Foreword

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This anthology began as an international symposium—which I organized and in which Patricia Zimmermann was a participant—at the Getty Center in Los Angeles during its inaugural year, 1998. Called “The Past as Present: The Home Movie as Cinema of Record,” the symposium was a result of my tenure as a visiting scholar at the Getty Research Institute for the Arts and Humanities. The Getty, of course, began as a museum based in Greek and Roman antiquities, eighteenth-century French furniture, and European paintings before becoming a modern-day Edinburgh Castle looming over the cultural landscape of Los Angeles. Bringing an anarchic and unorthodox subject such as home movies into the annals of this refined institution evidenced its capacity to transcend the traditional and break new ground.

At the Getty Scholars Program, the topic of home movies was admittedly greeted with mixed reactions. Most of the scholars—anthropologists, historians, architects, photographers, and writers—had never considered home movies to be a topic for serious, much less academic, consideration. Conventionally the terrain of birthday parties and vacation memories, the home movie was definitely the lowbrow bull in this highbrow china shop of arts and culture. As I got to know the other scholars, most were polite, some were intellectually curious, and a precious few viewed the topic critically enough to genuinely ponder and discuss if and how the study of home movies might fit into the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

All of my colleagues, especially those who were highly skeptical, contributed to a profound intellectual milieu and deepened my conviction regarding the utility and potential of this marginal genre to shed much-needed light on overlooked corners of history and culture. The encounter resurrected my desire—first experienced while attending the conferences of the Association Européenne Inédits (European Association Inédits) in 1994

and 1995—to gather together like-minded individuals who had also been mining this lost amateur cinema.

Seizing the Getty moment, I approached Michael Roth, then director of the Scholars Program, about sponsoring a symposium during which the historical and cultural significance of home movies would receive dedicated intellectual attention. In the process I hoped the symposium would strategically help to legitimize the study of home movies and raise the topic out of what Zimmermann has called “the junk heap of private culture.”¹ Roth, a true scholar eager to blaze new academic territory, was willing to put the Getty stamp—and resources—on this unestablished topic. He understood and embraced the fact that the symposium would not be standard film scholarship in the sense of analyzing the aesthetics, politics, ideologies, or economies of existing cinemas. Instead, it would be a process of recovering and rethinking practices and products that had heretofore been academically disregarded.

Roth wanted the symposium to focus on the “work” home movies could do rather than be an arena for scholars to present and pontificate, and I wanted to keep the focus on the image, centering and grounding dialogue on and around the home movie itself. Working together, we came up with the following format. Seven presenters from around the world who had direct experience working with the home movie as a cinema of historical and cultural record—rather than as a medium of self-expression and artistic production—would be selected to participate in an intensive two-day workshop. Both work and homework would be required. They were asked to submit an excerpt from a home movie or collection of home movies they actively worked upon and to write an accompanying paper discussing why and how they selected it and its initial origin and provenance, as well as its historical and cultural significance. These were due two months before the actual symposium. The excerpts were then edited onto a single reel, duplicated on VHS, and distributed along with the papers to all the participants. Both the video and the papers were to be thoroughly viewed, read, and digested before the symposium. A commentator was assigned to each presentation and asked to prepare a formal commentary. The two-day symposium itself would consist of the screening of the selected home movies, a brief review of each paper by the presenter, response by the commentator, and discussion by all the participants.

In addition to Zimmermann, the presenters consisted of Hungarian filmmaker Péter Forgács, who recasts home movie collections into cinematic productions; Toronto-based video artist and critic Richard Fung, who has incorporated his mother’s home movies of his youth in Trinidad into his own work; Anglo-Indian archivist par excellence Maryann Gomes, who spearheaded the North West Film Archive in Manchester, England, and to whose pioneering

spirit this anthology is dedicated; geographer Heather Norris Nicholson, who holds honorary research positions at the Centre for Mediterranean Studies and in the School of Geography, University of Leeds, and at the Centre for Regional History, Manchester Metropolitan University; Los Angeles-based filmmaker Robert A. Nakamura, who, independently of but simultaneous to Forgács, recrafted home movies into hybrid documentaries to unearth unknown histories of everyday people; Roger Odin, who created a research group on home movies and amateur productions at the Université de Paris-Sorbonne Nouvelle; and Robert Rosen, dean of the School of Theater, Film and Television, University of California, Los Angeles, who has long understood the meaning of home movies for history and culture.

The discussants were equally stellar and consisted of Robert Dawidoff, Department of History, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, California; photographer and filmmaker Marlon Fuentes, San Diego, California; Karin Higa, Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles; David James, School of Cinema and Television, University of Southern California, Los Angeles; Valerie Matsumoto, Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles; and Lesley Stern, School of Theater, Film and Dance, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, as well as Michael Roth, Getty Research Institute. Special guests included David Francis, chief of the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and André Huet, secretary general of the Association Européenne Inédits, based in Charleroi, Belgium.

The UCLA Film & Television Archive collaborated by programming an evening of rarely seen home movies from around the world, "Homemade Movies," which I curated. Noted *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan wrote, "'Homemade Movies' is the deceptively simple title for an intriguing, provocative program. . . . It's a fresh examination of the home movie form—and those who think of these efforts as primitive and devoid of interest will have their heads turned in a major way."² A standing-room-only crowd relished humorous examples of the social history of home moviemaking; rare reflections of regional, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity in the United States; home movies of Marilyn Monroe and Sigmund Freud; and inside-out views of World War II from the United States, Germany, and Holland. The films were generously loaned from the archives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Japanese American National Museum, the Library of Congress, the Nebraska State Historical Society, Northeast Historic Film, Wales Film and Television, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Mississippi—many of which are represented in this volume.

That the symposium succeeded in doing the work it intended is evidenced by each of the participant's papers in this anthology. They speak eloquently on their own. However, for the participants and for the field, the symposium did much more. Many of us work in relative isolation from one another, and we each have similar experiences of too often having to defend the integrity of the home movie. Thus, the event transcended the typical academic symposium as we greeted one another not with the usual academic formality, but with eager familiarity and camaraderie. The symposium stimulated not only an intellectual combustion, but also personally moving experiences as we brought our shared topic into the light of genuine inquiry with others who had been working underground to extract buried and neglected images. In this very rarified setting high above Los Angeles, Zimmermann analogized our work to the struggles of her immigrant grandfather, who had labored deep in coal mines with fellow miners of various ethnicities and races. Before the time of occupational safety rules, when mines collapsed, deadly, invisible gas would be released. Canaries were brought into mines as a safety warning: if the canary died, miners knew gas had leaked and they needed to escape. Zimmermann recalled her grandfather saying that "when the canary died, we all could die, so it was time to move out—together."

It is from this point of shared passion and connection to many communities of difference that Zimmermann, a Scot-Irish-German from the East Coast, and I, a Japanese American on the West Coast, decided that our collective mining had summoned us to the joint effort of producing this international book about home movies. We solicited articles from other miners in the field and felt strongly about including information on various archival mines that hold and preserve home movies for others to study and enjoy. To honor the work involved in finding home movies and to center the project in an action rather than a removed analysis, we named this anthology *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*. We know that if the canary dies, we all die, and with us, the images. Like the recently emerged miners that we are, from the "junk heap of private culture," we offer you these bits of rubble turned into gold.

Notes

1. Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).
2. Kenneth Turan, "The Most Personal Filmmakers," *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 1998, F1 and F6.