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Virtual Looking: Home Movies as Historical Evidence in *The Future Is Behind You* (Abigail Child, 2004)

Abstract: Twenty-first century scholars debate the epistemological and historiographic questions that emerge when once-private home movies are appropriated to support public-facing histories. Building on the work of Jaimie Baron, Catherine Russell, Jeffrey Skoller, and others, I approach archival filmmaking practices — in which filmmakers appropriate extant images for (re)use in alternative audiovisual contexts — as sites that make these questions and concerns analyzable. I turn to the archival film *The Future Is Behind You* (Abigail Child, 2004) as a space for exploring reflexive modes of looking at and appropriating home movies as historical evidence. Building on Skoller's analysis of the relationship between experimental filmmaking practices, history, and Gilles Deleuze's notion of "virtuality," I analyze director Abigail Child's historiographic methods as a process I call virtual looking at home movies. Virtual looking is an engaged, critical process through which an historian, filmmaker, and/or spectator disrupts home movies' surface-level content while exploring historical memories and experiences via imagined private perspectives. In *The Future Is Behind You*, Child manipulates and recontextualizes 16mm home movies in relation to one family member's imagined perspective and memories, which are described via superimposed digital text. I interpret Child's archival filmmaking processes of disruption and imagination as an invitation for further exploring reflexive strategies when appropriating and engaging with home movies in a variety of public historiographic settings.

Keywords
archive, history, archival filmmaking, home movies, historical evidence

Introduction

In her work on "archiveology," Catherine Russell evaluates twenty-first century filmmaking practices that are "reflexively engaging with historical documents."[1] Russell argues that, as these filmmakers critically reuse archival images in new contexts, "the image bank in its fundamental contingency and instability becomes a means by which history can speak back to the present."[2] Russell aligns these filmmakers' attempts to disrupt the present with Walter Benjamin's insistence on everyday objects' power — a power activated through collection and montage — to critique and unsettle the present. I begin with an overview of Russell's work because it deeply informs my thinking about the relationship between film, history, archival images, and evidence. Still, Russell's Benjaminian emphasis on the disruptive tensions between past and present often overlooks other productive contingencies and contradictions that might be explored through reflexive engagements with archival images as historical evidence. Specifically, Russell's study largely omits strategies for filmmakers, historians, and spectators to confront the contingencies of one image category — the home movie — and the historiographic concerns that emerge when looking at and/or recirculating these once-private images for public histories and audiences.

To analyze a model for reflexively engaging with home movies' contingencies and the tensions between public and private that accompany their reuse(s) as historical evidence, I turn to Abigail Child's *The Future Is Behind You* (2004).[3] In this approximately twenty-minute film, Child recontextualizes 16mm home movies shot by an anonymous family in 1930s Europe. Following techniques explored in films like *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1978) and *Sink or Swim* (Su Friedrich, 1990), Child employs visible editing strategies to disrupt home movies' surface-level content of a happy family and to interrogate what she describes as the images' "subtext."[4] Child's intrusive editing involves various tactics of "fragmentation," "discontinuity," and "interruption" — three traits François Bovier identifies among "the main tropes of Child's films."[5] As in many films by Harun Farocki, including *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (*Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*; 1988) and *Respite* (*Aufschub*; 2007), Child also superimposes digital text that raises reflexive questions about the nature of images, memory, and history. For example, Child's digital text poses the following questions: "What is omitted?" "Can one only be intrigued by what one does not fully grasp?" "Are memories only reliable when they serve as explanation?"

In addition to confronting viewers with reflexive questions about the relationships between home movies, knowledge, memory, etc., Child's digital text also narrates the story

1)   Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Filmmaking Practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 27.
2)   Russell, *Archiveology*, 103.
3)   *The Future Is Behind You* is the second installment in Child's series titled *The Suburban Trilogy*, but I will only analyze this film on its own terms.
4)   Abigail Child, "Abigail Child with François Bovier and Ricardo da Silva: Conversation with a 'Maximalist' Filmmaker," in *Is This What You Were Born For? Strategies of Appropriation and Audio-Visual Collage in the Films of Abigail Child*, ed. François Bovier (Geneva: MētisPresses, 2011), 128.
5)   François Bovier, "Strategies of Appropriation in *Is This What You Were Born For?*," in *Is This What You Were Born For?*, ed. François Bovier, 9.

of the family depicted in the home movies. This combination of black-and-white, analog home movies and digital text narrating a family's story recalls many of Péter Forgács' well-known films. Yet, unlike in Forgács' works such as *Free Fall* (1996) or *The Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle* (1997) — films that use digital text to narrate the pre-war experiences of the Pető and Peereboom families, respectively — Child superimposes invented names and a fictional story. Child recontextualizes a real family's home movies within an imagined narrative about a young girl and her older sister as they grow up in Bavaria during the rise of Nazism. This digital, fictional narrative is often told from the first-person perspective of the family's youngest daughter. Rather than offering a factual account of home movies' subjects, Child positions present-day viewers' responses to these appropriated images in relation to one family member's imagined memories and emotions.

