Martina Melilli

Q1Q: How would you describe the home to a person who has no familiarity with the term?

Q1A: Generally, what I say is that they are the films (filmini) that the majority of people have in their attics of their own homes, yet are not aware of their existence, because these films stop at the generation of our grandfathers (talking about my generation), as it is quite rare that our fathers would do them. So, I generally say this.

Q1Q. So, it is rather something personal that regards one's own family.

Q1A: yes, exactly, as these films are generally the movies of baptisms, celebrations, weddings, of private moments that were captured on reels. Today with the cell phones nobody thinks about saving these moments or do specific compilations with them.

Q2Q: How do you think that the public of the home movie has changed during the past few years?

Q2A: Let's say that home movies were originally produced for a familiar reason, shot generally by the head of the family (usually the masculine part and rarely the women of the family) in order to be seen together such as the films of vacations, to be seen as souvenirs/recollections of vacations. Going back in time to the 70s there was an initial public interest in this type of material. Starting with artists such as Jonas Mekas, (it is the name that comes to my mind having studied fine arts), but also Andy Warhol who in his work '15 minutes' deploys privately shot material addressing the public, these materials start to address a public that does not belong anymore strictly to the family circle. Then in Italy again we reached this point a little bit after other countries. During the late 90s and the beginning of the 2000 the first archives started to appear who were dedicated to the collection of this type of material. At a certain point it became clear that such material is a sort of counter-narrative or parallel narrative to institutional history and institutional mediums such as videos and photos informing the news. Home movies instead are the private counterpart of this official material, that anyways tell the story of the past and historical moments of who has lived them; both because people who were testimonies of official events such as parades or other public events usually were going to register these moments on camera and also because they are uncovering private moments of life from the past since maybe the 50s when Pathe Baby came on the market.

So, in my opinion starting with the later 90s and the start of the 2000 home movies become a more disseminated heritage, as people started understanding that this is material able to tell history (la storia), not only small stories but also to add something to how history has been told; and this material begins to open towards a public that is absolutely not that of the closed family environment anymore, but a wider public made of archivists and historians and then slowly made also of artists in a re-creative purpose (recuperated in order to create new things). Yes I think that they have gradually opened.

Q2Q: Do you think that artists who started experimenting with this type of material played an important role in this shift?

Q2A: Absolutely. I mean talking about my own experience, I can say that you start by what you have, what you can find in your own home. I found videos of myself as a small child, I started then to ask if there was also older material of this kind and as I am a curious person and I don't see to my own business, I started enlarging the research and discovered that archives at national level existed, such as Home Movies in Italy but also other online entities existed, such as Archive.org, where home movies have been collected systematically. As I have a personal passion for the analogic, for the reel

and its materiality and for the stories they are able to narrate, I became aware how these movies are a very rich source of stories, even if you cannot see this at first sight, as very often there is no contextual information about this material, which tells you who the filmmakers were and what they intended to narrate. You just watch them and your imagination is instantly aroused, driving you to understand what story they tell. This is why for me personally artists played a major role in this sense; then again I started by getting to know the artist Alina Marazzi, and chose her work as a topic for my thesis; and then (I don't know if you know him) Eyal Sivan, an Israelian filmmaker who started also to build a sort of an archive, interviewing Israelian old people who took part in the Palestinian Nackbah and who besides being a filmmaker is a very good theoretician, writing articles on the reuse of archive material (institutional or non-institutional). He produced a film on the trial of Eichmann, recorded various scenes for it and he edited the movie in the 90s from the perspective of the guilty man, instead of the point of view of his persecutors; he used the images he already had, but offering a different vision. He also did another beautiful movie using the images shot by the surveillance cameras of the DDR (German Nazi State), called Aus Liebe zum Volk. It is a very interesting movie that show how by changing the perspective of the images that have been shot with a specific purpose and editing them in a different way, they can tell a completely other story, a contrasting one. Thus I started approaching the works of different artists using archive footage, and I have been impacted by the capacity to re-narrate, to take the same material and use it in a different way in order to tell a different story, but without going against the 'truth' of the material; I mean by adding your own personal interpretation of it and not manipulating it.

Q2Q: Not twisting it too much.

