiegetic narrator articulated through the intertitles in third person singular, and a diegetic character articulated through the collage of the “first person”-like home media.

the texture of the images, the “how did Jonathan look at” aspect of the pictures as well.

The director intentionally provokes this paradigm of looking: with the means of a user-friendly technology (the entire film was cut with the Macintosh iMovie software) he multiplies, mirrors and occasionally deteriorates images, thus producing prism-like compositions. These special effects and the home made fiction films are more than just an illustration of the story about schizophrenia and abuse: they become visual-formal equivalents of the content. The amateur gore horror movies and the gay themed features (modelled upon films like Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho*, 1991 and Slava Tsukerman’s *Liquid Sky*, 1982) made by the director and his queer friends gradually become similar to home videos: woven together, intercut with the home videos and the intertitles they come to represent the horrid experiences of the autobiographical story, and on the other hand, also the visual fantasies of the director: his ideas and expectations about how films should look like. There is a sequence in *Tarnation* when the teenage Jonathan Caouette imagines/dreams about his life as a collage of his favourite films: *Hair* (Milos Forman, 1979), *The Little Prince* (Stanley Donen, 1974), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), other horror films, and music videos, shown simultaneously in split screen. This collage suggests that the author of this autobiography needs the images (as well as the viewer) as visual evidences in order to be able to construct a visual identity, possible to narrate only in third person singular.

Capturing the Friedmans (2003)

In Andrew Jarecki’s documentary the narration evolves around the turn-about in the life of the Friedman family: Arnold Friedman, head of the family and teacher, is charged with paedophilia and sentenced to life imprisonment. While in prison he commits suicide so that his sons can inherit his life-assurance. The film is constructed from materials coming from different sources, and with different intentions: interviews and establishing shots about the scenes made 15 years after the event, footages made for television news programs, and the home videos of the Friedman family. The interviewees are the members of the family, relatives, police officers, detectives, lawyers, journalists and the victims themselves. The recollections about the events are not in unison, they contradict each other even in the most trivial details: the story variants are as many as the number of those interviewed. The diffusion of the variants, the contradictory character of the statements renders it impossible to construct a

single coherent version, the absolute truth of the story. The divergences of the accounts prevent the viewer from recognizing the interviews as conventional television-documentary situations correlated to the reality, to the factual. Thus, in this family-saga the story versions are not to be understood in the true/false dichotomy, as the brother of the convicted father puts it: they cannot find out the truth and, consequently, neither can the viewer by watching this documentary.

Thus, the *Capturing the Friedmans* can be considered an alternative to the positivist approaches to documentary conventions aiming at a coherent narrative structure, which, supposedly, can reconstruct reality. In this documentary the conventional usage of home videos in documentaries (as visual evidence of an account, illustration of factual information or iconic images of a specific era) is deconstructed, just as the cognoscibility of reality. Home videos are easy to identify in this documentary with the help of the narrative information and due to some visual markers, like centred compositions, too much or not enough light etc. The home videos presenting Arnold Friedman while playing magic tricks with his children, celebrating Christmas, or giving piano lessons are presented in the textual context of the interviews about him and his paedophilia. The recurring images about the celebrating, happy family, and the family members arguing about the trial, eventually capture the story of the disintegration of a family. In such a context these private films cannot fulfil their evidentiary status; the images of the everyday, the ordinary become questionable. The narrative context does not deny the veracity of the images, and does not prove that the images about the happy family are fake; instead it situates the evidentiary status of the home videos outside the true/false dichotomy, just like in the case of the above mentioned contradictory accounts. This raises the question whether a person's life, the private can be captured or not. The factual claims, the contents of the home videos in this documentary are not the illocutionary act intended by the director: situating home videos in a context where the ordinary, the everyday becomes strange and inexplicable, it becomes an act of demonstration about how unrecognizable, unknown a person, a series of events, and eventually truth can be. The series of interviews are framed by two similar situations: at the beginning of the film one of Arnold Friedman's sons declares that he is going to introduce a particular person to the viewer: his father. In the epilogue of this movie there is a reminiscent situation: in a home video the father is being interviewed by his son: "Anything about your personal life, sir?" and his answer is: "I cannot. It's personal!" After all this we can do nothing but doubt and question any information, even the stereotypical text carved on his gravestone: "Arnold

Friedman (1931–1995) loving father, devoted teacher, pianist, physicist, beach bum”. So, who exactly was Arnold Friedman?

