

# Home Made: New Media in the Home Mode

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## Abstract

This essay investigates the peculiar situation of a new media project which takes as its raw material the home-video archive of a deaf man gone blind. In an attempt to revive this 'lost archive', *Planet Usher: An Interactive Home Movie* looks to uncover enduring spaces of productivity and, in the process, to make a case for the enduring viability and importance of home modes of production.

*While usually thought of as geographic, home may be photographic as well, unconfined to a specific place, but transportable within the space of imagination. (Moran 2002, 61)*

*But the most crucial thing to note is that the question of this space is raised within the space itself—that the agents have points of view on this objective space which depend on their position within it and in which their will to transform or conserve it is often expressed. (Bourdieu 1984, 169)*



## Not lost

Not only is the home a space, it is very much a time, and very often a time that has passed. It is also, as James Moran puts it, photographic, and hence 'transportable within the space of imagination'. This essay is concerned with tracing the way in

which the home is made visible across space and time, and to think about how a new media aesthetics can differently facilitate representations of the home—representations which, in this case, have literally been ‘raised within the space itself’. This investigation will focus on my own new media research project entitled *Planet Usher: An Interactive Home Movie* (Tarrant, 2003), since this project was deeply invested in finding ways of not only re-imagining the home, but of re-imagining its very transportability.

*Planet Usher: An Interactive Home Movie* is fundamentally about the fact that my deaf brother recorded twenty years of home videos before going slowly blind at the hands of Usher Syndrome. From the outset I envisaged a new media project that might be able to tell the story of this 'lost' video archive while also restoring its vitality and colour in the process. Hence this project began as a fantasy that the home-video archive, despite becoming sensorially lost to the man who produced it, might, through the intervention of new media technologies and aesthetics, become understood as *not* lost. And perhaps the very first step towards such an understanding requires one to make a distinction between deafness and blindness in relation to loss and the audio-visual archive. For while deafness proved to be a productive and engaging feature of the audio-visual archive—a point I shall develop later—blindness had the effect of making even the deafness disappear from view.

In an effort to reclaim the productive dimensions of both this familial story and the home video archive, one of my aims with *Planet Usher* was to prevent the deafness from disappearing; in part because it so rarely appears in representations of the home, but also because there was something like a deaf perspective at work in framing this home, a perspective that was both formed by, but also formative of, the space of the home itself. After Bourdieu, the will to 'transform or conserve' the space of the home is a question raised within the home itself. With three of nine siblings being affected by Usher Syndrome, and hence, being deaf from birth, this particular home was very much a deaf home whose very transportability and comprehensibility was, and is, articulated through the deaf home movies it yielded.

My brother's conservation and transformation of the home through narrative and audio-visual framing operated like many a home movie practice where the home is rendered photographic in a bid to understand, remember and in some respects, take control of that space. The thing that my brother did not properly understand when he documented this world, however, was the looming blindness that would make conservation such a poignant ambition. Poignant, that is, because of the apparent futility of conserving audio-visual images for a deaf-blind future. However, such futility assumes that the videographer was only conserving the world for himself rather than for others as well; or, indeed, that the videographer was in fact *conserving* the world rather than transforming it. To return briefly to the idea that deafness was a productive feature of the home videos rather than a simple absence, or loss, productivity emerges here to the extent that deafness, as an audio-visual point of view, is transformative precisely to the extent that it challenges what Michele Chion (1994) calls the audio-visual contract. In other words, the relation between the visual and the sound tracks in a text created by a deaf man goes more than a little way towards fostering an understanding that the relation between sound and vision is mutable and metaphorical rather than essential or fixed.

In the first instance, my own practice is much like my brother's insofar as both come out of the space they wish to represent and both have a mixture of conservational and transformational concerns. Furthermore, each of us is shaped by the home as it is transported, or conveyed, through the home video archive. By studying the archive as I have done, I am the only family member who comes close to sharing my brother's investment in, and understanding of, the archive. But unlike Peter's, my own practice begins from the proposition that the home video archive is a long lost depiction of the family (from the perspective of its now-blind producer), the very fact of which makes it a tantalising document of loss (from my perspective). But lest this should sound cold-blooded, the initial thesis being investigated in this research was whether or not *Planet Usher* could simultaneously render a depiction of this loss through the very document that made that loss tangible (the home videos), and to thereby make the

audience not only come to understand the archive as not lost for them, but ultimately, as not entirely lost to the man who made them. While it may be compelling to ponder the audio-vision of a deaf man gone blind, it is infinitely more compelling to consider that that story might not be as tragic as it sounds.