Q2A: Exactly. And also this other very interesting thing, which he was saying: the capacity to create a counter-history that in an era like this, characterised by an over-production of images, where almost everyone has instruments able to produce images, the idea of recuperate old images and give them new meanings is for me very interesting; in the sense that if it is not necessary to record other images because there are some suitable ones already there, why should I record other? I try to recuperate the already existing ones.

Q3Q: Which do you think are the suitable formats for the reuse of archival footage?

Q3A: You refer to film genres or physical formats such as super8, 8mm?

Q3Q: Genres; but not only filmic genres, also artistic ones for example.

Q3A: As I see it, I do not want to limit the potential, to put it into a box. In a certain sense the non-fiction genre has been mostly used for the reuse of archival material, but also in this case the definitions are very blurry. For example, you have for sure in your mind the documentary 'We want also the Roses' by Alina Marazzi, where she puts together already shot images of her family and parts of diaries, giving to the persons appearing in the images shot, the voice of who wrote the diaries. This is therefore a sense a fiction gesture, because these voices are not the real protagonists of the images we see. At this point we ask: is it a documentary or a fictional film? We tend to say it is a documentary, because the people we see in the images are real. But it becomes also fiction, because it is the choice of the filmmaker to select two real elements and put them together in order to tell another story. I would not know what to say in this respect, because I do not see any major limits. I have seen the reuse of this material both in visual art and documentary filmmaking. I don't know, it is difficult for me to say: fictional documentary. Maybe you know also the film 'The Train goes to Moscow', where there are already existing scenes used to tell the story of the main

character's trip to Moscow, but the things he says have been rebuilt. Therefore the documentary is fictional.

Q3Q: I see the point. What do you think instead of more specific type of genres that are more commercial, such as ads and short promotional videos?

Q3A: I don't see why not. There are no examples that come to my mind right now, but there is a big love for the graphical and aesthetic side of this kind of material, such as the vintage trend that goes on to tap into the past. It is as if one goes in the past to recuperate more concrete and defined values; therefore a vintage graphic or trace is often used inside commercials, mainly with the scope of returning to the 'good old things' from the past. So I do not see why it can't be done. I would definitely not exclude such a reuse. Then it also depends what you are using them for. With the new iPhone for example uhmmm….

Q4Q: yes, maybe you don't need them so much. You were telling me about your creative process and how you approached home movies. How did your creative process change in time?

MM: Me, I have always been more a more analogic than digital person, I love the collage, both on paper and as an edited piece; putting together different pieces that then give a sense to the final work, which does not need to be a linear meaning. For example my film 'The fourth day of school', works more based on evocation, on metaphors, than through a sense of linear narrative. They are images that evoke specific sensations, which are not triggered because of what the voice tells you. This is a modality of narrative that interests me, the collage on paper, the editing in filmmaking, which is a sort of collage that puts together heterogeneous materials. Since I have discovered home movies, I have for sure undertaken this collage work; 'My home in Lybia' is my first film where I record my own images, and where I could not do otherwise than inserting a part of archive footage. Before having the idea for the film, before thinking about what images to record, I think about the possible existing material that I can find around; therefore, it is not a reverted process, where I record images and then fill in the gaps with archive images, but a process where I search the archive to see what is available and then record the images needed.

Q4Q: So you always start with what you have, the basis is the archive.

Q4A: Yes, maybe because it is a passion that I have; I like to research a lot, to look into the archive, to discover this photographic and filmic material. It is therefore a personal preference to do this kind of research before doing the creative work. It is not that I like more the research part than the actual filming part, but almost. If I can do without my own recordings, I am equally happy. This is not because I do not like to record images myself, but rather because I like this type of material, I like the idea; also in my wardrobe I have only second-hand clothes; I love the idea of re-use, of not throwing away things that are already there and are beautiful the way they are and are available for reuse.

Q4Q: In your work inside the archive, do you work with metadata or you like to be guided more by your instinct and the images?

Q4A: It depends a little on the type of work I need to do. For example, in 'The fourth day of school' I had already recorded the audio, therefore I was searching for specific images that were useful to what I wanted to narrate. Therefore, the framework, the context in which they were created was not a principal element. I rather searched for the context of their creation afterwards. Whereas in other situation it is the contrary: I become fascinated by the story behind the image; anyways I try to have a certain method inside the archive, because they tend to be endless and if you don't have a

minimum of method you can get lost easily. Therefore, I have my topic, the theme around which I work, but then I get inspired also by the stories that lie behind the archive footage, by what I am able to find.

