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Associazione Home Movies, l'Archivio Nazionale del Film di Famiglia

An interview with Paolo Simoni and Karianne Fiorini of Italy's amateur-film archive

Guy Edmonds

In 2002, Paolo Simoni and Karianne Fiorini, with technical director Mirco Santi, founded 'Associazione Home Movies', aspiring to become Italy's de facto national archive for amateur films. For two years its collections were housed in spare cupboards in the founders' houses. In 2005, they moved this archive of *film di famiglia* into a historic palazzo in Bologna, replete with climate-controlled vaults. This had been achieved through collaboration with the Istituto Storico Parri Emilia-Romagna (the Regional Institute of Historical Research, named after antifascist leader Ferruccio Parri), an archive of twentieth-century Italian life originally centred on the history of the wartime Resistance. The arrangement provides the opportunity for exhibitions and screenings in the shared spaces of the building.

Associazione Home Movies collects films, supplementary materials, and contextual information from across Italy, collaborating with communities and an informal network of like-minded small-gauge enthusiasts. Working with local councils and arts institutions, it has curated exhibitions and special events, including annual participation in the international Home Movie Day, which has brought the issue of small-gauge film preservation to a public audience.

Guy Edmonds: We begin with the idea of the archive: how was Associazione Home Movies born?

Paolo Simoni: Our archive began as a notion of a kind of approach to cinema. The ambition that inspired us was to go deeper into the relationship between cinema and society – and history. There is also something appealing about re-defining cinema, what its nature is, what we can historically consider 'cinema'. Cinema is a way to record the reality of the people and the space around them, and a way to record phenomena for scientific studies. This was true from its origin. All the forms of cinema tell us something about the society in which they find expression. Including home movies, of course.

Practically, the project of the archive began together with Mirco Santi in 1999. He found some collections of home movies and showed them to me in his cellar, where there was also a laboratory to

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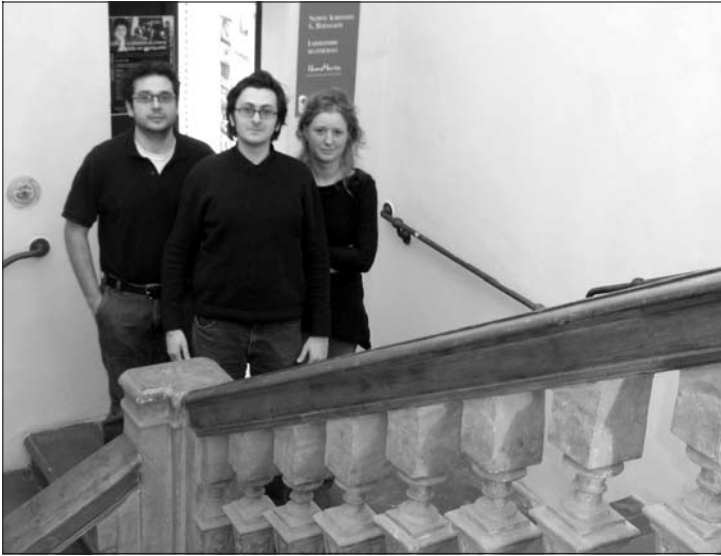


Fig. 1. Mirco Santi (left), Paolo Simoni and Karianne Fiorini. [Photo: Guy Edmonds.]

develop experimental films. He wanted me to see how beautiful the images were. I saw also how they were rich with information about people's lives and social background. The idea of building an archive like this in Italy – no one had seriously thought of it before. We also emphasised the importance of keeping the original films first.

GE: Your arrangement with the Istituto Parri seems an ideal situation. How did it come about?

PS: We are completely independent, but the aims of Istituto Parri and the aims of Associazione Home Movies are partly the same. The archive has been granted space for at least twenty years from 2005. The relationship came about naturally, because of the closeness of our interests and fields of research. In a phase of expansion, the Institute moved into the now restored convent of San Mattia. So they asked us to be part of the new Parri. From our point of view their request was ideal. We were looking for an institutional place to develop our project and we had collaborated previously with the Istituto Parri.

GE: For a small film archive without a home it would seem obvious to try and establish a project with a larger film archive but your example would seem to suggest that it is better to seek a collaboration outside the film community. Would you agree that amateur film archiving is best managed outside the film archive 'establishment'?