The Future Is Behind You's combined processes of disruption, reflexivity, and imagination offer a practical site for exploring what I call "virtual looking" at home movie images. My conceptualization of virtual looking is informed by Courtney R. Baker's insistence on the "look" as an active gesture that produces meaningful insights about images' subjects.[6] Baker's emphasis on an active, searching look counters passive understandings of the one-way "gaze" in much of visual studies.[7] My use of the term "virtual" is inspired by Jeffrey Skoller's analysis of the relationship between experimental filmmaking practices, history, and Gilles Deleuze's notion of "virtuality."[8] As Skoller argues, "To consider the virtual as part of the process of making history is to embrace what is usually understood as the antithesis of historicism: invention."[9] This embrace of invention as a critical historiographic tool is especially apparent in Child's re-evaluation of home movies through a fictional narrative and imagined perspective. I also privilege the term virtual due to its affiliation with simulation and the digital. Child's juxtaposition of analog actuality footage with digitally-imposed, imagined narration — which is told from a family member's simulated perspective — is key to what I describe as the film's process of virtual looking at home movies as historical evidence.

Digital technologies and the concept of the virtual — like the act of invention more broadly — often seem incompatible with traditional understandings of history and truth. However, Child's film models some useful ways digital tools might be employed to challenge initial readings of home movie images and to speculate about missing perspectives and responses. This interest in imaginatively seeking otherwise absent experiences and meanings aligns virtual looking with many characteristics Skoller identifies in his analysis of the relationship between experimental filmmaking and historiographic practices. Skoller argues that while many experimental films

> use traditional visual elements and techniques of the historical film such as documents, artifacts, testimonies, and re-creations to represent past moments in their

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6)   Courtney R. Baker, *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

7)   Baker, *Humane Insight*, 2.

8)   Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

9)   Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards*, xli.

most visible and material forms, they also work to make us aware of the nonvisible elements that also surround their images.[10]

Skoller is primarily interested in this broader relationship between experimental cinema and historical representation, but his emphasis on filmmaking's exploration of images' "nonvisible elements" paves the way for studying critical processes of virtual looking at home movies as historical evidence. Virtual looking, then, is an engaged, critical process through which an historian, filmmaker, and/or spectator actively seeks insights about subjects' otherwise invisible historical experiences via reflexive methods and imagined perspectives, often with the aid of digital technologies.

Fiction as a Welcome Strategy

The Future Is Behind You's collision of actuality images, intrusive editing, familiar documentary tactics, and an imagined narrative is likely responsible for Child labeling her film "a documentary with fiction intruding."[11] This framing of the film is valuable because it positions Child's tactics within a rich history of docu-fiction experiments. That said, in the context of this article's study of virtual looking, the word "intruding" risks implying that this film's fictional tactics are out of place in the process of seeking meaningful historical insights. While it might seem presumptuous to deviate from a filmmaker's own framing of a film, for the purposes of evaluating *The Future Is Behind You* as a model for virtual looking, I approach the film as a documentary that productively employs fictionalized perspectives to critically engage with home movies. Child does not employ traditional research methods one might find in films based on interviews with home movies' living family members or the cross-referencing of related sources such as diaries, photographs, letters, etc., as in much of Forgács' work. Still, *The Future Is Behind You*'s process of imagination is read here as a welcome, rather than intruding, historiographic strategy for seeking insights about past experiences of home movies' subjects. This embrace of fiction and/or narrative as a strategic step in history's construction echoes Hayden White's claims about the link between history and imagination. White infamously critiques the relationship between historical narratives and fiction, but he ultimately argues for the value and necessity of certain processes of imagination. As White explains, "How else can any past, which by definition comprises events, processes, structures, and so forth, considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an 'imaginary' way?"[12]

To analyze *The Future Is Behind You*'s imaginative methods as a model for virtual looking at home movies as historical evidence, I approach Child as an historian. Decades ago,

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10) Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards*, xv.

11) Cited in William C. Wees, "'How It *Was* [emphasis original] Then': Home Movies as History in Péter Forgács' *Meanwhile Somewhere…*," *Jump Cut*, no. 52, (2010), accessed June 20, 2022, https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/wees-forgacs/index.html.

12) Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 57.

it was more controversial to study a filmmaker as an historian. Since the 1990s, though, many film scholars have leaned on the work of White, Michel Foucault, and others associated with the "linguistic turn" in historiography to persuasively argue that filmmaking practices offer productive modes of constructing history on-screen.[13] Much of the writing about films-as-history focuses on the Hollywood historical film, but Skoller productively shifts attention to historiographic tools produced and employed by experimental filmmakers. In his own analysis of Child's *B/side* (1996), for example, Skoller approaches Child's practices as historiographic methods and the film as "a work of history."[14] Despite Skoller's intervention in this discourse about experimental films as history, my emphasis on filmmaker-as-historian still runs counter to how an artist like Child is most often discussed. For example, Tom Gunning situates Child's filmography and her visible editing strategies within the "poetic" mode of cinema theorized and practiced by Maya Deren.[15] Gunning argues that — despite Child's deep interest in history — she is foremost a "maker, and in that sense an experimenter as well as a poet," rather than an historian.[16] Gunning's analyses of Child's films as poetry are invaluable to my understanding of her filmmaking practices. To contend with *The Future Is Behind You* as a model for virtual looking, though, I shift the angle from which I analyze Child's filmmaking practices; I approach Child as an historian to primarily interpret her cinematic devices of repetition, interruption, superimposition, etc., as historiographic methods.