Q5Q: Which do you think are the easy aspects of working with home movies and which are the difficult ones?

Q5A: Well, the easy part is in the aesthetics, if you like the type of aesthetics, I mean the sort of images where you can never achieve a high definition without grain and where you need to accept the idea of error, of the effect of damaged reels where 4K is impossible to have. Then on the other hand you have already existent images, shot by someone before, so they set some limits. It is not that you have created them according to your need, like shot/reverse shot. So, you have limits and you need to play inside of those limits or break those limits, but realistically there are limits because you did not create those images thinking about what you wanted to achieve. You need to think about what you want to do based on those images.

Q5Q: Therefore, the editing part is the critical one, where you need to get inspiration and play around a lot.

Q5A: Yes. The research part can be beautiful/fascinating but also very dispersive; me for example I am fascinated by the images, so the choice is also difficult, but then as you start following a well-defined line, and you impose limits for your own actions (because otherwise you can research endlessly) things become clearer. Editing is for sure the more creative part. Not by chance they called the films done with home movies, edited movies (film di montaggio); it is necessary because these are already existing images and what you can do is edit them re-work them, but the basis is already there somehow.

Q6Q: Do you think home movie is a form to fill in, or do you believe that it contains a part that makes sense for its own right and can't be filled in with another meaning?

Q6A: In my opinion it depends on the 'depth'/the sensibility of the audience. I will try to make some examples that we maybe share. In the initial part of 'I would like you only for one hour' (un ora sola ti vorrei) by Alina Marazzi, when she presents all the members of the family and starts to enter that specific universe, she does it with the intent of showing that it was a middle-class family, surrounded by an aura of happiness and prosperity. In reality they are everything else than that, but they are depicted in a happy moment, as very often home movies tend to show (vacations, celebrations, happy times). There are rarely banal moments, as they often record special moments: births, weddings, the first steps of a baby, the first bath of the newborn. But on the other hand the gaze, the point of view of the filmmaker is very strongly present. Also in the images we are talking about, the audience has the strong feeling that the ideas transmitted by the images are the ones intended by the filmmaker. The camera does not focus on the marginal people or the sad faces, in order to render the idea of happiness more vivid. Therefore, the intention remains in a certain way. Then on the other hand, what Alina Marazzi does in order to tell a different story (the counter-story) is to edit the scene where her mother appears, in slow motion. She slows the image down so that you can perceive the sadness of the face recorded by the camera. So she adds her point of view to the one of the filmmaker who shot the images, that nonetheless remains strongly present. In my opinion, each time you re-use home movies, you have two overlapping points of view, because it remains clear the

point of view of the filmmaker and additionally you add your own point of view through the editing process.

Q7Q: Which of the home movie scenes you worked with did you keep vivid in your mind and what do you think was so special about them to remember them (a feeling, an impression, a tactile element)?

Q7A: Well I am very fond of the materiality of the reel. One reason why I like reusing this material is because of their material feeling, the grain of the reel that leads you to the object itself. I like this feeling of materiality that becomes in a way a symbol of the passage of time, through a layering of moments. I like the scratches, the stains, which beyond the meaning of the images becomes an abstraction of that scene. When you find these scratches or stains, the image becomes something else in its own right, and when you are strange as I am, it becomes a sort of abstraction. Lets take that for a birthday celebration scene you have the image of a face which has been ruined by mold, you are able to imagine this person as a sort of ghost, it becomes almost an abstraction of what it really is. I like these physical and materialistic stratifications of the reel. From the images I reused, I don't know what to say about which I am mostly fond of, because I am particularly attached to all of them (I also did some small post-cards with them). In 'The fourth day of school' I found very meaningful, also because of the general meaning of the film which is oriented towards the contemporary condition of migrants and exiled people, the scene shot from above, that depicts a man in a boat, who at a certain point looks above him. These two or three seconds of this moment of the scene have impressed me a lot, like the scene where the two children hold in their hands a snake. It is rather an emotional and personal thing that connects me to those specific moments and which I am not able to explain. In 'My home in Lybia' instead there are archive images that belong to a part of my family's history, which I knew very little about. These have created a strong emotional impact on me, seeing my father when he was little and all those moments that I was not ware of because I was not much connected to that part of the family or the events at that time. It was a powerful effect to see them in first person and be able to narrate them.

