Lucy Leake

Plymouth College of Art

Making Pasts? Investigating the sustainability of family stories in a digital age

"Nothing tells memories from ordinary moments. Only afterwards do they claim remembrance, on account of their scars." (La Jetee)

Individuals have always spun tales from their experiences, and passed these stories down the generations orally and in the form of artefacts. Photograph albums, home movies or cine films, embroideries, quilts, letters and diaries – these artefacts are used to construct the family's identity, and to fabricate collective memories.

Some of these craft activities have had a particular gender bias. The heirloom quilt often documents the women that made it; fragments of fabric representative of particular times and places, spliced together to form a picture of the individuals that crafted it. Embroideries handed down through the generations with stories inherently attached to them at each stage. Men have more often been responsible for crafting family stories through the lens, the 'familial gaze' of the stills or cine camera, capturing the family on film then later screening these fragments for the family members to collectively reshape the memories, to re-create, to re-remember. What these activities have in common is that they require craft skill and creativity. They are technologies of mark-making, fabrication, editing and memory-making that can be felt, held, passed around, and that have some durability.

This paper seeks to examine whether the digital age allows for artefacts of memory. It investigates our reliance on digital media to store our memories and identities, and whilst celebrating the obvious democratisation of image making that the digital age has allowed us, seeks to question the assumed durability of identity afforded us by the Internet. As our mark making becomes digital, relying on uploads, digital storage and blogging, should we seek to make a more permanent archive of our memories? Third wave feminism celebrated the liberatory potential offered by the Internet for new modes of communication and power. Yet the matrix has perhaps failed in its promise of emancipation and has instead allowed us only the chance to commodify our selves, our memories, our families and our visual records of family stories into a digital black hole with a semblance of permanence that is completely inadequate.

This study puts forward the notion that there is a need to explore more permanent means of capturing family stories. It suggests a return to the celebration of learned craft skills, embracing the creation of artefacts, re-awakening the notion of hands-on creativity and mark-making as crucial core elements of self awareness. It questions the legitimacy of the digital alternative that fails in its potential to leave a real mark, and proposes that the sustainability of memories and family stories is achievable only through tactility.

In this paper, I refer to a range of crafted artefacts that tell stories, including not only traditional techniques such as quilting, embroidery and weaving but also artefacts such as the family album and the home movie, or cine film. I examine how these artefacts tell family stories and how they might be threatened by our digital age, where our story telling is online, and our archives are in digital code. It should be noted that I will be focusing on western traditions, technologies and experiences. Using Facebook as the main medium for communication, I have undertaken a pilot study with 34 women to understand what kind of activity is taking place in terms of making memory material, and how this activity might be specifically gendered. This paper is an introduction to the

topic under discussion and has opened a great many further avenues of inquiry that I will be following up.

It is clear that 'making' is at the heart of what we do. Humans are creative beings and this is certainly reflected in our spoken language which 'has appropriated countless images from the textile world: we talk of the rich tapestry of life, or the fabric of our society' (Cygan in Rowley 1999: 91). This use of language can also be noted in how we refer to storytelling. I can weave a web of deceit, spin a tale, or fabricate a lie. I can craft, fashion, hew and construct. Story telling is a craft, and through craft we tell stories. 'Many terms that describe the textile arts also apply to the work of the storyteller...textiles were not only a source of metaphor for the poet's art, but also a means of storytelling through visual narratives' (Edmunds http://classics.rutgers.edu/text_textile/textile1.htm)

My father considered himself a craftsman when he bought his first Standard 8mm cine camera and started to record his experience of the world. He had to learn his tool through experience, invest time in it, and handle it with care and eventual expertise. He would, perhaps, 'record the noteworthy, the celebrated, the remarkable, and the extraordinary. Or perhaps their memorialisation on film codifies these events as such' (Citron 1999: 19). He developed, spliced and edited his films, adding cartoon end captions, titles and credits. He would then bring the family together to watch his cleverly crafted creations. These films are like time capsules. They are evidence of a family performing in front of a lens, and the viewing of them is also a family performance. Watching them is a special event in itself as it involves the setting up of a screen, a projector and seating, the winding of the film onto the take-up spool, and the necessary drowning out of stray light from windows and doors using blankets or towels. As the film rolls the family re-remember the images of times past. This collective re-remembering is a shared event, reinforcing, and often recreating, the identity that the family unit has created for itself.