Many experimental and commercial filmmakers reuse home movies to construct new historical arguments. One subcategory — the archival film — offers an especially practical site for exploring how filmmaker-historians might appropriate once-private images from the past in new public-facing contexts — and how spectators might engage with these images in new historiographic texts. In an archival film like *The Future Is Behind You*, the filmmaker primarily (re)uses extant images in a new text, rather than recording new footage. My analyses of archival filmmaking practices are informed by foundational discourses about "found footage" and "compilation" films by scholars such as William C. Wees and Jay Leyda.[17] Still, I employ the term archival film, rather than other commonly used classifications, to emphasize how a film like *The Future Is Behind You* constructs an historiographic text through the study and reactivation of archival images. Family archives and home movies often blur lines between official and unofficial, so the appropriation of home movies as historical evidence also complicates the traditional distinction between "archival" materials (appropriated from official public archives) and "found" materials (appro-

13) See, for example, Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Eleftheria Thanouli, *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

14) Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards*, 94.

15) Tom Gunning, "Poetry in Motion," in Abigail Child, *This is Called Moving: A Critical Poetics of Film* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), xiv.

16) Gunning, "Poetry in Motion," xv.

17) Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964); William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York City: Anthology Film Archives, 1993).

priated from unofficial and/or private settings).[18] Furthermore, although the term "appropriation" carries negative connotations, I use this word here to describe any act of selecting, looking at, and recirculating home movies — even one's own home movies — as historical evidence in new contexts. I choose the term appropriation to emphasize how looking at home movies as historical evidence involves the use — or what Jaimie Baron calls a "misuse" — of once-private images for unintended purposes.[19] Of course, looking at nearly any materials as historical evidence requires engaging with those materials in ways their original creators likely never intended. Appropriating home movies as historical documents, though, also requires specifically working against the grain of the images' perceived private function. As Roger Odin argues,

> In the family domain, a home movie does not function as documentation. The family film is, in fact, a *counter-document* [emphasis in original]. The collective interactions at the moment of their shooting or viewing or in the individual interior discourses aroused are more important than the images. To read a home movie as a document is to "*use*" [emphasis in original] it for something that is not its own function.[20]

The appropriation of home movies as historical evidence in archival films makes these tensions between counter-document and document, as well as private and public, apparent and analyzable.

The Contingent Meanings of Home Movies

Patricia R. Zimmermann traces an historiographic turn toward the study of home movies in relation to 1960s social history trends often summarized as "history from below."[21] As Zimmermann explains, these trends evolved and expanded into diverse interdisciplinary methods that aim "to represent a wider and more diverse range of historical experience" and to historicize "everyday life."[22] As Richard Maltby suggests, in the field of film studies, many "new cinema history" methods and associated interests in previously understudied sources similarly grew out of broader historiographic trends toward the everyday and "the socio-cultural history of experience."[23] Since the 1990s, many film historians have specif-

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18) For a thoughtful analysis that employs this distinction between "archival" and "found", see Michael Zyrd, "Found Footage as Discursive Metahistory: Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99*," *The Moving Image* 3, no. 2 (2003), 40–61.

19) Jaimie Baron, *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 8.

20) Roger Odin, "Reflections on the Family Home Movie as Document: A Semio-Pragmatic Approach," in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, eds. Karen I. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 261.

21) Patricia R. Zimmermann, "Introduction: The Home Movie Movement: Excavations, Artifacts, Minings," in *Mining the Home Movie*, eds. Ishizuka and Zimmermann, 3.

22) Zimmermann, "Introduction," 10.

23) Richard Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, eds. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 32.

ically focused their historical studies on amateur films, including home movies, as cata-lysts for challenging prior assumptions about what constitutes film history.[24] These histo-riographic trends and research methods demonstrate that home movies offer crucial — albeit fragmentary and mediated — traces of people, places, and events that institutional archives, Hollywood, and film historians alike have traditionally ignored or misrepresented.