Q8Q: I understand, the suggestive aspect of re-discovering a less-known part of your past. On the other hand, did you perceive also home movies scenes that were rather peculiar as they were rather unconventional compared to what we would expect from such images?

Q8A: I would not know what to say exactly. Because often you encounter home movie scenes that you don't know exactly how much they have been staged and how much they are the result of a natural sequence of events. I have often found myself in this position, of not being certain if the images were staged; for example in the common case that the filmmaker makes his characters assume certain bodily positions so that he can do the recording, there it is clear. In other moments it can be less clear; you cannot know if who is recorded assumes certain positions and attitude because it is suggested by the filmmaker or it is for real. I had often this sensation. This is the more common sensation I had connected to the ambiguity of images.

Q8Q: Aesthetically speaking, could you find more specific aesthetic categories in which to group different types of home movie scenes?

Q8A: From a thematic point of view there is certainly a categorisation possible based on the type of familiar events: baptisms, the first steps or festivities. Then there are those who use the camera like

a pen, like a diary, to tell common stories of everyday life, such as recording a window or a walk. Aesthetically speaking it is certainly more difficult to tell. In my opinion it is similar to the images recorded with the cell phones today. There are the filmmakers who are technically more knowledgeable and aware of different filming techniques; they have a knowledge and perception of the instrument. The others instead use it as a prosthetics of the eye: less-studied frames, frenetic movements done without thinking much which are shaky and less focused.

Q8Q: So you refer here to a category of the experienced filmmaker versus the spontaneous, less experienced filmmaker.

Q8A: Yes, something like this.

Q8Q: Indeed it is quite difficult to try and find aesthetic categories. Personally the material I have been watching has raised this question of how I can render it more accessible and meaningful for the artist who needs to reuse it. As you said one goes to the archive to discover and uncover things. Then on the other hand you expect to find there things that you need. In the search for a specific scene one can find various shots that are thematically suitable to one's needs, nevertheless aesthetically speaking they can tell different things, they can leave you with distinct feelings.

Q8A: Yes, I imagine it is very difficult both for the researcher and the archivist. There can be for example birthday scenes who are either spontaneous images or fictive/directed images, so you have these two options. It is indeed very difficult. Certainly having this kind of a approach is very useful. If for example I approach an archive for a birthday scene that I am looking for, I know I need a scene shot in a certain way: I know if I require spontaneous and maybe more shaky scenes or well-thought images. On the other hand I am aware there is no re-defined system. Already when you need to present a work at a festival and they require you to say to which category your work belongs (documentary, experimental, fiction etc), it is very difficult. How can you tell clearly? In the case of the home movie it becomes even more complicated. It would be very useful but on the other hand I realise this categorisation can be also very subjective: what for me looks like a professional scene, for another artist might be quite different.

Q9Q: In the Fourth day of school you were talking about your re-use of archive footage, referring to an aesthetic need. Could you tell me more about the editing methods you used to include these images in the film?

Q9A: In 'the Fourth Day of School' I recorded first the audio, that guided my creation process, both the research in the archive and the editing. Once I 'internalised' the audio trace that evoked in me certain images, I went to research in the archive images that fitted my imagination. I was looking for trips on ships, images of contemporary migrants, I was searching something that recreated that sense of alienation expressed by the narrator's voice. I also wanted to play with this fact that the narrator is an adult but speaks with the voice of himself as a child. In reality I went straight to the point by searching the trip on the boat, this trip of an American couple shot in black and white and the videos of safeguarding the migrants from the boats in the Mediterranean sea. The other elements that I included have been part of a discovery process. Looking for children, families and so on I found the images with animals that were part of shots taken by a father of his children, in which he was narrating fables (a sort of fiction). Then I also discovered by chance the scenes with the drawing. It depicts a Japanese painter doing a watercolour drawing of Fukushima. This image recalled me the volcano which a child sees first when approaching Naples and that can become part of the child's

memory. So a part of the elements were the result of a direct search, the other part belongs instead to the discovery process, to the material that surprised me.

Q9Q: Indeed the watercolour you choose is very well included and gives fluidity to the entire work. On another note, you mention in your website that through your work you search for this sense of belonging. How does this feeling manifest itself at aesthetic and sensorial level?