> Home movie images function less as representations than as *index* inviting the family to *return to a past already lived.* The home movie does not communicate. Instead, it invites us to use a double process of *remembering. Collective remembering.*...To watch a home movie is to be involved in a "performance" (Odin in Zimmerman 2008: 259)

The filmmaker, like the photographer aims to 'preserve the fleeting instability of reality and the passing of time in a fixed image' (Mulvey 2006: 18). This gives the photographer or filmmaker power to select what will be included and what will be left out, and whilst rendering the present past, it also gives the image-maker power over that past; power to create a version of it that is selective. What do we not see in these films? Which photos are left out of the family album?

Citron too acknowledges the power play of the selection process that is undertaken when the family is filmed. The films or photographs 'represent the parents [sic] memories, not the child's. The camera freezes the child's life and puts into a box or an album. Most often it is the father who holds the camera and peers through the lens' (Citron 1999: 11)

The home movie camera might appear to have long been the domain of men and especially fathers. Odin suggests that the father uses this technology to rule over his family, the camera acting as go-between. The father tells his family where to stand, when to smile or wave, and he is at centre stage 'like an omnipotent God' (Odin in Zimmerman 2008: 257). Not only is 'dad' directing the family's actions but he is doing so within well-established filmic codes and conventions.

> Home movies have a logic of their own. The powerful convention of home movies ("Over here!" "Smile!") makes the problem all the more acute. There is a strong imperative to show something positive. The home movie is something you will

> want to look back upon. It is meant as a *nostodiac,* a stimulant of nostalgia...Images of happiness...colliding in history (Roth in Zimmerman 2008: 70)

There is a definite drive in us to record our families and the passing of time. In an effort perhaps to freeze time, we photograph every event of our children's' lives to the extent that we risk not remembering these actual events except through the photographic evidence of them.

Mulvey (2006: 56) describes how the 'beauty and emotional appeal [of the photograph] lies in it's '"thereness", the fleeting presence of a shadow, which is captured and saved....The index, fixed as it is in the photograph, is a record of a fraction of time. When rays of light record an object's presence they also inscribe that moment of time, henceforth suspended'. This is the allure of the family album. 'It embalms time' (ibid)

My grandfather photographed incessantly. There are boxes and boxes of photographs of these times past, most photographs have a name and date on the reverse but others are sadly blank, with no reference as to why they were ever significant. These are the photos that did not make it into the family albums, of which there are many; pages and pages of images, glued onto black paper, with meticulously hand written captions underneath. However, those disregarded photographs are somehow still revered enough to be kept in those boxes, even without the status of being good enough for the family album, but why?

Perhaps the fact that they evidence actual fragments of time, their indexical nature, is value enough for them to be revered as artefacts of those memories. As Sontag claims, 'All photographs are *memento mori.* To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographers testify to time's relentless melt.' (1976: 15) Perhaps the fact that they were crafted from tactile material, in a time when photography still held an element of magical alchemy, and by an amateur photographer who honed his craft through experience and erudition, they are instilled with a value that digital images simply cannot hold.

My mother, grandmother and great grandmother crafted artefacts of a different nature, sewing, embroidering and knitting. These too were often representative of family events, and could be said to reflect 'the significance of the domestic art tradition as an expression of female experience and as evidence of her creativity' (Barnes year: 107). There was an element of socialising to the activity through pattern swapping and chat, but often the 'making' was fairly solitary and there was not a formalised group setting. In contrast, the quilting tradition, with its formal guilds, has a long history and is hugely significant in 'revealing the character, temperament and activities of women (and sometimes the men) who designed and made them' (ibid). Quilts have even been described as a visual record that is the precursor to the family album (ibid).

The women in my family made items that mostly had a specific use, although often saved for special occasions. These include embroidered napkins, tablecloths and antimacassars, as well as samplers and 'forget-me-nots'. Some of these, like some examples of American quilts, have been made to commemorate special events like weddings and birthdays, and they are preserved as treasures to be handed down to future generations. Some of the items handed down through generations are clothing or jewellery, lace and ribbons. Barnard notes how these items function as material reminders of those who have passed away; reminding not only the wearer of the item but also those who see an item and recognise it. 'Clothing (by which we understand all that is worn...) reminds. It can do so oppressively of course...But whether oppressively or not, memory is materialized' (Barnard 2007: 60)

Through our preservation of photographs, textile artefacts, films and letters what we are doing is making memory material; giving it a sense of tactility. This is where I have found common ground between filmic and photographic artefacts, and those more traditionally recognised as craft. All these items are evidence of times and people past. Sontag writes with relation to photographs that 'the fascination that photographs exercise is a reminder of death, it is also an invitation to sentimentality. Photographs [and indeed all our crafted artefacts] turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgements by the generalized pathos of looking at time past.' (Sontag 1978: 71).