PS: There is not one way to set up an archive. Our specific project needs conditions that are not the same as other film archives. We are working on filmic material that is perhaps nearest to oral histories or autobiography. Memories recorded onto film mean that you need to provoke a reaction between the footage and the people to recontextualise the old images, to elaborate the gap created by the passage of time. Such work may be between, for example, the historian, the anthropologist and the psychologist. To be strictly a film archivist is not enough. I am not sure that the film archive community is ready to work on home movies. We are still in the neglected part of the field.

Some good words have been said for home movies, even in official circles, such as the FIAF congress. But not much more. The film archives are sometimes not ready, in terms of technical means and approach. From these kinds of experiences new forms of archive could emerge, no longer places so closed and far removed from the people. Home movies can give a real chance of contact with people, and provide the occasion for meaningful exchanges.

GE: Do you have any role models in the archiving world? Or did you find inspiration elsewhere?

PS: We looked around. Here in Italy there was no one. Elsewhere in Europe we found several. However, we had to work autonomously due to our specific situation. In general, regional archives work more with amateur films than other organizations do. There is also l'Association Européenne Inédits [formed in 1991], a group devoted to amateur films. Some inspiration was taken from people like Péter Forgács, a filmmaker, an artist, but he starts with an idea of research, questioning the past. This is important.

GE: How would you like to develop the archive?

PS: We want to continue with projects like the one we're running in Rimini, collecting film from a specific area for a limited time. A selection of the films will come into the archive here in Bologna, but everything is logged in a database, which will remain accessible to the people of Rimini. One of our dreams is to realise an online database, which could be a Europe-wide project to give access to the films. But there is always so much to do: rework and edit the original footage, show the results, organise public screenings and festivals, analyse and study the

films, publish the results of research. And of course we need to continue our activities in the archive. We have collected many films and we continue to acquire more.

GE: Do you draw a distinction between home movies and amateur film?

PS: It is a question of definition. We are in the territory of unknown and quite unusual material. What are 'home movies' exactly? Sometimes you might say 'underground films'. What is the real difference? The scholar Roger Odin defined home movies and amateur film. For him their nature is completely different. Home movies are without a narrative structure. They are simply a way to create a system of communication inside the family. In our experience, that definition does not always work.

It depends also on which era of amateur filmmaking it belongs to. What Odin says may be true in the case of the father of the family with a Super-8 automatic camera who has no knowledge of or interest in cinema. Everyone, it seems, in the 1960s could afford a camera. But before that, people shot film with a sense of knowledge and an idea of cinema. Their films were not about narrative, but were concerned with composition, and with the selection of parts of reality. If you see the films from the 1930s, there is, in our experience, the idea of creating a diary. The filmmakers were preserving a little part of reality by selecting images. (For example, with 9.5mm, you have only one minute of film per 'charger'.) They had knowledge of photography, cinema and the concept of the frame. So the films of the 1930s were usually beautiful films.

GE: Because they were cineastes as well as people recording their families.

PS: As filmmakers they were inside the family or inside a little group. They were people who were doing cinema for this little group and not for the public. They experienced a 'cinema privato'. Yes, they were filmmakers – why not? Then what are home movies? Maybe something in this indefinable area: A film about a day in the life, or experiments of colour, flowers, sunsets, nature, animals, light and darkness, or ideas to try to film. There were many little experiments with taking pictures of their own experience, both ordinary and extraordinary.

GE: The way you described the 'dispositif' of home cinema is very much like the early 'cin-

ema of attractions', with people sometimes watching themselves on the screen the same day as the film had been shot. They themselves were one of the attractions and there would be a much greater level of interaction between the image on the screen and the audience.

PS: This is an important aspect and linked to a similar one: In the world of experimental cinema, the screenings are often meetings, where filmmakers talk and show their films. Personal cinema is a means to share experiences. In other ways, the world of the traditional amateur filmmaker is different. In the cine club, they sometimes tried to make a professional film in miniature, because they want to be professionals. I make distinctions between the amateur experimental filmmaker devoted to his private space, where he makes movies for himself and friends, and the amateur filmmaker who wants to realise movies, like news, documentaries and narratives for a real audience. Of course these two figures are not well defined. And there is so much in between. But it is curious to note that amateur filmmakers often consider home movies to be trash.

GE: Your own programming often makes the connection between amateur film and experimental film with events such as 'Le Giornate del Cinema Privato'. Was this a strategy to raise the profile of the archive, as well as these more neglected genres of film culture? Is it through such screenings that most people come to hear about the archive?

