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The filmic representation of home in transnational families: The case of 'I for India'

Efrén Cuevas

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In an increasingly globalised world, the phenomenon of transnational families has spanned many countries, raising questions as to the traditional understanding of home, a concept normally associated with the notions of homeland and the family house. This article intends to study these issues through an analysis of *I for India* (2005), a documentary film portraying the migratory endeavours of an Indian family that moved to the UK in the 1960s. Since filmmaker Sandhya Suri builds this portrayal of her family with the help of a valuable family archive of home movies and audio reels special attention will be given not only to the role of this domestic archive in the making of the film but also the configuration of transnational families in constructing visual/audio memories to share across frontiers.

Transnational/diasporic families and their self-representation

Before beginning an analysis of *I for India* it is convenient to briefly delineate some concepts and terms related to the issues brought up by the film. 'Transnational family' is a concept which has aroused growing interest in academia in the current era of globalisation. Debora F. Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela have defined it as 'families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely "familyhood", even

across national borders'.[1]It has been discussed whether this term can be applied straightforwardly to diasporic families. Daniela Berghahn, in an effort to refine these terms, asserts that 'in the case of transnational families, mobility can be individual or collective, whereas diasporic and immigrant families are inevitably linked to mass migration movements'.[2] Moreover, what characterises diasporic families from other types of transnational families, according to Berghahn, is the importance of the axis of origin and return:

this vertical axis between the country of origin and the destination country, the 'there' and 'here', accounts for a particular diasporic consciousness. It finds its expression in a strong affective bond, a nostalgic longing to return [...] to an idealized homeland. The myth of the home(land), based on the collective experience, memory or postmemory of migration, is an essential feature of the diasporic sensibility. [3]

For these diasporic families home implies not so much a connection to a physical place, the house or the native territory, but is more related to social, cultural, or religious traditions. As David Morley states,

[h]ome is not always symbolised by any physical container – whether suitcase, building or coffin. At times language and culture themselves provide the migrant with the ultimate mobile home. [...] Thus home may not be so much a singular physical entity fixed in a particular place, but rather a mobile, symbolic habitat, a performative way of life and of doing things in which one makes one's home while in movement. [4]

This understanding of home as related to cultural and symbolic frameworks points to the role played by media objects in the configuration of transnational and diasporic families. As Jose Van Dijck has studied, our identity and memory are highly mediated, since we heavily rely on objects of memory as means of self-representation and communication to shape our personal and collective identities. This is even more evident in the case of personal and family media such as letters, snapshots, home movies, and home videos, which give shape to what Van Dijck has termed our 'personal cultural memory'.[5]

Home movies[6] play a special role in this configuration of family identity, as their primary role, according to Roger Odin, is to strengthen the family and safeguard it as an institution, providing a mythical anchor that protects it from the contingencies of time and the tests to which it is subjected by the world.[7] This function, which was fulfilled literally when fam-

ilies sat down together in front of the film projector or the television, took place in an analogous fashion in transnational families, with the home movies filmed to be watched not only by the nuclear family but also to be sent to family members living in either the country of origin or of reception. The home movies thus served as a much more vital way of holding the family together, like an umbilical cord that kept the family bonds alive. In this sense their value as a visual memory bank or a deposit of the family's past which can be re-visited takes second place to their function as a communications nexus that keeps the family united in the present. This latter function has come to the fore in the last decades with the arrival of the internet, social media, and live communications, which allow transnational families to share images, texts, and conversations at a steady pace, widening the reach of the previous personal and family modes of communication and recording.

I for India: An 'accented' autobiographical narrative

The film *I for India*, directed by Sandhya Suri, becomes an illustrative case of the life of a transnational family and the role played by domestic technologies in the configuration of its identity. The film had a successful run on the festival circuit, receiving awards in eight international film festivals and being selected in the official competition of festivals such as Sundance and Visions du Reel. In addition it has received significant scholarly attention from researchers such as Brunow, Berghahn, Cross, Lebow, and Linke.[8] Released in 2005, the film displays an outstanding degree of current relevance despite being available for more than a decade. The main themes underlying its narrative, from the life of diasporic families to the reactions of the local population towards immigration, are no longer an issue in just a few countries such as the UK or Germany, but in all European countries, where the public discourses and the stories of immigrant families that populate today's news echo the narrative of *I for India* in a way that blurs the temporal distances.