The Kid Stays in the Picture (2003)

The film directed by Nanette Burstein and Brett Morg is a biopic, an adaptation of the autobiography of a Hollywood producer, Robert Evans. The film starts with a motto by Robert Evans which eventually becomes the *ars poetica* on the biopic’s relation to the real: “There are three sides to every story: your side, my side, and the truth. And no one is lying. Memories shared serve each differently.” The subjective character of the narration set in the Hollywood of the seventies is emphasized by the usage of private photos, snapshots enhanced with visual techniques and special effects. The visuals of this biopic refuse the conventional imagery of the genre usually constructed from talking heads and re-enactments. Simultaneously with the voiceover narration (first person singular) a series of still pictures are presented. While the voice of the narrator brings back memories, the snapshots come to life as well: with the help of special effects they gain certain attributes characteristic to moving pictures. The private snapshots are divided on layers, on foreground and background, using focus-effects, zoom and miming camera movement; the two dimensional pictures become three dimensional, cues of depth are introduced and some repetitive motion is simulated. These animated still pictures are not meant to function in either of the two aforementioned looking paradigms: neither “the open window” nor “how they looked at.” The pictures are detached from their original contexts and meanings and function as attractive illustrations of the story, a decorative background while the verbal narration becomes the salient information.

Blair Witch Project (1999) and Cannibal Holocaust (1979)

Despite the fact that the narrative of the *Blair Witch Project* (D. Myrick–E. Sanchez, 1999), and the *Cannibal Holocaust* (R. Deodato, 1979) shows similarities and both films are examples of the horror genre, they produce their effects differently. In both cases the horror-effect is based on found footages, discovered after the disappearance of the filmmaking team, and after the viewing of the recordings the members of the team are declared to be dead. While in the *Blair Witch Project* the amateur filmmaking group searches for

traces of a legendary witch, the professional documentary team in the *Cannibal Holocaust* aims to capture the life of a cannibal tribe in the Amazonian jungle. One of the main differences between these situations is, that, while in the latter movie the team does find the cannibal tribe and manages to capture their man-eating ritual in scenes of graphic violence (the cannibals will eventually eat the filmmaking team, and the director chooses to make the recording instead of saving his colleagues), in the *Blair Witch Project* the source of all the horror that the team has to endure remains invisible, there is no visualization nor any sign of corporeality of the witch. While in the *Cannibal Holocaust* the footage is found, viewed and interpreted in a diegetic world, the footage in the *Blair Witch Project* is allegedly found in an extradiegetic world: the reality of the viewer (this premise is supported with other extradiegetic items, like the diary of one of the filmmakers, which is made public on the internet). Thus, in this case the effect of the movie is based on contextual information about the found footage consisting of material proofs, narratives laid outside the filmic construction contributing to the evidentiary status of these recordings, stating that they share a symbiotic relationship with reality. In the case of the *Cannibal Holocaust* the viewing of the found, raw footage leads to questions of media ethics: with what means can films show the truth, how can they produce the effect of reality? In the other movie the usage of the handheld camera, the accidental character of the compositions and the fake extradiegetic information about the context of these images leads to different dilemmas, situated outside of the realms of the real: are these images really faked? And how was this simulacrum constructed? This shift of paradigms suggests another dilemma: how long are we disposed to believe according to our naïve media theories that home videos are real and evidentiary, when we have to accept that they can be so easily forged?

In my essay I have distinguished between two categories of the private films' contexts based on Chalfen's interpretation of home videos, which defines this type of film based on the criteria of the personal, private modes of filmmaking, and the intention of personal or private consumption (on behalf of the viewer). In my opinion, the context-analysis of private films will lead only to a partial interpretation; consequently I have enlarged the epistemological frame with the notion of interpretational paradigms, and with that of the naïve media theories. Only in such a complex interpretational frame I consider it possible to accurately describe the narrative and representational characteristics of private films. Naturally, further case analyses would be needed in the analyses of home videos consumed privately, in order to be able to typify the illocutionary values of these films.

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