Karianne Fiorini: In the first year we were known by word of mouth. Then we started to organise public presentations about the Associazione. In Milan, for example, we showed some films from the first collections of our archive in an art context, projected simultaneously on five screens placed in a sort of circle with people in the centre and accompanied by an experimental musician. From the beginning, we took part in some film festivals with a short anthology of home movies. The anthology included a Super-8 film from my collection, shot by my father in the early 1970s. I was three years old, and I danced on a terrace, wearing a red dress. The film was silent, but I found an audiocassette recorded during the same period as the film, in which my father can be heard teaching me 'Bandiera Rossa', the hymn of the Italian working class. Mirco and Paolo mixed this sound with the film.

Fig. 2. In-house telecine facilities fabricated by Mirco Santi, the archive's technical director. [Courtesy of Associazione Home Movies.]



After some public presentations of our work, some journalists became interested in the project. The key moment, when we became a national archive, arrived in July 2004, when a journalist from *Corriere della Sera* – the principal daily newspaper of Italy – wrote an extensive article about Associazione Home Movies on the front page. From that moment we received about fifty calls and emails a day. It was a really crazy period. We had to answer the calls and give attention to everyone, and there were only 3 of us. Many were also seeking collaborations, but we could not get involved because we didn't have the archive physically set up, so we were also a bit frightened. We were launching a national archive, but we were still working in our private space.

GE: Did the article say that you were working in your houses and using your wardrobes as storage space for film?

KF: No, but from that moment we made good progress in setting up the film archive and intensified our contacts with European archives and cultural associations dedicated to home movies. At that time we had about 100 hours of amateur film, but hun-

dreds of other people wanted to give us their films. So we had to find a strategy to deal with that, otherwise it would have been impossible to continue.

GE: What collecting procedures do you follow at the archive?

KF: The first thing to say is that we don't seek out the family – the family comes to us. We are at a point where people recognise the importance of preserving their memories, but have encountered obstacles in doing so. Our first role, therefore, is to help them achieve that. The process is not simple. People have to trust us, and they want it to be right. We are taking their private memories. They contact us asking if they can see their film again and if it is possible to have a digital copy of it. Usually they no longer have a projector, or maybe it's not functioning. Then they want to know how we can help them. Can we transfer their film to video, if the film has to remain in the archive? This moment is delicate because sometimes these films, even if people can't see them, are real objects of the family, part of their heritage.

The first step is to explain the archive's processes, from preservation to presentation. Usually

they have never thought their film could be important to someone else, or to society in general. Sometimes they phone and ask 'how can my film really be interesting for you? Why? What do you do with the film? It's just my family – my wedding.' They want a guarantee about how we will use the film. At this point if possible we organize a meeting in our archive and sometimes a trip to see them in their home.

GE: Do you present the family or representative with a contract, so you have a legal basis to use the material?

KF: Yes. They give us the film and the rights to it, we guarantee the preservation and cultural use, and in return they receive a digital copy, as it's the only way they can see the film. In certain cases we accept film without rights, but for us without a cultural presentation there is no real preservation. Almost everybody agrees with this. They understand that we have a serious and collective project: to safeguard Italian cultural patrimony from the risk of oblivion. We want to build, for the first time, the history of Italian amateur cinema.

Our archive collects not only film, but amateur technical equipment. We want to make these sources of Italian history and society available to researchers such as historians, sociologists and anthropologists. We want to provide access to a point of view of reality that no one has ever given importance to. We know only what the establishment has told us about many aspects of our country. However, people shot their family habits and rituals. They too say something about the external world, because they also shot the activities around the family ritual. You can understand how life was lived in an industrial suburb of the 1950s, for example. It may be the only witness of some little moment of reality, or evidence of work activities and industry.

GE: Dealing with amateur film is much more a matter of working with real people. How does this affect your approach to cataloguing? Did you have a model for the cataloguing or did you have to create one yourself?

KF: First of all a film, in order to be recognized as a historical source, has to say something. You have to know about the filmmaker, the people in the film, and the place where the film was shot. We try to create an overview, which can be useful to people wanting to reuse the material. We created the catalogue ourselves, following the FIAF rules of cataloguing. One of the main differences between a typical

film database and ours is that home movies are unique copies. You don't have an original negative and copy elements. We have a unique catalogue record for each reel. And each record has sections for item-specific data, semantic, technical, biographic data, and so on. There is also a 'collection section', where we report how many films are in a given collection, if the film has been preserved elsewhere, and the different digital copies we have of each film in that group.