The family of the filmmaker Sandhya Suri can fit in the category of transnational family in the broader sense proposed by Bryceson and Vuorela, but also in the narrower definition by Berghahn, since the migration of the Suri family is linked more to an individual decision than to a mass migration movement typical of diasporic families. Robert Cross clear-

ly identifies the narrative of this film as transnational, as opposed to migrant, in the specific context of South Asian migration. Unlike working-class migrants, Cross states that ‘the transnationals who came to Britain, by contrast, constituted a social elite made up of multilingual, highly educated and skilled professionals such as doctors and engineers who migrate to Britain through choice rather than necessity’.[9] Nevertheless, the distinction is not so clear-cut, since the father of Sandhya places himself as part of a collective exodus of young Indian doctors leaving for the UK for better opportunities. More importantly, the narrative underlying the audio-letters of the father emphasises the vertical axis between the country of origin and the destination country that Berghahn pointed out as characteristic of the diasporic consciousness. Therefore, the story of the Suri family could be read as hybridisation between a narrower understanding of the transnational phenomenon and a more proper diasporic/migrant experience.

In order to tell this story Sandhya Suri adopts an autobiographical approach. There are not very many examples of autobiographical narratives about the life and hardships of transnational families. Personal documentaries often begin from a need to explore the multiethnic origins of the families of the filmmakers, frequently associated with stories of migration. Nevertheless, especially in North America, these films do not show the difficulties of migratory phenomena, since this experience belongs to the past of the filmmakers, who are already settled in their new country with relative normality. In Europe, however, one can find a number of autobiographical documentaries that address the tensions that follow emigration to European countries. Such is the case of *Ich Bin Tochter Meiner Mutter (I Am My Mother's Daughter)*, 1996), where Seyhan Derin, living in Germany, explores the migratory move of her parents from Turkey to Germany; *Wir haben vergessen zurückzukehren (We have forgotten to return)*, 2001), with filmmaker Fatih Akin exploring the life of his Turkish family in Germany; or *Exile Family Movie* (2005), in which filmmaker Arash T. Riahi shows the effort made by his family – dispersed between Iran, Austria, the USA, and Canada – to maintain their ties to one another.

In this context *I for India* stands out for its effort to give an account of the lives of transnational families and for its remarkable way of using an invaluable family archive to tell the family's migratory narrative. The story begins in 1965 when the entire family emigrates to England, where her father Yash obtained a job as a doctor. Shortly after arriving he buys a pair of Super 8 cameras, two projectors, and two tape recorders; he sends one set

to his family in India and the other he keeps for himself. For years Suri's family keeps in touch through these home movies and audio recordings. Years later, having access to the entire archive, Sandhya Suri decides to make a film telling the story of her family. The film is quite clearly structured in three parts. The first part of the film relies more heavily on the family's archive to tell the story of the first period of their life in the UK. The second part shows the family's unsuccessful attempt to resume their life in India in 1982. Ultimately, they decide to return to England, giving way to the third part of the film, where we also find out that one of the daughters decides to emigrate to Australia, repeating the migratory cycle of her parents.



Fig. 1: Reels and letters.



Fig. 2: Daughter on the snow.



Fig. 3: Family in India.

I for India is made by Sandhya, one of the daughters of the family, now a professional filmmaker, in a kind of co-authorship with her father Yash, the amateur filmmaker and principal protagonist of the family's migratory

journey. The film could be regarded as a case of what Paul John Eakin has called (in literature) a 'proximate collaborative autobiography', [10] in which there are two closely-related protagonists both speaking in first person, with the author (here the filmmaker) telling the story of her life while at the same time relating the story of her father's. Actually, the film presents an interesting variation on this model, since the autobiography is more properly linked to the retrospective vision of the daughter, whereas the home movies and audio reels of her father present a structure closer to that of a diary: 'entries' shot or taped over the years, composing a kind of audio-visual diary, to be shared in this case with his Indian family. Nevertheless, Sandhya Suri complicates this distinction since she gives her father the position of first-person narrator in the first few minutes of the film, when he introduces himself in voiceover while we watch old family pictures of his youth in India.