Other scholars shift away from analyzing home movies as primary sources for their own historical research. Instead, as I aim to achieve in this article, these scholars primarily focus on how filmmakers and spectators engage with archival images, including home movies, in new audiovisual historiographic contexts.[25] In addition to analyzing appropriated home movie images' content, these scholars are often interested in the perceived authenticity of — and affective reactions to — home movies' formal characteristics: uneven sound recordings, unbalanced compositions, over- or under-exposure, a lack of post-production, etc. As Efrén Cuevas argues, home movies' "noncommercial nature and their unprofessional formal features give them a surplus of authenticity that underscores their quality as a trace of the past."[26] When home movies are appropriated, these amateur production traits might produce a sense that a spectator is witnessing a candid, unfiltered view of family life. Similarly, when encountered in new contexts, these images' typical signs of outmoded technologies tend to produce an affective version of what Baron calls the "archive effect" — or a spectator's belief that specific images "come from another time and served another function."[27] Finally, these scholars propose that considering a tension between public and private becomes crucial to analyses of appropriating home movies. As Baron argues, "even if they contain nothing that seems specifically meant to be kept hidden, home movies may still give us a sense of being in proximity to an individual's unguarded and therefore private experience."[28] This discourse suggests that home movies' evidentiary force is largely rooted in a viewer's belief that the images were never intended to be seen by outsiders today.

These aspects of home movies — their formal qualities, technologies of production, and perceived sites of reception — contribute to a sense that one is encountering an intimate glimpse of private life as it was really lived. Yet family archives and their home movies carry conventions, exclusions, and ideological underpinnings. Like all archives and their sources more broadly, home movies do not provide direct access to a subject's experiences. As Crystal Mun-Hye Baik summarizes, "the home film is not a raw or objective source, but is always already mediated by a host of factors, including the filmmaker's sub-

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24) For example, many scholars present complex processes for engaging with amateur films, including home movies, at the annual Orphan Film Symposium.

25) See, for example, Efrén Cuevas, *Filming History From Below: Microhistorical Documentaries* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2022); Broderick Fox, "Home Movies and Historiography: Amateur Film's Re-Vision of Japanese American Internment," *Spectator* 26, no. 2 (2006), 9–21; Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, and Whitney Davis, eds., *Cinema's Alchemist: The Films of Péter Forgács* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

26) Cuevas, *Filming History From Below*, 51.

27) Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11.

28) Baron, *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse*, 27.

jective positioning, archival practices, and curatorial directives that frame what viewers see."[29] While home movies tend to be structured by their makers' attempts to construct a controlled representation of an ideal family, attempts to harness home movies' recordings into a stable vision of the family often clash with their unpredictable meanings and their amateurish productions' excesses.

When I view my own family's home movies, the fragmentary images often trigger memories and produce knowledge about the past in unexpected ways. For example, when watching footage of a Christmas morning's gift unwrapping, my look wanders beyond the surface-level content of my twin brother and I opening gifts to a small, turtle-shaped stool in the corner of my grandparents' living room. Over the years, as my grandparents moved to different houses, this stool remained a constant presence; my brother and I often played on or around this small piece of furniture. Beyond a visual record of a specific era's furniture styles, this excessive information in the background of the image likely offers little of interest to outsiders. When I notice this stool, though, it points to experiences of both brotherly fun and fighting. Similarly, humor and many emotions arise when I witness the camera operator's mistakes. For example, as I hear cheers at one of my childhood baseball games, the home movie images present grass beneath the camera operator's feet. As soon as the soundtrack reveals that I have hit the baseball, the camera quickly tilts to catch the remainder of the action. This footage of grass does not read as a "mistake" to me; I immediately recognize that my grandfather is behind the camera, and I recall that his interest in watching my sports events with his own eyes, rather than through a viewfinder, frequently led to lengthy recordings of the ground beneath his feet. The jerky images of the ground on the sidelines of a baseball game — like the out-of-focus or seemingly incoherent shots throughout many families' home movies — are often opaque to those without access to additional contextual information, but they are crucial to my understanding of my family's past.

Because home movies' contingent meanings heavily depend on their viewers' relationship to the depicted subjects and events, I echo Baron's insistence that the "home" in home movies is more than a reference to the location where many of the images were recorded. The home must also be understood as "a previous, private context in which the recorded documents were (or are imagined to have been) intended to be shown."[30] When filmmakers reuse home movies to support historical arguments in new contexts, they raise concerns about the appropriation and public circulation of images that are perceived as belonging to a past, private site of reception. Unfortunately, when many filmmakers appropriate home movies — which spectators assume were intended for private exhibition — to support public claims about the past, they often fail to address potentially productive tensions, excesses, and contradictions. In many cases, home movie images' signs of amateurish production are exploited as shorthand for authenticity while these fragmentary, incomplete, and contingent traces are ultimately conformed to support neat representations of the past. This trend is common in many commercial biographical documen-

29) Crystal Mun-hye Baik, "'The Right Kind of Family': Memories to Light and the Home Movie as Racialized Technology," in *Screening Race in Nontheatrical Film*, eds. Allyson Nadia Field and Marsha Gordon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 367.

