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Inside the Home Mode

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Despite their occasional pretensions to more ambitious forms of video production, the advice manuals and consumer magazines examined in the last chapter implicitly recognise that, for most people, video is primarily a means of recording family life. In *The Camcorder Handbook* (1992) Malcolm Squires writes:

> Perhaps one of the most enjoyable uses to which you can put the camcorder is making an ongoing record of your family. You can include all sorts of activities, depending on what you like to do as a family. In this way you will also build up a permanent record of your children as they grow and develop over the years.

(p.102)

This chapter focuses on the practices of camcorder users who do little more with their cameras than video their family and friends. Richard Chalfen (1982) uses the term 'home mode' to refer to the amateur photographer’s or film-maker’s representation of the private world of the family (see Chapter 2). The category of home mode video footage comprises the kind of material made, if not necessarily within the home, then dealing primarily with ‘the home’, the domestic and the familial. Such material tends to be thought of as ‘private’ and as such, its significance closely resembles that of the traditional family photo album.

Home mode imagery can be distinguished from representation which follows an established set of formal codes, tends to be shaped by commercial interests and is intentionally produced. In Chalfen’s words, it is:

> [C]onceptually and pragmatically distinct from the professionally produced forms seen in advertising, photojournalism, art or museum
exhibitions, feature films, education, film festivals, and the like ... [It is] generally produced by nonprofessional photographers using inexpensive, mass produced cameras.

(127)

Such video commonly tends to be considered insignificant as a form of cultural production: it is generally deemed banal, uninteresting, unimaginative and unremarkable. The common tendency is to think of such practice as the work of the excited new parent, or the ‘emotional’ video-maker simply and unthinkingly collecting records of their ‘nearest-and-dearest’. Of all the various identifiable functions of the amateur film or video camera, the category of the home mode undoubtedly carries the least of what Bourdieu (1984) calls ‘cultural capital’. Like family photography, home mode film- and video-making is commonly viewed as reinforcing rather than challenging a particular familial ideology. As we have seen in Chapter 2, authors as diverse as Pierre Bourdieu (1990) and Susan Sontag (1977) have argued that domestic photography serves to sustain a representation of the family as integrated and cohesive, which tends to belie the increasing fragmentation of contemporary family life. Such representations are typically accused of erasing tensions and conflicts in favour of bland and superficial images of ‘happy families’ – images which are of course also strongly reinforced in the advertising and marketing materials associated with these technologies.

Much the same is true with regards to family film and video. From a wide range of perspectives, such ‘ordinary practice’ is dismissed as the very least creative, interesting or meaningful use of the amateur film or video camera. As we saw in Chapter 3, from buyers’ guides, through critical reviews of amateur film history, to camera owners’ own descriptions of their practices, the home mode is commonly viewed as, at best, a simple, naïve (in terms of its lack of formal codes) and relatively uncreative practice, and at worst, as a practice perpetuating an oppressive and very selective image of ‘the family’. According to Patricia Zimmerman (1995), for example, the mass marketing of home film technology and practice has historically encouraged precisely this ‘narrative spectacle of idealized family life’ (46), and thereby stripped amateur film and video of its more radical potential:

From 1897 to 1962 [the period of her study] amateur film discussion incrementally relocated amateur filmmaking within a romanticized