The resulting migratory narrative has a specific structure that emerges from this configuration. As Sau-Ling C. Wong suggests, these types of narratives do not deal with the opposition between the Old World and the New, but with a set of three systems: the 'ideal' Old World values of the relatives of the authors, their real Old World values as actually mediated by those same relatives, and the 'real' New World values of the authors themselves. [11] This way of relating the differences between generations is more suitable for studying narratives of transnational families than the one suggested by Berghahn, who approaches these narratives using the concept of 'post-memory' proposed by Marianne Hirsch. [12] For the latter author, post-memory refers to the way traumatic historical events are experienced by the generation after the events, a memory composed through the testimonies of the witnesses of the traumatic events, and linked by objects of memory as family photographs. But transnational families do not always fit so well into a framework of trauma narratives, despite the hardships of most migratory stories. Nevertheless, they frequently have in common a narrative that spans several generations, as in the case of *I for India*, mingling the memories of the first generation of emigrants with the perspective of the younger generation already accustomed to the values of the New World.

Beyond this collaborative autobiographical approach *I for India* can also be identified as 'accented cinema', a well-known concept employed by Hamid Naficy in relation to diasporic and exilic cinema. This is evident since the film was made by a filmmaker whose family migrated to Europe. Be-

sides, she makes a film which draws the two countries that give shape to her personal and family identities into dialogue, showing how locations, people, and cultures mix and clash in her personal story. As Naficy explains in relation to the general category of accented cinema, ‘the accent emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from the displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes’.[13] The structure of the film, especially in the first part, also relates directly to one of the typical features of accented cinema: its epistolary structure. As Naficy states, ‘exile and epistolarity are constitutively linked because both are driven by distance, separation, absence and loss, and by the desire to bridge the multiple gaps’.[14]

The use of the archive: Home movies as reverse ethnography and microhistory

This accented character of *I for India* is strongly linked to the domestic materials employed by Sandhya Suri. These materials were originally conceived as filmed or recorded letters, imbued with a strong sense of displacement and made in the most artisanal mode of production: home moviemaking. Suri is very conscious of the value of her family’s domestic archive and in the first part of the film she lets the archive speak for itself with hardly any direct intervention, voiceovers, or supporting interviews. Nevertheless, she does introduce a fundamental novelty, since she edits together films and audio recordings that were originally filmed and recorded separately. This changes the nature of the home movies in two ways. First, it adds a new layer of meaning to the festive and happy nature of the images, which take on a new significance because of the commentary provided by the audio recordings, which are usually of a more intimate nature, imbuing the narrative with the pain of separation and the yearning for reunion. In this way the two types of disparities characteristic of the archive, as pointed out by Jaimie Baron, here end up complementing each other: the obvious temporal disparity is enhanced by the intentional disparity caused by the explicit detachment of the home movies from their typically celebratory nature.[15] Second, the audio reels provide the home movies with an explanatory narrative framework for any spectator unrelated to the Suri family. Usually home movies are somehow mute to anyone outside the family circle, looking like repetitive fragments of family life lacking a larger

narrative scope. This lack is worked out by the audio commentary, as Suri states:

Super 8 is often about capturing a moment, so making all these fragments into a narrative whole was a challenge. In fact, it was mainly the audio reels, which provided that narrative arc.[16]

On the whole the film/audio letters exchanged by the Suri family over 20 years become singular and pioneering proof of the role played by domestic communication technologies in maintaining the communal identity of transnational families. In this sense, as mentioned earlier following Odin's analysis, the main role of the Suri home movies, beyond their value as a visual memory bank of the family's past, is to act as a kind of umbilical cord, holding the family together. In fact, when the family returned to India in 1982 her father shot very few home movies, as if they only made sense as way of keeping the family together across distances of space, but not as a living memory of past times. Nevertheless, those materials were kept by both sides of the family, and this allowed their use as a visual memory bank later on, when the daughter-turned-filmmaker decided to relate the family's history by making an autobiographical documentary that reflects the struggles of her transnational family.

