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Filming History from Below: Microhistorical Documentaries, by Efrén Cuevas. Columbia University Press, 2022, 304 pp.

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Efrén Cuevas's *Filming History from Below: Microhistorical Documentaries* will appeal to media scholars, archivists and historians interested in the complex links between images, the archive and history. Cuevas argues that a certain category of film—the "microhistorical documentary"—constructs historical narratives through a reduced scale of observation, an insistence on human agency and the appropriation of archival images via varying levels of reflexivity and imagination. Cuevas's book is especially rewarding for scholars curious about the diverse evidentiary roles of one specific type of audiovisual archival source: the home movie. According to Cuevas, microhistorical documentaries typically appropriate once-private sources, including home movies, found in family archives. Cuevas persuasively demonstrates that documentarians' appropriations of home movies as evidence can produce an alternative vision of the past that prioritises the daily experiences of those typically omitted from traditional histories. On one hand, this focus on microhistorical methods and the appropriation of home movies provides a rather limited theoretical lens for studying a modest subgenre of documentaries. On the other hand, this spotlight on a relatively narrow cinematic process paves alternative pathways toward addressing much broader concerns relevant to multiple disciplines. Even if a reader is not directly invested in viewing and/or studying these kinds of documentaries, Cuevas presents substantive claims applicable to familiar scholarly conversations about the archive's power and limitations, the evidentiary force of images, the relationship between narrative structures and history, the ethics of appropriation and much more. As in the documentaries analysed throughout the book, Cuevas microscopically scrutinises the particular to reveal new ideas that have typically gone unnoticed by attempts to study the general. Cuevas's targeted attention to specific documentaries' engagements with family archives leads to unexpected discoveries that will challenge and expand many readers' broader understandings of documentary practices, archival methods and history's construction.

To frame this study of the microhistorical documentary, the book's introduction offers an accessible and concise overview of discourses about films as history. Cuevas introduces many of the key figures—from Siegfried Kracauer to Hayden White to Robert Rosenstone—that helped legitimate the serious study of filmmakers as historians. The first chapter then summarises meaningful trends in social and cultural history, including everyday life studies, history from below and the foundational Italian historiographic approaches referred to as *microstoria*. In this first chapter, Cuevas also offers a very brief survey of some prominent documentary theories. For most readers, depending on their training or exposure to notable late-twentieth century trends in film

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studies and history, portions of the book's introduction and first chapter will be a review of much-discussed names and claims. By the first chapter's final pages, though, the stage is set for merging these interdisciplinary discourses through Cuevas's original study of documentary filmmakers as historians working within a microhistorical mode.

This original, interdisciplinary framework avoids reductively forcing these established-yet-diverse historiographic practices onto documentaries, which obviously cannot function in the exact same ways as the books most often associated with microhistorical methods. Cuevas argues that documentaries do not directly repurpose the microhistorical practices of written history, as famously theorised and demonstrated in books such as Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* and Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Documentarians working in the microhistorical mode often engage in similar offscreen research processes to produce related knowledge about the past, but they do so within the specific limitations and affordances of the documentary's audiovisual medium. Also, despite the title's phrase "filming history from below", Cuevas most frequently emphasises how documentarians appropriate (rather than film) images to construct microhistorical narratives. In other words, microhistorical documentarians typically study and reactivate images filmed by others, including home movies recorded by otherwise anonymous families. So, although Cuevas studies some filmmaking practices that involve the recording of interviews or other new footage captured specifically for documentary films, the book's strongest claims are related to how microhistorical documentaries can uniquely produce affective histories from below that are shaped by their repurposing of home movies and family archives' other visual sources.

The second chapter most overtly addresses these concerns about how appropriated visual sources, including home movies, produce historical knowledge in new microhistorical documentary contexts. To frame these links between appropriation, family archives and historical knowledge, Cuevas provides a succinct overview of the so-called "archival turn" and a growing interest in preserving and studying home movies and amateur films. This chapter then builds upon foundational scholarship about archival appropriation by Catherine Russell, Jaimie Baron and Rebecca Swender. Cuevas contributes to this wider conversation through a specific study of microhistorical methods for appropriating sources from unofficial private archives. Readers who study the evidentiary force of appropriated images in new settings will find this chapter especially thought provoking and productive.

Throughout the five chapters that follow, Cuevas explores these complex links between the microhistorical documentary and audiovisual archival appropriations through detailed studies of specific filmmakers and historical themes. Cuevas's objects of study represent a rich diversity in subjects and contexts, which range from Hungary to Cambodia to the United States. In the third chapter, Cuevas effectively demonstrates why Hungarian archivist-turned-director Péter Forgács's films offer the most straight-forward examples of this mode of microhistorical filmmaking. Forgács's filmography presents an especially consistent narrativisation of anonymous family histories via appropriated home movies to expand viewers' understandings of macrohistorical contexts, including the Shoah. For those unfamiliar with Forgács's films, Cuevas offers an inviting entry point. Readers familiar with Forgács's work and the many prior scholarly responses to it—such as the essays in *Cinema's Alchemist: The Films of Péter Forgács*—will still discover

something new in Cuevas's re-evaluation of Forgács's best-known films, including *The Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle* (1997).