While my brother's conservation of the family and the home has an ironic and cruel twist, my own efforts could be seen much the same way since any audio-visual representation that I came up with was going to be of little use to him. But its being of little apparent *use* to my deaf-blind brother did not make it of no *interest* to him. And the broadest claim of this essay is that my brother's video archive, despite appearing to have little use value for him now, is also of significantly more interest and ongoing investment than one might suppose. Furthermore, my own taking up of these home movies has likewise been of considerable interest to both my brother and I, not least because it continues to privilege an ethos of production over conservation, the latter proving itself to be a perilous pursuit and the former being an attempt to render the home in such a way that makes it available in the space of imagination for producers and audiences alike.

### **The Research Context**

Although *Planet Usher* was a response to a remarkable familial tale on the one hand, it would never have been made had it not also been a very practical response to the ambition of taking part in a practice-led research degree. Hence the motivation for this work was not to reclaim and rejuvenate a home video archive *per se*, but quite specifically to do so as a creative venture within the framework of practice-led research. My ambition was to frame the fantasy of restoring my brother's audio-vision as a research question in the context of interactive new media. Which means *Planet Usher* was never *not* research, and in that vein was always pragmatic and self-serving first, even if it was also experimental, conservational and familial. The practice-led researcher operates in an atmosphere where the very material advantage of a research degree looms as a constant presence. So while it might have seemed a fantasy for me to reclaim the lost archive, that fantasy was much less a fantasy with respect to its

receiving academic accreditation.

As a practice-led researcher, I was afforded intellectual, practical, social and technological support; and at the end of it all I was even awarded a research degree. For someone exploring an idea that has no obvious commercial value—like many an artist or amateur—research-led practice is such an attractive proposition that one wonders how a person pursues their fantasies of independent production without such support. And that is indeed one of the humbling aspects of this project, one which not only enjoyed the support of a research institution, but which also drew so heavily upon the work of someone who didn't have that support.

To the extent that practice-led researchers consider the material conditions or economy of their practice, they ought at least to begin with an understanding of the privilege they enjoy over other practitioners, perhaps also with an eye to how this privilege frames (and therefore might insinuate itself in) their art, from the outset. In the case of *Planet Usher*, where the benefits of both eyesight and hindsight served as vivid frames of privilege that I enjoyed over my brother, there was little danger of forgetting those other frames of privilege afforded by the university, for instance, or by the act of poaching the best bits of someone else's video archive. Instead, the danger lies in sentimentalising these privileges, for one then runs the risk of shoring up ones privilege through the very utterance of the word. What I mean to highlight here is that the practice-led researcher must not only recognise their privileged status among independent practitioners, but that they must also guard against indulging the privilege-utterance lest it insinuate itself into the creative work, much as a failure to recognise privilege *at all* might insinuate itself into an artwork.

The reason for emphasising the pitfalls of privilege in the research context is that it taps into, or intersects, a range of concerns about my own place within both the real and the represented home and my audience's place in relation to a text about the home. One of the examiners of *Planet Usher* remarked, approvingly, on its 'lack of sentimentality'.

It is unremarkable to say I have never thought of myself as privileged for having good hearing and vision, and likewise I do not have a tendency to sentimentalise my siblings or their disabilities, because one tends not to, having grown up around them. So this lack of sentimentality about either the home or my privileged place within it is in very large part a sensibility determined by the home being represented. However, to simply not recognise one's privilege through the making of something like *Planet Usher* would constitute a wilful blindness. To overstate privilege would be to sentimentalise and reinforce it. But perhaps the most pertinent concern for this work was that if it had become infiltrated by sentimentality and condescension, the audience would be left with little space in which to imagine my brother as something other than 'under' privileged, and would likewise have had little hope of understanding his home video archive except as a tragic loss. In order to render a vision of the archive *not* lost to the ravages of Usher Syndrome, the first step in my creative process was to eschew tragedy in favour of productivity, which meant finding a space for the audience beyond pity and privilege, albeit in a time after the time of images.

