

Review: Efrén Cuevas, *Filming History from Below: Microhistorical Documentaries*

Stuart A. Neave

DOI: 10.15664/fcj.v20i0.2503



Frames Cinema Journal

ISSN 2053-8812

Issue 20 (Winter 2022)

<http://www.framescinemajournal.com>



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. To view a copy of this licence, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Filming History From Below: Microhistorical Documentaries

By Efrén Cuevas

Wallflower, 2022

Reviewed by Stuart A. Neave, University of St Andrews

To write “history from below” is to write it from the perspective of those individuals that history has forgotten. As E. P. Thompson phrased it, it is to “rescue” the “casualties of history” from “the enormous condescension of posterity.”¹ Thompson’s “casualties” were croppers, weavers, and artisans at the turn of the 18th century. In this new monograph Efrén Cuevas has identified 20th century casualties – quite often literally – that have been rescued not by writing history, but filming it. These are the victims of genocide in Europe and Cambodia; migrants to America; Palestinians disappearing from their homeland; and Japanese interns in the United States.

The ambition of Cuevas’ book is twofold. First, he challenges the monopoly of the writer-historian on investigative history. He asserts that documentary film can communicate a type of history that is not merely expository. Rather, these films can “contribute a knowledge of their own” (1). Cuevas’ second assertion constitutes the bulk of the book; namely, that a genre of film called “microhistorical documentary” exists and is one that can record and communicate its own history (2). The first assertion is proven by showing us the existence and characteristics of the second.

Microhistorical documentary takes its name from another term found in written history: microhistory. This field originated in Italy in the 1990s as *microstoria* and is attributed to the writings of Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi amongst others.² Cuevas, who is less interested

in the details of theory than its application to film, accepts microhistory at its broadest possible definition (7). Such a definition was offered by the microhistorians István Szijártó and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and was neatly contained to three rules: the scale of observation must be reduced, normally to a single event, life, or community; its objective should be “more far reaching than that of a case study,” seeking answers to great historical questions; and, in alignment with Thompson, microhistory must recognise human agency and the individual as a “conscious actor.”³

Cuevas’ previous work on autobiographical documentaries presented early signs of interest in microhistory. It occurs first in a 2008 study of the documentary filmmaker Ross McElwee and his use of his Grandfather’s home movie footage in the film *Bright Leaves* (2003).⁴ Cuevas later argued that Mercedes Álvarez’s documentary *El cielo gira* (2004) provided a microhistorical analysis of a tiny village community.⁵ Two final studies serve to demonstrate the moment his research shifts towards the home movie as a source material, feature of documentary film, and resource for microhistory.⁶

One of the key characteristics of microhistorical documentaries that Cuevas outlines early on is their reliance on home movies as a source material. In 2013 Cuevas identified the home movie as an understudied area of film scholarship.⁷ By this point the major work in the field remained Karen I. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmerman’s *Mining the Home Movie* (2007) which, despite its impressive breadth of scope, did not guide the source material towards the autobiographical or microhistorical discussions that are the focal point of Cuevas’ *Filming History from Below*.⁸ Cuevas is at the forefront of research in this field, and this monograph constitutes an attempt to fill in some of the gap. His characterisation of home movies makes obvious their suitability to microhistory: they are personal in nature and often familial; the

individuals featured are generally anonymous or ‘ordinary’; and they are scarcely collected into large archives. They mesh with Cuevas’ recurring argument that microhistory should recover marginalised characters and construct “counter-hegemonic” narratives in opposition to “official histories” (44-45). Cuevas agrees with Roger Odin that home movies are quite often the only records of communities marginalised by the “official version of history” (56).

In Cuevas’ treatment of the director Peter Forgács we can see clearest the utility of home movies to microhistorical films. Forgács’ *The Maelstrom* (1997) is visually constructed from the home video archive of the Jewish Peereboom family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. By doing so Forgács observes a fractal experience of the Holocaust that, while studied on a reduced scale, can be blown up into a representation of common Jewish experience (76). Furthermore, Forgács contrasts these movies with amateur films of Reich Commissioner Arthur Seyss-Inquart alongside his family, and audio-recordings of various speeches. Cuevas convincingly argues that this creates a connection between the microhistorical experience of the Peerebooms and the macrohistorical event of Nazi occupation and the Holocaust (79-80). Cuevas grounds these editing techniques in a combination of theories borrowed from historical and film scholarship. Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of historical materialism in *The Arcades Project* is united with the cinematographic techniques of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* creating a filmic-historical philosophy close to microhistory itself. The “crystal of the whole event,” as Benjamin wrote, can be discovered in the “close up” and “expanded snapshot.”⁹ The reader can also pick up on similarities between Benjamin’s montages and the “patchworks” of Alf Lüdtkke. Lüdtkke – a pioneer of *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life) – who argued that by collecting “collages” or “mosaics” of miniature events the historian could recover the “network[s] of interrelations” uniting them, connecting micro-events to macro-contexts (52).¹⁰ Such patchworks become a major feature of Cuevas’

interrogation of *Something Strong Within* (1994) by Robert Nakamura and Karen L. Ishizuka. This film arranges home movies from an array of ethnic Japanese families interned in American concentration camps during World War Two into a patchwork of day-to-day activity (99). Placed within the context of imprisonment, these scenes of innocent happiness and casual activity are converted into a depiction of nonchalant resistance weaved into the fabric of everyday life.