30) Baron, *The Archive Effect,* 91.

taries. For example, *Amy* (Asif Kapadia, 2015) and *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (Morgan Neville, 2018) appropriate home movie footage of their subjects: singer Amy Winehouse and television host Fred Rogers, respectively. These biographical documentaries center on very different celebrities, but the filmmakers similarly present appropriated home movies as affective glimpses of everyday life without confronting the contingent meanings these images might have produced when viewed by their original private audiences.

To illustrate further: Morgan Neville recontextualizes home movie footage to support *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*'s historical narrative about the link between Fred Rogers' good-natured on-screen persona and off-screen life. For example, Neville presents home movie images of Rogers happily playing with his son on a beach while a reporter sums up the film's historical argument: this television star "has managed to escape the calloused, the embittered, the negative aspects of being a public performer. He is doing the one thing in the world that he wishes to do, and he is, by any definition, a happy man." Although Neville's film hints at darker aspects of Rogers' life, the home movies lend an affective authenticity to the documentary's primary vision of this celebrity as a positive force both on television and in "real" life. This coherent image of family life — as in similar appropriations of home movies in other commercial biographical documentaries — often has little to do with the fragmentary, messy, and unpredictable memories or historical knowledge these images produce for their original audiences. Alternatively, through *The Future Is Behind You*'s reflexive archival filmmaking practices, we can investigate processes of looking at home movies in more critical, reflexive ways that foreground — rather than smooth out — their contradictions, incompleteness, excesses, and tensions between private and public. To begin considering these processes, I now analyze Child's filmmaking practices as a model for virtual looking, which disrupts home movies' surface-level implications and speculates about the perspectives of home movies' original audiences.

Discontinuity and Disruption

In *The Future Is Behind You*'s opening scenes, appropriated home movie images of smiling sisters are not positioned as transparent or authentic glimpses into a complete, knowable family history. Instead, Child's disruptive editing tactics emphasize the home movies' mediation and the photographed girls' performativity. In the first appropriated shot, we witness a smiling young girl, her older sister, and an adult male in an outdoor setting. As in many home movies, a family member — in this case, the youngest sister — stares directly into the lens; she then dances for the camera. The direct address implies intimacy between viewer and subject, but Child interrupts this shot with a few nearly illegible frames before returning to the original shot. This jarring back-and-forth editing between the film's first two shots continues as the sisters walk toward the camera. These editing techniques of interruption and repetition illustrate what A.L. Rees identifies as experimental cinema's frequent "doubt or mistrust of apparent continuity."[31] By approaching Child as an historian,

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31) A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 6.

we can also read these editing strategies as a challenge to traditional historiography's structures of continuity, causality, teleology, etc. Child's disruptive montage, then, aligns with methods Robert Rosenstone identifies as traits of postmodern histories. According to Rosenstone, postmodern historiographic methods often

> foreground their own construction; tell the past self-reflexively and from a multiplicity of viewpoints; forsake normal story development, or problematize the stories they recount; utilize humor, parody, and absurdist as modes of presenting the past; refuse to insist on a coherent or single meaning of events; indulge in fragmentary or poetic knowledge; and never forget that the present moment is the site of all past representation.[32]

Many of these reflexive challenges to filmic and historical continuity are on display in *The Future Is Behind You*'s first edits, which disrupt home movie images, rather than presenting them as affective illustrations to support a definitive vision of a coherent past.

The invented narration — told via superimposed digital text — also draws viewers' attention to the home movies' excesses, contingent meanings, and varied perspectives, rather than conforming the images to an enclosed, authoritative narrative. One of the film's first digital texts states: "I was seven." Next, a shot of the older sister is accompanied by text that explains: "Ellie was ten." Upon viewing this scene, I recognize my own public distance from this invented perspective of an insider looking back at her home movies. Yet, as a viewer outside the family, I am simultaneously invited to engage with these images through this fictional insider perspective. This daughter's superimposed perspective and memories often reproduce the experience of discussing images while watching a home movie with other members of the family. As Odin reminds us, "Unlike fictional film screenings, interaction infuses the projection of a family film."[33] Through Child's textual intervention, I am encouraged to re-calibrate how I look at these home movies via a family member's imagined interactions with the images. As *The Future Is Behind You* unfolds, I increasingly recognize that the youngest sister's imagined perspective is pointing to the kinds of experiences, memories, and interactions that are often neglected by an outsider's common concentration on the surface-level content of strangers' home movies.

For example, as the sisters pick flowers in a field, Child rescales the home movie footage so that its images constitute only a small square space in the upper-left corner of the frame. In the unbalanced negative space surrounding the rescaled images, digital text reads: "On particularly fine days we went out into the fields." Child slows an image of the older sister holding and smelling flowers before freezing on a moment when this girl looks quite somber or even worried. Text states: "Mama would walk ahead of us taking springy steps that were characteristic (I realize only now) of the German Wandervogel hiking movement, which must have had a lasting influence on her from her youth." As text about the hiking movement appears, viewers witness a slowed home movie image of the sisters and others walking down a hill. The surface-level content of these images does not focus

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32) Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History,* 22.
33) Odin, "Reflections on the Family Home Movie as Document," 259.

on a mother walking but rather the sisters' movements. Yet, as *The Future Is Behind You* demonstrates, home movie images of oneself walking in a field might spark unexpected memories of a mother's walking habits and the events that influenced those habits. This process of virtual looking foregrounds absences and explores how unanticipated moments in a home movie might direct an original audience member's thoughts and memories toward off-screen experiences.