### **A time after the time of images**

Derek Jarman's final film *Blue*, in which the visual field is made up of no more than a laboratory generated blue colour field, has been described as "being of a time after the time of images" (Esch 2003, 523). This time after images was made so by the blindness that afflicted Jarman as he battled AIDS. *Planet Usher* is also about the relationship between blindness and image-making, and so in that simple sense is concerned with representing a time after the time of images, a time when the home videographer can no longer view his work. But where Jarman's film dispenses with images almost entirely, *Planet Usher* responds by trying to open up new kinds of *spaces* for images, even if those spaces lie beyond a time of images. The sort of spaces I've imagined take a variety of forms, some of them critical or speculative, while others can be understood as emerging out of a new digital poetics, or of an aesthetics of interactivity. The remainder of this essay will be concerned with unpacking the specific aesthetic, temporal and domestic spaces conjured in *Planet*

*Usher* in the name of a productive re-visioning of the home video archive reclaimed from the brink of vanishing.



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In the sample provided above, movement of the mouse cursor prompts nine small squares to chase each other across the screen, painting or filling in an unseen photograph onto black as they go. Each square continuously maps its own location relative to a stable, archived photograph, updating its position as it moves. However, by the time each square's coordinates are read in to the system (according to which a small image sample is taken and stamped onto the screen) the square has moved. This produces a curious lag in the memory space between reading, moving and writing, which is what accounts for the distortion in the image on screen.

So where we might want to talk about the temporality of memory, in this instance it is its spatiality that figures most prominently, even though that space is also a space, or gap, in time. In this case both the image and its distortion are animated in the slippery space of a memory time, producing images which, while emergent and live, also bear the mark of their own decay and fragmentation.

And of course in a much more everyday fashion we might think of the lost archive persisting in my brother's memory and therefore, persisting in a time beyond sight. But there is a more interesting point to make here, as Robert Stebbins does in his research on

amateurism. This research, he writes:

turned up eight *durable benefits* found by amateurs in their various pursuits: self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, recreation or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity. (Stebbins 1992, 7)

So, just as there are enduring benefits for me that result from producing *Planet Usher*, so too the twenty years my brother spent framing and recording his environment is labour that ought to be understood as generating benefits that don't simply cease to exist just because the material archive has become inaccessible to him. One doesn't record and frame twenty years of domestic events without that process having ongoing effects, including effects on ones visual memory (not to mention effects on the events themselves). Hence the amateur producer in this case may be understood less as someone who has lost an archive he worked so hard to produce, than as someone who has enriched his visual field, for a time, beyond vision. I am not talking about the video archive here as a simple analogue for visual memory either, but rather that my brother's construction of the archive represents a process of memory-making capable of generating an afterimage in a space beyond the time of images. I call this afterimage *the remembered home movie*.

### **Narrative and the Looping Home Movie**

The remembered home movie recalls and gives added poignancy to Lev Manovich's figure of the 'loop as a narrative engine' (Manovich 2001, 314). This loop is one that maintains motion and activity within otherwise static fields. The remembered home movie is, likewise, a looping narrative engine that drives an endless cycle of writing and re-writing, even as its progress appears stalled (production of the archive has ceased, access is denied). This looping cycle involves the 'capturing' of memory *on* video, the remembering that occurs when *watching* home videos, and finally the remembering *of* the home videos themselves in a process that likely corrupts both the video's and one's memories, but which may, nonetheless, be productive, and is almost certainly a narrative process.



The loop as a narrative engine can be seen as a response to human and ‘narrative’ frailty, and what it offers is persistence. Home movies, memory and narrative take it in turns to write and re-write the other in an endless spiraling loop, leaving the audience to wonder where it all ends. In *Planet Usher*, where the fixity of photographic technologies plays against the fluidity of memory, meaning and disability, the simple looping home-movie does more than conserve space on a CD-Rom or offer movement within static fields. What it also does is expose the iterative, always incomplete work of memory, and the temporal aesthetics of a certain type of narrativisation by prompting one simple, yet enduring question: why doesn’t it stop? In this sense *Planet Usher* is less a narrative-lost, than a narrative engine that just won’t quit; a typical ploy, of course, where the spectre of loss looms large. So in the ongoing challenge to imagine a space after the time of images, an aesthetics of the loop reminds us that the loop is actually a space worth exploring, not simply a place you find yourself.