We collect also related materials, not only the amateur equipment, but also diaries, slides and photos. (Usually these are reproductions, not the originals.) These materials give important details about the history of the families. And all this information is referred to in the electronic catalogue under the collection category.

GE: Do you know the Northeast Historic Film online catalogue? It includes a couple of stills from the films, a biography of the filmmaker, and a sample of content.

KF: That's interesting. I know better the catalogues of the Smalfilmuseum [in Holland] and of the Cinémathèque de Bretagne [in the Brittany region of France]. If researchers want to study something in particular they can search our database and find what they are looking for.

A basic point for us is to keep in touch with the families. Without them our work is impossible to do, but also we're focused on collecting all the things that can say something about the family. If we want to reuse the film, sometimes we need not only the film but other kinds of memories and documents as well. For example, we worked on a collection from an Italian Jewish family, in which the filmmaker started to shoot film after the Second World War. But during it, when he was thirteen years old, he wrote a diary where he noted all his feelings about what happened around him. However, in the films he's an adult shooting his life with his family.

And here's another point: a peculiarity of home movies is that they are always showing good times, because the dramatic situations are hardly ever recorded.

GE: But sometimes there are moments when people aren't happy – where the filmmaker hasn't made a sufficiently good contract with the subject. You can see that the person in front of the camera is annoyed. This works against



Fig. 3. Frame enlargement from a Nino Gatti 8mm film.
[Courtesy of Associazione Home Movies.]

the presumed intention of the filmmaker to portray an ideal situation and lets you see a different kind of 'truth'. Sometimes you have to interpret a home movie by what is inadvertent or perhaps not shown at all.

KF: Yes. For instance, we have a collection of 16mm film from a deceased filmmaker who was not interested in people. His films – maybe in one or two there are some people – otherwise were only landscapes. He was a misanthrope! In the films you can see the personality of the filmmaker – really interesting! For example, Nino Gatti [whose 8mm and Super 8 movies (1950s–1980s) the Associazione has presented in public] wanted to show his world, his high bourgeois world. You see that the wife is the principal subject of the films, because she is the head of the family and was higher born and more wealthy. She was a jealous wife, so she didn't want him to do his work and meet other people. He was a dentist. She bought him a camera so he could become her personal filmmaker. He told us a little private mystery of this life!

GE: Have you discovered any women filmmakers?

KF: It is not so common [in Italy], because amateur film is mainly a masculine domain. But we have found some. For example in the Rimini project, a woman, Adele Mussoni (who died in 1999) had started to shoot film in the late 1950s. She worked at a local bank. When she retired in 1959 she was lonely and single, and started to film. She became the filmmaker of the bank. She went on social trips with her ex-colleagues in the bank and on some trips elsewhere in Italy. Her sixty-year-old nephew has preserved all her films and given them to us. After retiring from work, all her life was dedicated to film. She filmed the landscape, people and life around her. The life of her town was wonderfully displayed through her eyes and the films are really poetic. Of course in most cases the filmmaker is a man, but sometimes a husband gives his wife the camera and then you see a different view.

GE: When one's working with amateur film in the family context, the archivist becomes more like a social worker, even a family therapist. That's an interesting development for a profession that is generally grounded in dark, non-public spaces. Archives are having to open up and become much more friendly and sociable.

KF: Yes, in the beginning I didn't know it would be like this, but I am usually the one who makes and receives calls and explains our process. Also, when cataloguing, I have to liaise with still more families. Sometimes I felt this – that they have to trust you. It's like the relationship between the patient and psychoanalyst. If you don't feel good together, it's impossible to do anything. You have to sense the other person and make him or her feel relaxed, because sometimes that family member has to say something very private. Behind a film there can be tragic circumstances. Weddings, birthdays and holidays, yes, but with a dramatic history behind them. It's not so simple, sometimes.

Abstract: Associazione Home Movies, l'Archivio Nazionale del Film di Famiglia, by Guy Edmonds

Guy Edmonds interviews Paolo Simoni and Karianne Fiorini, two of the founders of the Associazione Home Movies. The archive, established in Bologna in 2002, is dedicated to collecting, preserving, cataloguing and showing amateur films from across Italy. They discuss the value of Italian 'family films' to individual communities and to researchers.