Notably, the narrator's invented reactions to her home movies' absences are positioned as retroactive. The text states that this daughter only later realized that her mother's walking style was tied to time spent in an interwar-period German youth group, which would be banned during the years of fascist control. Child's techniques point out to me as a public audience member that these home movie images are always experienced historically — and do not carry static meanings — even for those we perceive as belonging to their original private audiences. This process of virtual looking echoes Baik's insistence that a home movie "is not a repository of fixed memory, but actively recomposes layered memories as multiple audiences, situated in different times and cultural locales, struggle to make meaning of competing narratives."[34] By imagining the memories and thoughts that might come to mind for this daughter as she retroactively watches her family's home movies, Child's digital text inspires me to think critically about the contingent, in-flux historical knowledge that might be produced through these images by various onlookers in the future.

A Wider Historical View

Throughout *The Future Is Behind You*, Child investigates connections between personal memory and broader historical events occurring outside the frame. Cuevas identifies related approaches in films he associates with the "microhistorical documentary," including many films by Forgács. Cuevas aligns these films, which tend to appropriate materials from family archives, including home movies, with microhistory's aim "to explore the past and to place the 'micro' analysis in relation to relevant macrohistorical contexts, thereby making these documentaries historiographically representative in their own right."[35] Although the imagination at play in Child's film separates its methods from many established practices of microhistorical research, I am interested in how *The Future Is Behind You* relates its micro-scale analysis of home movies and one family member's virtual memories to a broader historical context.

For example, Child presents home movie footage of girls performing at an outdoor event. This performance involves the girls lifting and lowering their arms in unison. The camera is positioned at an obstructed angle and the girls' movements often occur in an underexposed, shadowed portion of the frame. These visual cues hint that I am viewing an amateur-produced recording. Rather than exploiting these familiar production elements as mere signs of authenticity, Child disrupts the images and produces a reflective space for new modes of looking. Through multiple jump cuts, the duration of this shot is jarringly

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34) Baik, "'The Right Kind of Family,'" 363.
35) Cuevas, *Filming History From Below*, 31.

fragmented. This intrusive editing points to the fragmentary, unstable forms that memories — like home movies themselves — often take. Superimposed text then states: "At school, Ellie refuses to salute. She is sent home." From this imagined perspective, shots of childhood performance — including the rehearsed lifting of hands into the air — spark a memory that links the family's immediate experiences to broader interwar-period events. In *The Future Is Behind You*, this girl's refusal to perform a fascist gesture is an imagined memory. Yet this imaginative process invites complex thinking about the kinds of memories a real onlooker rooted in this class position, cultural background, gender, etc., might encounter if viewing their own home movies.

In the next moments of the home movies' childhood performance, the girls swing tree branches in the air through choreographed motions. Via disruptive montage, including freeze frames, digitally adjusted speeds, and repetition, Child draws attention to moments when the girls are dancing in a circle with their branches held high. Over this digitally manipulated, dizzying image of girls frantically spinning in circles, the seemingly pleasant performance takes on a new, unsettling tone. As the girls rapidly spin, text explains: "Palm Sunday: Windows of homes are smashed and Jews dragged through the streets." This process of virtual looking inspires me to consider how personal memories, broader historical events, and home movies intertwine in contradictory and unpredictable ways. Here, images of (non-palm) branches raised during an otherwise cheerful performance trigger a speculative memory that Child appears to connect to the real 1934 violence on Palm Sunday in the city of Gunzenhausen.

Later, Child returns to images of the older sister and her peers performing. As they move their bodies in unison, superimposed text reads: "I recall little other than processions, marches, and parades."[36] The girls' motions again take on alternative historical meanings in relation to inter-war period militarism. Child highlights this connection by cutting to home movie images of a parade, including soldiers marching toward the lens. Presumably, these two historical events — the girls' summertime performance and the family's trip to a parade — are not directly connected in the original home movies' timeline. Here, though, Child's re-sequencing and process of virtual looking suggest that an encounter with a childhood performance might produce memories of broader historical experiences, including encounters with increasingly prominent public displays of militaristic power.