If an aesthetics of the loop can open up a narrative space for a time after images, it is nonetheless a narrative shot through with frailty. This notion of a ‘narrative’ frailty can be seen at work in Michelle Citron’s film *Daughter Rite* (1979), and her book *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (1999). Here the emphasis is on the difference between narrative and remembered experience, and the implications of this difference for the tasks of representation and reconciliation. In Citron’s case she writes of the trauma of incest, where memory is fragmented, mutable and incoherent. In the case of trauma, memory is designed to fail, and in that sense is rendered obscene. Narrative, as she explains, attempts to make sense of that failure. But where narrative might make sense of trauma for the filmmaker, “[f]or the audience... narrative reduces a complex, confusing, overdetermined tidal wave of experiences and half-found awareness into something that is linear, understandable... Narrative makes it seem safe. This is a lie.” (Citron, 50) Hence the frailty of memory and the shortcomings of attempts to communicate trauma highlight a kind of narrative frailty, or failing. That is to say, linear narrative geared towards causality and resolution is frail in the face of attempts to communicate the chaos and confusion of lived experience. That such a site of

struggle can be a productive one is a feature of Citron's film *Daughter Rite* and is doubly elaborated in *Planet Usher*, insofar as interactivity, with all the challenges it poses for narrative, is also brought to bear on the reception and communication of the complexity of differently lived experience.

Furthermore, Citron's use of home movie footage in *Daughter Rite* is an example of how home movies are more literally remembered or re-produced in other media. It is worth noting that in this re-presentation one sees clear evidence of James Moran's contention in *There's No Place Like Home Video* (2002, xv) that "home video has become increasingly homeless – that is, displaced from the actual field of production inhabited by real families and their home consumer equipment." As an institutionally endorsed new media project framing home video, *Planet Usher* also contributes to this state of homelessness. Yet this project was, in fact, produced in the home—just not the home it grew up in. And in any case, to talk of homelessness here is really to talk about the transportability of a home-imaginary and, by extension, the enduring quality of the space it was raised in. If one considers the way that my brother painstakingly narrativised and framed the home when he could see, it is not much of a leap to suggest that his work was transported, however unwittingly, to a future self who would not see. Indeed it is the process of turning the home into narrative and into images, that generates more enduring, transportable and ultimately more meaningful artefacts than any preserved on tape.

### **The Home Mode**

Perhaps the most important lesson to be gleaned from Moran's (2002) book, however, is the extent to which we ought to think of home video as a representational modality. In this vein one can understand *Planet Usher* as being 'new media in the home mode', which means that the project engages with the aesthetics, the ambitions and the content of a mode of production that aims to capture a view of the home from within. But the home mode is hotly contested ideological terrain and has been accused of lacking the overtly political, experimental and artistic qualities purportedly found in productions conducted *outside* the home. Yet Moran, armed with the notion of 'modality', suggests

that representations of the family might instead be treated as choices that are neither technologically, economically nor biologically determined, but are, in fact, modes that can be switched and multiplied. In which case, the home need not be treated as essentially ideological (conservational) any more than we should assume that avant-garde works are essentially political (transformational).

In a related point, Vivian Sobchack writes, “a fiction can be experienced as a home movie or documentary, a documentary as a home movie or a fiction, a home movie as a documentary or a fiction.” (Sobchack 1999, 246) Likewise, Moran highlights the way that avant-gardists like Jonas Mekas, Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage have each taken up and thought about the home mode, amateur practices and consumer technologies in varying ways. Moran describes the twin modes at work in Mekas’ diary film *Lost, Lost, Lost*, for instance, where Mekas “attempts to construct a *family* within the New York *avant-garde* art community” [my emphasis]. He goes on to describe that film as both “documenting the avant-garde’s *community* and demonstrating its *visual codes*.” [my emphasis] (Moran, 70–71) Similarly, *Planet Usher* aims to document and reproduce a home mode practice while citing its visual codes, all the while trying to imagine what an ‘Interactive Home Movie’ might be and what sort of spectator it would address. By engaging seriously with the notion of modality this work has the great privilege of looking amateurish if it chooses, of being nostalgic or cold, or of shifting at will between the social mode of the documentary and the aesthetic mode of a new media experiment—or more to the point, of treating these modes simultaneously. But since my own project is a remediating exercise, the notion that it might engage with the home as a mode of representation is unsurprising. What’s more interesting, perhaps because it is slightly more surprising, is the extent to which my brother’s home videos display a capacity for transforming the home and for commenting on the visual codes of television and other media, while also capturing visions of the world that contained sounds he couldn’t hear.