However, it is becoming apparent that most of our capture of these times past is now digital. As a self-confessed technophile this is exciting to me but at the same time I have genuine concern about the future of my memories. This manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, I have concerns about where my information is stored when I put it online. Who has access to it? How can it be used by third parties? Do I want to be a part of a giant marketing database? More worrying to me however is the lack of material memories in my home, and a concern that whilst sites like Facebook and Twitter are quietly pervading every aspect of our social, professional and family lives, like some kind of rhizomatic force, enticing me to share my family stories online, the memories of these are becoming mediated through a globalised exhibition; a digital 'performance' of my identity and that of my family.

When we interface with the computer, and communicate with other users around the world, this act in itself is a cyborg one, more than human. The technology of the computer changes the way that we interact, not only in the way that it breaks down traditional boundaries of geography and notions of 'space-time', but that it allows us to communicate without using our physical bodies. Our communication, our photographs, our status updates ("what's on your mind?"), our personal information and shared stories and events can be reduced to silent, typing on a keyboard, a self-conscious digital posturing, internalising our memories, editing them and then recreating them in a huge social arena. There is perhaps an even greater element of storytelling to be experienced through media such as Facebook than there is in traditional craft, because we have a freedom to portray any identity that we so wish. Information, such as date of birth, location, employment status, is not necessarily factual but constructed and open to change. The editing and selection process is even greater than it was when we used family albums, and perhaps even further removed from reality.

> The fact that all forms of information and communication can now be translated into binary coding with a single system signals ...the end of an era. The digital, as an abstract information system, made a break with analogue imagery, finally sweeping away the relation with reality... (Mulvey 2006: 18)

These digital codes are not tactile. I cannot hand them down to my children, and we will not be able to collectively re-remember times past unless we plug into the computer. Gadgets such as the iPad and iPhone clearly have some haptic qualities to their design that recreate a sense of engaging with tactile making but still the result is that there is no original artefact to experience, only experience itself. The Internet, cyberspace, is like this. It is formless, genderless and removed from reality.

Allucquere Rosanne Stone however (1991: 81-118) claims that cyberspace is not gender neutral but gendered female. She suggests that on entering cyberspace, the physical, biological space of the embodied user becomes "refigured". 'To enter cyberspace is to physically "put on" cyberspace. To become the cyborg, to put on the seductive and dangerous cybernetic space like a garment, is to put on the female.' The act of putting on the female could be viewed as being cloaked in the other. Her use of language is interesting as it makes use of traditionally female-associated notions such as seduction and textiles, and suggests some kind of tangible quality to digital interaction.

Cyberfeminist Sadie Plant also maintained that the *matrix* (Latin for womb) is, in essence, female. Using a Freudian idea that weaving and plaiting are the only historical contributions to technology that are ascribed to women, Plant put forward the theory that the modern computer is based on the Jacquard loom (1993: 504), a woman/machine interface operated with punched paper patterns. The matrix is also woven, a woven world wide web, and Plant claims that female computer programmers liken their experiences to knitting, weaving and patchwork. For Plant, cyberspace is the womb, the matrix, a female space, and the computer is female. However, she also claims that women, like nature and the majority of machines, have always existed for the benefit and use of man. For her, machines, like women, have been constructed, built and worked on by men and for men. They are boy's toys, and technological development is a continuation of man's attempts to rationalise and control nature, and therefore to control women too. (1997: 266-8)

However, for Plant the relationship between women and machines is already a dangerous alliance for the patriarchal tradition, and cyberfeminism is a reality. Her cyborg embraces the collapse of identity and the shift of the real world into the virtual. As we exist more often within computer networking systems, such as surveillance technologies and databases, our identities become verified by machine codes. As we communicate and live our lives within cyberspace the cyborg becomes a threat to our traditional, patriarchal society. For Plant, the cyborg is almost working undercover, waiting for the whole networking system to 'crash', taking with it our 'proof' of identity. In this way the identities left behind will be only a part of what they were before. They will be post-human, and therefore post gendered and deconstructed.

These third wave feminist thinkers were keen to reclaim computer technology, and may have been overambitious in their assessment of its liberatory potential. Whilst offering those with Internet access the opportunity to participate in a space that is potentially genderless, equal and possibly post-human, cyberspace has also perhaps already robbed us of our individuality and acted as mediator to our creativity. With this in mind, what are women doing to address the issue of digital story telling? What is the gender balance of people making use of social networking sites to upload and share family stories? Is there any actual 'making' taking place? Are women still making treasure boxes, writing letters, putting actual photo albums together, crafting textiles? Or are social networking sites, blogs and other digital alternatives, such as Facebook, the only repository for our memory making? My pilot study with 34 mothers, of varying backgrounds and ages, illustrated that I am not alone in my concern about making memory material.