Similarly, readers familiar with two other influential and much-discussed filmmakers—Rithy Panh and Jonas Mekas—will still find plenty of new insights in Cuevas's chapter-length studies of their work as histories. Panh's films about the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia have already inspired many complex scholarly responses. For example, Panh's films play a central role in Raya Morag's perceptive book *Perpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary.* Cuevas shifts attention to Panh's films as examples of microhistorical documentaries that focus on the filmmaker's personal stories and memories as a means for countering dominant historical narratives and enhancing historical knowledge about genocidal violence and trauma. In a detailed analysis of Panh's widely acclaimed *The Missing Picture* (*L'Image manquante*, 2014), Cuevas suggests that the film's autobiographical narrative and reflexive form produce public knowledge about the Cambodian genocide through Panh's own memories and searches for truth about the past. Notably, Cuevas also argues that Panh's film confronts a common microhistorical issue: the absence of a preserved family archive. Cuevas suggests that Panh's decision to combine the limited available archival materials with re-enactments of certain memories through the overt artifice of figurines and dioramas can be understood as an imaginative microhistorical response to the archive's inevitable gaps.

For many readers, Mekas will be the most famous—and, perhaps, unexpected—filmmaker studied by Cuevas. Mekas's own writing about cinema, his passionate film programming and his collaborative spirit helped to shape the American avant-garde. In turn, Mekas's work tends to be approached as experimental art, rather than history. Also, because most of Mekas's films comprise footage he recorded first-hand, his experimental films seem inherently disconnected from the microhistorical documentary's appropriations and reflexive engagements with archival images produced by others. Yet Cuevas argues that, when Mekas reuses the film diaries he recorded over decades to produce new retrospective accounts of his immigration experience, this process effectively blends two of microhistorical documentaries' key strategies: autobiography and the appropriation of extant images from family archives. Films such as *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) and *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976) present Mekas's personal story through the appropriation of images he recorded in previous contexts to produce knowledge about the broader post-war experience of Lithuanian immigration to the United States. Some readers, especially trained historians working in written modes, might question the link between Mekas's personal, poetic, avant-garde filmmaking and the rigorous archival research of historians such as Ginzburg. Still, these moments in Cuevas's book introduce complex and provocative tensions between traditional historiographic practices and especially unconventional documentary styles. These tensions are likely to challenge prevailing assumptions in the fields of film studies, archival science and history alike.

Cuevas's other chapters, which explore lesser-seen and -studied documentaries, offer fresh and engaging analyses. For example, in a chapter about films related to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, Cuevas explores a film by Stephen Holsapple, Emery Clay III and Satsuki Ina titled *From a Silk Cocoon* (2005). I have never seen *From a Silk Cocoon* or read other critical or scholarly responses to this film, which is about Japanese American everyday life in prison camps during the Second World War. Despite my own ignorance, Cuevas's

close analysis of this documentary raises many rich questions about the evidentiary roles of other appropriated sources typically found in family archives, including diaries and personal letters. In this chapter about Japanese American internment, Cuevas illustrates microhistorical documentaries' diverse strategies for addressing a shared subject. A later chapter, which covers various films about the conflicts in Israel and Palestine, similarly connects microhistorical documentaries that address a related historical subject. For example, Cuevas links the quite distinct autobiographical approaches of films such as Yulie Cohen's *My Terrorist* (2002) and Mahdi Fleifel's *A World Not Ours* (*Alam Iaysa Iana*, 2012). As Cuevas explains, these autobiographical films engage with their limited archival materials, shift between past and present and blend microhistorical and macrohistorical scales in very different ways, but they share a commitment to telling specific family stories as representative of the wider experiences and context of the conflicts in Israel and Palestine.

This themed chapter about Israel and Palestine draws readers' attention to a diversity of approaches. Yet these very different examples paint a much messier picture of microhistorical documentaries than Cuevas's opening chapter, a neat study of Forgács's many films that clearly share aesthetic and historiographic characteristics. If the early chapter about Forgács is read as a legible prescription for a microhistorical form, this later chapter complicates that prescription by introducing many disparate processes that Cuevas fits within the microhistorical category to varying degrees. The chapter about Israel and Palestine, as well as other chapters in the book's second half, might prove frustrating in their descriptions of otherwise divergent filmmaking techniques and varied political perspectives. Still, at times, Cuevas's comparisons of these diverse filmmakers and their assorted styles ironically best define the mutual threads holding this cinematic category together.

The book's conclusion speculates about future trends in microhistorical documentaries, especially in the wake of increasingly digitised processes of filmmaking, archiving and historical research. This conclusion raises fascinating questions about the future, but it also serves as a reminder that the preceding chapters often lack this attempt to consider microhistorical filmmaking within specific technological, economic and historical contexts. In other words, Cuevas's book will likely fail to satisfy readers hoping to better understand how the emergence of the microhistorical documentary and its evolving forms fit within the longer history of documentary cinema itself. Furthermore, while the book provides some exposure to the historical contexts—the Shoah, Japanese American incarceration during World War II, the Cambodian genocide, the conflicts in Israel and Palestine, etc.—addressed by the examined microhistorical documentaries, Cuevas is far more interested in establishing links between many filmmakers' styles and their historiographic methods than conducting his own historical research or narrativisation of the past. In this sense, the book's frequent focus on Cuevas's theoretical framework, classification of filmmaking modes and lengthy close readings of film examples from many different historical and national contexts might ultimately appeal to documentary scholars more than some professional historians.

That said, the goal of microhistorical methods is to focus on the singular to complement and enhance our understanding of the broader experiences exemplified by that singular story. With this goal in mind, Cuevas's book makes a strong case for why scholars from many disciplines might further study microhistorical methods across different media. Cuevas's intentionally narrow

perspective exposes the reader to diverse filmmaking techniques, raises many unsettled questions about the relationship between written and filmic historiographic practices and inspires alternative paths of research that extend far beyond the confines of documentary studies. Specifically, as scholars across many disciplines continue to contend with what archival materials—especially sources from family archives that have been historically overlooked by researchers—can tell us about the past, Cuevas's careful study of microhistorical documentaries and their appropriations of home movies provides a strong model and inspiration.

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