Emotions, Gestures, Identities

Following images of parade marchers, footage of the girls' performance is accompanied by digital text that reads: "Ellie had a new friend." Child freezes the image as all but two girls exit the frame. Following this unbalanced still image of two happy friends, Child presents

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36) Due to a lack of space, I omit discussion of Child's use of sound, including John Zorn's experimental music, which is also important to the ways this film explores experiences and memories. For example, sounds of military-style snare drums and Zorn's music add layers to this scene's collision of performance, a parade, and virtual memories of public militaristic displays.

a shot of the two sisters walking toward the camera; the older sister carries a small bouquet of flowers. As the older sister pushes the narrator away, text reads: "I was jealous." The images of these girls are then interrupted by shots of the older sister with her peers, including a slowed, repeated, and reversed shot of the older sister kissing two friends. As Citron argues in relation to her own influential re-working of her family's home movies in *Daughter Rite*, "Slowed down and repeated, the images reveal another film that had been obscured at the normal speed."[37] By drawing attention to the home movies' excesses — again through digital slow motion and freeze frames — Child reveals the unpredictable responses and feelings about the past that might be inspired by this younger sister's encounter with these images.

In this example of virtual looking, playful images of a big sister and her new friends first sparked broader connections to historical events like the violence on Palm Sunday in 1934. The footage then provoked virtual memories of militaristic displays witnessed by European children just before World War II. Through Child's reflexive tactics, these shots also point to experiences of jealousy and other emotions tied to a young girl's coming-of-age. These attempts to move beyond events traditionally deemed historic and toward uncovering personal experiences of jealousy from beneath home movies' surface-level content echo Eivind Røssaak's claim that "at stake in [Child's] films is a kind of complex archaeology of affects."[38] By emphasizing this contradiction between surface-level playfulness, memories of violence and militarism, and private feelings of jealousy, Child complicates these images' perceived immediacy while excavating the kinds of interconnected, messy emotions about the past one might encounter when viewing one's own home movies.

Along with Child's penchant for excavating emotions from archival images, scholars have identified an emphasis on bodies and gestures throughout Child's career. Gunning, for example, describes Child as "a feminist [Eadweard] Muybridge, breaking down gestures and actions to reveal unconscious and otherwise invisible patterns and determinates."[39] In *The Future Is Behind You*, Child deconstructs gestures to reveal otherwise invisible patterns of historical experience within the excess of home movies. This process recalls Friedrich's influential examination of latent gestures, emotions, and meanings in her own home movies in *The Ties That Bind* (1984) and *Sink or Swim*. However, Friedrich's influential examples of an experimental filmmaker appropriating and disrupting gestures in her family's home movies — as Citron also demonstrates in *Daughter Rite* — do not necessarily confront the methodological questions that arise when archival filmmakers and/or historians like Child reactivate someone else's home movies. Child explores heightened levels of invention and imagination to seek alternative historical meanings and emotions via strangers' bodies and gestures.

For example, Child models a process of virtual looking at bodies in motion on a family ski trip. An intertitle describes these images as taking place in 1935. The mother then smiles at the camera as she climbs a ski hill. Previously, on-screen text explained that this

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37) Michelle Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 18.

38) Eivind Røssaak, "Celluloid City: Diary from an Encounter," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 52 (2009–2010), 24.

39) Gunning, "Poetry in Motion," xix.

woman's mother (the narrator's grandmother) was Jewish, and her father was a Christian. The next shot presents the younger daughter slowly drifting on her skis; she smiles with her hands held high in the air. Everyone has fun in the snow; no one, especially the mother, seems to have a care in the world. As the film cuts to the next shots of the young daughter's body swiftly skiing down the hill, text states: "That winter, S. tells Mama a half-Jew might be embarrassing to his clientele." The frenetic shot of skiing is then interrupted by a medium close-up; the daughter now lies on the snow after an apparent tumble. The prior text — which describes the supposed embarrassment caused for others by the family's Jewish identity — remains superimposed on this image of the daughter's fallen body. The images' surface-level content presents a moment of mild embarrassment and even humor. In *The Future Is Behind You*, the daughter's invented inner voice and Child's emphasis on her body's fall tell a different story. This act of tumbling in snow leads to the speculative imagining of a disturbing experience of embarrassment and humiliation caused by the racist institutions lingering outside the frame. Reflexive digital text then draws attention to this otherwise invisible set of memories and experiences. The text states: "Another picture that is not shown."

Child also exposes elements of what is not immediately visible in the home movie images through emphases on more subtle bodily gestures. Describing her interest in exploring home movies' subtext, Child explains, "When your mother and father just say: let's take a photo; you might just be ready to go out and socialize; but you put on your smile. And I am interested in what is behind that smile."[40] To explore what kinds of experiences or memories might be lurking behind those smiles, Child foregrounds home movies' moments directly before and after a posed smile — the lead-up to and aftermath of the instance that might be isolated in a still portrait. For example, Child draws attention to the older sister's visible frustrations with the cameraperson's implied off-screen insistence that the girls continue smiling. Superimposed text describes the younger sister's reactions to these images: "I am filled with wonder, anger, yearning, and revulsion in equal measure." This younger sister then enters the frame and performs her own forced smiles. Text now reads: "I am ashamed that I do not belong." Child emphasizes the younger sister's repeated, forced bow and smile. These images are disrupted by brief shots of the younger sister grabbing and turning her mother's head toward the camera's lens to provoke a smile. As Odin explains, "No other types of films evidence as much direct address as the home movie."[41] When looking at these images as historical evidence, the frequent moments of direct address often require strategic speculation about what the smiles might reveal to those viewing them later. In these moments, Child does not position smiles at the camera as public-facing evidence of happy girls and women. Through the process of virtual looking, smiles unexpectedly reveal the shame and anger experienced by Jewish girls and women who were expected to perform happiness for their family and others — as the world beyond the frame told them that they did not belong.