> At the moment most of my photos are online/ on disc but it is my intention to eventually get them printed and into albums because I miss the tactile and tangible feel of real photographs and being able to read an album like a book...[child 1] has about four albums charting her early life already and [child 2] is on two. (Aimee)

> If I had the time I would love to shoot some images on film of G. I really miss taking a film to the lab and waiting for it to be developed, and the excitement I used to get producing an album of printed images (Jane)

> I brought M a photo album which we try to add to but we're not very good as everything is on an external hard drive (Ilona)

The issue of not having any material photographs came up repeatedly, and all of my respondents shared the need to create a box or collection of material artifacts that acted as a link to very specific memories. Most had already begun collecting and archiving material memories. These included first shoes, babygrows, and school uniforms as well as drawings, letters and cards.

> My Sons are in their twenties and I have every card and funny little present they ever made for me. Also their primary school paintings and exercise books. I keep everything in old tin deed boxes or slightly battered biscuit tins along with my Mothers button collection, Victorian memento brooches with tiny plaited strands of hair and the plastic, hospital identity bracelets from when my sons were born, Baby H 6lb 8 oz is now 6 feet tall! I don't write nearly enough letters, but have many in the family archive including letters sent from France during WW1, which say things like, "the shelling was particularly bad yesterday and thank you for the cake and warm socks".

My Facebook pilot study has indicated that there is a multitude of ways that mothers are engaging with making memory material but, it seems, without making use of traditional crafted activities. We may have christening shawls handed down from grandmothers but we are not making our own. I have begun to examine how fathers are also involved in craft activity, and whether there is still a perceived gender divide. Are fathers still controlling the lens of the camera? Indeed, if this image making activity is now shared, how has this affected the family films that are being created? Are we still shooting complete family films, or merely capturing snapshots of moments in time, like moving photographs, and storing them on hard drives for later use?

In applying some of my research to my teaching practice I now firmly believe that teaching 'film and media production' as a subject at degree level necessitates that we teach students how to use film, not just digital technologies. At Plymouth College of Art we make use of Super 8, Standard 8 and Super 16mm filmmaking technologies to engage students in the real essence of image-making and cinematic storytelling, which is about mindful composition of light, space, place and time. It is important that we give our students, and our children, opportunities to use potentially endangered technologies, not to instill in them a sense of nostalgia, but to teach them about real mark-making, and to raise their awareness of the impermanence of digital creations. In this way, we can hope to foster independent thinkers who can make excellent use of digital technology whilst understanding its limitations, and who also have the ability to create without the use of a computer.

This study is merely the introduction to a project that will further investigate the potential of the family to capture, edit, share and re-remember stories. Evidently there is still a need to materialise our memories, our identities, our existence, and that of our children, but we are doing this in a very different way than previous generations. Perhaps there will not be boxes of family photographs or cine films for our children to look at, and there may well be less handmade textiles and clothing to pass down, but there appears to be some material archiving taking place so I have hope that our family stories will not be completely lost in the digital void of Facebook uploads and technical obsolescence.

Bibliography:

Barnard, Malcolm (ed)(2007) Fashion Theory: a reader London: Routledge

Barnes, Ruth and Eicher, Joanne B (eds)(1992) Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning Oxford: Berg

Citron, Michelle (1999) Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions London: University of Minnesota

Cygan, Wlodzimierz (unknown) 'A Deeper Examination', in Rowley, Sue (1992) Reinventing Textiles Winchester: Telos

Doane, Mary Ann (2002) The Emergence of Cinematic Time: modernity, contingency and the archive London: Harvard

Edmunds, S (date unknown) http://classics.rutgers.edu/text_textile/textile1.htm [02.09.11]

Haldrup , M and Larsen, J (2003) 'The Family Gaze', Tourist Studies Vol 3, No1, 23-46 London: Sage

Hirsch, Marianne (ed)(1999) The Familial Gaze Hanover: University of New England Press

Keen, Andrew (2007) The Cult of the Amateur London: Nicholas Brealey

Kirkup, Gill, Janes, Linda, Woodward, Kath and Hovenden, Fiona (eds)(2000) The Gendered Cyborg London: Routledge

Mulvey, Laura (2006) Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image London: Reaktion

Odin, Roger () 'Reflections on the Home Movie as Document' in Zimmerman, Patricia R and Ishizuka, Karen L (eds)(2008) Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories London: University of California

Pepperell, Robert (1995) The Post-Human Condition Exeter: England

Rowley, S (ed)(1999) Tradition and Innovation: volume 1 Winchester: Telos

Sontag, Susan (1978) On Photography London: Penguin

Zimmerman, Patricia R and Ishizuka, Karen L (eds) (2008) Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories London: University of Californian Press