Cuevas' analysis of happiness on film is one of the primary strengths of his book. Like all historical sources, home movies require close scrutiny and should not be naively approached as wholly factual. Cuevas recognises that home movies typically depict celebratory or otherwise-happy familial moments, such as weddings or birthdays (51). Though he had recognised this previously in a study of Vitaly Manskij's *Private Chronicles. Monologue* (1999), Cuevas had then been guilty of taking happiness for granted. His conclusion that Manskij offered a happy depiction of Soviet Russia set against the stereotypes of Western history lacked the critical approach demonstrated in his latest monograph.¹¹ For example, his treatment of Jonas Mekas's *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) and *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1975) emphasises the role of autobiographical commentary in accentuating the suffering and "rootless" feeling of migration against celebratory footage (196/203). In Michael Aviad's *For My Children* (2002) the happiness of childbirth, parade, and family visits is contrasted with our own knowledge of Israel's future as viewed from the present; emphasised by footage of the Second Intifada shown shortly afterwards (171).

Several issues begin to surface as Cuevas' book progresses – some minor, and others more complicated. Early on Cuevas introduced the "patriarchal gaze" as a feature of home movies that, alongside happiness, must be taken into account. However, this theme is never returned

to despite opportunities to do so when discussing the films of Michal Aviad and Yulie Cohen. Cuevas must have seen this opportunity as he cites Yael Munk on the contribution of these filmmakers to creating visibility for “women, children, [and] the elderly” (165). Further, Cuevas’ criticism of omniscient narration is weak. Despite introducing it as an anathema to microhistory he excuses the films *Free Fall* (1996) and *From a Silk Cocoon* (2005) as the narration was only brief (89/106), and Rithy Panh’s documentary *Bophana* (1996) is also excused because it was designed for television (128).

The final chapter is the most complicated, seeking to redefine the practice of history more broadly than simply justifying its translation from book to screen. With *Lost, Lost, Lost* Cuevas stretches thin the boundaries of microhistory. By presenting his experience as a Lithuanian immigrant, he argues that Mekas represents the experience of thousands of others (203). The analysis starts on rough terrain; Cuevas side-steps Mekas’ notoriety – normally a deal-breaker for microhistory – by pointing out that at the time of filming he was unknown (190). Cuevas uses the concept of a “diary film” to justify autobiographical history, a film with two stages of editing: one at the time of recording and one at the time of creating the film. However, Cuevas betrays himself by agreeing with Mekas’ own definition of this second stage of editing: “Elimination, cutting out the parts that did not work.”¹² This quote should guide the debate towards opportunities for a biased retelling of history, something which the most disconnected historians could not even claim to be completely devoid of. However, Cuevas largely (if not completely) avoids any discussions of possible bias.

Cuevas’ monograph achieves its ambitions. It proves that investigative history can be communicated via documentary film; and it demonstrates this potential, in particular, in the case of microhistorical documentaries. Its analysis of home videos as a suitable source is

especially strong, revealing how they can be integrated into film and contextualised without drawing upon expository methods. Furthermore, he has simultaneously acknowledged their issues – such as their depiction of happiness – taking into account and demonstrating ways of overcoming these obstacles. This analysis is vital not only to the documentary filmmaker or film scholar, but also to the written historian who might now take more notice in home movies and understand how they can be utilised to uncover more information about the past.

Notes

¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), pp. 12-13.

² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980); Carlo Ginzburg, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

³ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 4-5.

⁴ Efrén Cuevas, 'Sculpting the Self: Autobiography According to Ross McElwee', in Efrén Cuevas and Alberto N. Garcia (eds.), *Landscapes of the Self: The Cinema of Ross McElwee* (Madrid: Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias, 2008), p. 64.

⁵ Efrén Cuevas, 'Cycles of Life: *El cielo gira* and Spanish Autobiographical Documentary', in Alisa Lebow (ed.), *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (London: Wallflower Press, 2012), pp. 91-92.

⁶ Efrén Cuevas, 'Home Movies as Personal Archives in Autobiographical Documentaries', *Studies in Documentary Film*, 17(11) (2013): 17-29; Efrén Cuevas, 'Change of Scale: Home Movies as Microhistory in Documentary Films', in Laura Rascaroli, Gwenda Young and Barry Monahan (eds.), *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 139-151.

⁷ Cuevas, 'Home Movies', 1.

⁸ Karen I. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmerman (eds.), *Mining the Home Movies: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (London: University of California Press, 2007).

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 461; Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 2007), p. 236.

¹⁰ Alf Lüdtke, 'What is the History of Everyday Life and Who are its Practitioners?', in A. Lüdtke (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 21.

¹¹ Cuevas, 'Change of Scale', p. 141.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 193.