By recontextualizing these images within broader historical events and this family member's perspective, *The Future Is Behind You*'s model of virtual looking suggests that a

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40) Child, "Abigail Child with François Bovier and Ricardo da Silva," 128.
41) Odin, "Reflections on the Family Home Movie as Document," 257.

home movie's most deceptively simple moments, including posed smiles, likely lead to complex, contradictory memories and historical knowledge, rather than serving as transparent, static traces of past happiness. This insistence on the instabilities and contradictions of memories, home movie images, history, and coming-of-age recalls Stuart Hall's broader claims about identity and cinema. As Hall suggests,

> Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.[42]

Viewers of their own families' past as it is represented in home movies already recognize that the identities of these images' subjects — much like the potential evidentiary values of these images more broadly — remain unsettled. As Child's film suggests, those who appropriate once-private images for new public contexts might seek ways to foreground these processual changes and unpredictable meanings.

Conclusion

In *The Future Is Behind You*, imagining the fictional perspective of a home movie's intended audience is not a matter of falsely equating fiction and the events of the past. Certainly, if *The Future Is Behind You*'s viewers mistakenly believe these narrated memories are factual accounts of a real woman looking back on her real childhood, Child's historiographic process could be deemed unethical or even dangerous. Yet, if one approaches the film's tactics as processes of virtual looking, *The Future Is Behind You* offers a path of speculation, reflection, and critical examination that leads to its own insights about home movies' subjects, as well as the values and limitations of these once-private images as historical evidence. I am drawn to Child's archival filmmaking processes of disruption and imagination, then, because I interpret them as an invitation for further exploring reflexive strategies when appropriating or engaging with home movies in a variety of public historiographic settings.

These reflexive strategies begin from a key recognition: the contradictions and tensions that arise when appropriating home movies are generative. Home movies are fragmentary, mediated documents carrying contingent meanings; their surface-level content often conceals as much as it reveals. At the same time, these fragmentary images can help us learn much about past experiences and emotions precisely because of their excesses and absences. Virtual looking also productively points to the gaps between historical realities, mediated images, and the imperfect stories we tell through them, while actively seeking to learn something about the kinds of memories, experiences, and emotions that meaningfully contribute to an onlooker's understanding of the past. Again, these gaps are

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42) Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, eds. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 257.

not ignored or approached as detrimental; they are catalysts for digging into the fertile qualities of home movies as historical evidence. Finally, virtual looking foregrounds an outsider's own distance from these once-private, fragmentary traces of the past, while seeking deeper understandings of their evidentiary values through the imagined memories and responses of an insider. *The Future Is Behind You* illustrates many advantages of confronting this disjuncture between a present-day, public onlooker's position and the private, personal responses of perceived intended audiences. These processes of virtual looking suggest that searches for traditional kinds of historical meanings and facts, including descriptions of content such as people, places, clothing, etc., are important, but these approaches only scratch the surface of home movies' evidentiary roles.

Investigating an archival film like *The Future Is Behind You* as a model for alternative methods of looking at home movies as historical evidence is not a theoretical diversion. Shifting our processes of looking at once-private images affects our understanding of what counts as evidence in the first place. Zimmermann states: "As a cinema of recovery, home movies unsettle homogeneous, unified official history by locating records as incomplete, fragmentary articulations of difference…and hence provoke a reexamination of what constitutes evidence."[43] Similarly, the appropriation and recirculation of home movies in public-facing histories might determine what future onlookers believe constitutes history more broadly. As Philip Rosen argues, "different modes of writing history often imply different ways of conceiving of or understanding history."[44] *The Future Is Behind You* demonstrates that archival filmmaking practices which engage with home movies make many of these processes of looking, appropriation, and constructing history visible. In turn, Child's brief film might aid in making the re-thinking of what constitutes evidence and history imaginable.

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43) Zimmermann, "Introduction: The Home Movie Movement," 22.
44) Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 7.

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Filmography

Amy (Asif Kapadia, 2015)
B/side (Abigail Child, 1996)
Daughter Rite (Michelle Citron, 1978)
Free Fall (Péter Forgács, 1996)
The Future Is Behind You (Abigail Child, 2004)
Images of the World and the Inscription of War (Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges; Harun Farocki, 1988)
The Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle (Péter Forgács, 1997)
Respite (Aufschub; Harun Farocki, 2007)
Sink or Swim (Su Friedrich, 1990)
The Ties That Bind (Su Friedrich, 1984)
Won't You Be My Neighbor? (Morgan Neville, 2018)

Biography

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