### **Audio Vision**

While at one level my brother would appear to be incapable of framing the physical

sound environment, he clearly makes it a part of his composition in a video entitled “Crazy News”, circa 1981. In this re-enactment, three deaf siblings take it in turns to hold a microphone and mumble would-be questions and observations into it. While capable of speaking English, these actors choose not to, in accordance with their own experiences of television news *without the sound*. In turn, the youngest hearing sibling enacts an interesting feedback loop by mumbling gibberish when interviewed by deaf siblings mumbling gibberish, and speaking perfectly respectable English when interviewed by myself, a hearing sibling not speaking gibberish. So the microphone, as a visual signifier of sound, is sufficient to make audible sound a part of the composition in this instance, and by extension, a part of the story that is being told. In fact sound is the very subject of “Crazy News”, both in its audible and inaudible states.

Inheriting this tradition for re-thinking the audio-visual contract in the home, I have been keen to cite my brother’s authorship and to layer it with my own. For example, the primary interface screen in *Planet Usher* is accompanied by the sound of another brother’s piano rendition of The Beatles tune, “The Long and Winding Road”. This was recorded incidentally, bearing no relation to the vision except insofar as the home is a cacophonous environment of sound, image and movement that falls within the camera’s, and sometimes the cameraman’s, purview. The use of this music has multiple effects. On the one hand it can be understood as an image of the amateurish, since its merits as a performance are somewhat dubious. The second image projected is sentimentality, evoking a sense of the multi-generational family saga and, more precisely, the twisting fortunes of an oversized Catholic family marked by uncertainty, change and disability. The third image is of irony, which raises a question of taste. And the fourth image is meta-textual, evoking the long and multiple winding roads of multiform, branching and looping narratives common to interactive media. The spectator is cast in the role of negotiator here, forced to move between ambivalent parties in search of resolution, but also forced to confront the fluidity and indeterminacy of the home mode and, thereby, to confront its aesthetic potential.

In another of *Planet Usher*’s worlds the user is cast in the role of photographer,

simultaneously de-constructing and re-constructing a photograph of three brothers in school uniform. For two of the brothers, Peter included, the moment records the first day of school. The interacting audience is invited to manipulate an on-screen viewfinder in order to trigger a photo of the photo, thereby producing a newly cropped and noticeably pixellated detail of the image, which in turn triggers a sample of an audio interview. This technique provides an opportunity for engaging an audience in the processes of representation and production that lie at the heart of the project. In contrast to dismissive representations of the home mode as being merely about people and family, this example is also *about* photography and its relation to an idealised vision of the family.



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If the user happens to take a snapshot of Peter, they trigger a rueful description of an event that occurred on his first day at boarding school at the age of three. My Father describes Peter getting smacked by a nun, and the nun's subsequent take-it-or-leave-it attitude in the face of my Mother's objection. My Father, not present for this incident,

notes with sarcasm: “I’m taking Kevin to school and Kevin’s bawling his eyes out ’cause he started school... it was *his* first day at school. We both had a great day!”

The telling thing about this scenario is the way that it hitches all the decay and struggle of living to the actual moment of recording. And rightly so in this case, since the iconic first-day-of-school photograph hasn’t even been developed before its redundancy has set in. That is, the drama that unfolds with a nun smacking a three year-old child will infuse the home before the iconic photograph has even made it to the developers. And surely once the photograph does make its way into the home in days or weeks to come, its charm will be met with equal parts gratitude and ambivalence, for the photograph, instead of functioning as a fantasy of an ideal family moment rescued from time, marks instead the very ephemerality and deep irony of that fantasy. This particular ‘Kodak moment’ reveals itself to be a fallacy, as the interacting user is uniquely positioned to apprehend, compelled as they are to try to capture a moment by triggering its narrative decay. No sooner has the image been snapped than the story it would tell begins to fade.

## **Conclusion**

Both *Planet Usher* and this essay emerged from the home. But more significantly, they emerged from the photographic and imaginary space of the home mode itself. In the context of this familial tale one realises that the home is forever on the brink of vanishing, that its time has come and gone, and that the home mode producer is therefore compelled to loop. But while the home mode may have very good reasons for conserving the home and the family, that doesn’t mean it isn’t also productive in its persistence and transformative in its effects. And, in any case, one wouldn’t want to arrive sooner than necessary at a time after the time of images.

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- See also <http://www.patrick-tarrant.com>

### Biographical Statement

Patrick Tarrant is a PhD candidate pursuing an experimental documentary video practice that investigates the notion of 'Metaculture' as it takes shape around an event called "Band In A Bubble". Patrick's Masters project *Planet Usher: An Interactive Home Movie* has been exhibited in Melbourne (ACMI, Memory Grid, 2004); New York (ACM Multimedia Conference 2004); and London. The UK exhibition *Sequences* toured regional and city arts centres across England for twelve months in 2004/05.