Q9A: This is complicated. It depends much on the material. People who want to remember their own roots, the environment where they lived, the events and people around them generally shoot home movies. For example in the editing of 'My Home in Lybia' which is an 8mm reel belonging to my grandfather, the part of archive that you see is not re-edited. These are the only images of the reels he conserved from his life in Lybia and afterwards. The events depicted such as the trip on the boat, the first events in Italy, the birth of sons, the new home, the celebrations and birthdays are all scenes that have been produced through in-camera editing. All these moments run one after the other sequentially and if you watch them you get an idea of the things and events that were so meaningful and important for the filmmaker in order to be captured on reel: the birth of sons and the places, sons going to school. In this case he records the same atmosphere of 'home', of the place he continues to live nowadays and to feel like home. At the same time nevertheless he is somehow 'outside' of this atmosphere called home; if we go deeper and analyse we discover the same language that talks about home through this double perspective: inside and outside, entrance and exit. It is as if he is not able to confer to the 'interior' the qualities of home, belonging and family. There is a certain moment depicting the return, but it ends here, as it does not show the interior of the house, the atmosphere. The only scene of the home in Tripoli is outside of the house, in the balcony, where the gaze is oriented towards the exterior, outside. This is in my opinion an aspect that can be found through a closer analysis of the elements which the filmmaker chooses to narrate; generally what is captured on reel regards something that needs to be remembered for the future.

Q9Q: So in this analysis you are able to find a sort of a scale of values belonging to the filmmaker.

Q9A: Yes, in a certain way, at least until now I have this impression.

Q10Q: As a last thing I would like to show you a brief edited video made of home movie scenes, so that you can tell me what feelings it arises, what it evokes for you.

Q10A: ok, so I watch this material and tell you.

Q10Q: Ok.

Q10A: So it is material that we have already seen during the event in Torino?

Q10Q: No, these are scenes of Sicilian home movies.

Q10A: So you wanted to tell a story?

Q10Q: No, I wanted to have your first impression on the material

Q10A: ok, for me this aspect of the audio (the song that appears at a certain moment) is quite disturbing, as I am used to home movies being sound-less material.

Q10Q: Oh yes, this is an issue I had after uploading the video. I do not know why this fragment of audio /song appears.

Q10A: Ok, so the scene with the lady on the motorcycle is very beautiful. There are several beautiful images. Now I re-watch it. So these are fragments of various families.

Q10Q: yes, they belong to different owners. Some belong to the same family, other not.

Q10A: The scene with the little boy who is fishing is also very beautiful. There is also the scene of the old man sitting in front of the bar. I don't know, I tend to connected them logically and think that the

old man remembers his childhood or the other way around. That the little boy has turned into an old man.

Q10Q: Interesting this association of characters.

Q10A: Yes, for me it is like this with home movies. When you see the scenes in sequence, when you look at the film, you are somehow searching for such connections, because you want to find out what story they tell you. You want to find out who the main character is, what he does etc. At least I am looking for connections. My mind looks for narratives, for connections.

Q10Q: So you connected more to the characters, to who they were etc.

Q10A: Yes, I also connected between them the colour images. Yes, the old lady on the motorcycle especially is beautiful, the way it was shot and her attitude that offers her a specific aura.

Q10Q: Similar to a diva.

Q10A: Yes, she seems to be heading towards the infinite, but in reality the motorcycle stops and she gets off. It is also a bit comic.

Q10Q: Instead, the rabbit scene how did it seem?

Q10A: Quite violent I must admit.

Q10Q: Yes, this tradition that I could not clearly identify in the Sicilian culture nowadays.

Q10A: Yes, it is quite violent and the children are assisting. If you put this scene in a context that tells the traditions is one thing. If you insert it in a metaphorical context, lets say a voice over that reads a fragment on violence by Hannah Arendt, then you read it quite differently. It becomes a sort of a metaphor of oppression of the weak. Personally I find it beautiful working with archives because of you are able to search for the images for your own story. In my case I had the voice over and I could afford a research that was purely evocative and metaphorical, that were telling the story through metaphors and not showing it explicitly. I love this potential of home movies and of archives in general, their evocative power. These images have one meaning while being created and they are able to acquire other hundred meanings when you appropriate them and decontextualize them. When you approach them you can make your own decisions. For example if I would approach this kind of scene with the rabbits I would not use it to tell the traditions of Sicily but I would use it to tell a story, but this is my way of doing.