Nonetheless, Sandhya Suri does not limit herself to the use of her family archive. She also resorts to public archives in a few significant occasions throughout the film to contextualise the endeavors of her family, hinting at the cultural and social differences experienced by so many immigrant families in the UK at that time. The film begins with an excerpt from a 1969 BBC program titled *Make Yourself at Home* ('For Indian and Pakistani Viewers'), in which an anchor explains how to operate a light switch. The temporal disparity gives this piece a strong ironic connotation, coming from its naïvely patronising attitude toward immigrants. A similar connotation colours the other excerpts of public archive, like the one from the 1966 program *The Dark Million*, describing immigrants as people who 'create an atmosphere of foreignness, very different from the sort of atmosphere British people are used to'. Two other brief news fragments openly address the public and political discussions raised by immigration. One of them covers a demonstration against immigration, and another includes Margaret Thatcher speaking about the fear of the British people of being overwhelmed by immigration and the possible hostile reaction to this phenomenon. The montage of these brief excerpts from the public archive, contrasting with

the home movies from the 1960s and 1970s and the ordinary life of the family today, underlines the temporal as well as the intentional disparity of this archival footage, questioning its original meaning without further explicit commentary. Moreover, this contrast between public and domestic archive turns *I for India*, and more specifically the home movies of the Suri family, into what Alisa Lebow calls ‘reverse ethnography’: a look at British society from the vantage point of an Indian ‘ethnographer’, expanding meaning beyond the family circle to become a valuable social record of this period in England’s history.[17]

Fig. 4: Daughter with Queen’s guard.

This type of ethnography, constructed mainly from domestic archives, also positions *I for India* as a remarkable case of filmic microhistory.[18] Documentaries, as well as history as a discipline, usually tend towards looking at the Grand History led by public figures, but in recent decades historians have also vindicated the concept of ‘history from below’, giving way to approaches such as the history of everyday life or microhistory. *I for India* fits very well into these micro-historical approaches, since it deals with the larger phenomenon of transnational families (specifically the British Indian diaspora) but from the point of view of a particular experience. The small scale of observation and the narrative/biographical approach places it close to the proposals of micro-historians and in contrast with the ‘macro’ approaches of traditional histories (parallel somehow to standard expository documentaries) in trying to show what the macro analysis is incapable of grasping, i.e. the struggles of individuals and families. Besides, the inclusion of public archives in contrast with the domestic footage also points out the determination of microhistory to make the small-scale meaningful for the understanding of macro-historical contexts.

‘Home’ in *I for India*: The longing to return

In portraying the biographical experiences of the Suri family, *I for India* places ‘home’ at the heart of the film’s narrative. Starting from the most evident criteria we can state that most of the scenes involve the family members of the filmmaker, from the home movies of the past to the footage shot by her for the film. The exception would be the brief excerpts

from public archives and most of the scenes illustrating the short period spent by the family in India in 1982, during their failed return, where the filmmaker uses contemporary footage in a rather symbolic and non-temporal way. The home movies in the film show scenes typical of this type of cinema: life in the family house, mealtime gatherings, family vacations, etc. The cross-cutting between home movies from both England and India that occurs in the first part of the film underlines the here and there of this transnational family in a very compelling way. One scene in common stands out in the footage shot in both countries: a traditional Indian wedding (the first one featuring a sister of the father; the second one the sister of the filmmaker, shot by her on home video). These two events serve as a clear link for the transnational family, since they portray similar rites and traditions, despite the physical and temporal distance between them. Sandhya Suri also chooses to show her parents in ordinary family scenes, to underline the present-time perspective of the migratory narrative from which the film looks at the past. The house garden is a reiterative place showing up in the past and present footage as an intermediate between private and public spaces. Interestingly, there is little visual emphasis on the journeys, although it is understood as central to the experience of this type of family. There are only a few brief shots of planes departing when the family leaves for India and returns.



Fig. 5: Wedding in India.



Fig. 6: Wedding in the UK.

Over this visual footage the audio letters taped by the family throughout the years provide the film with a strong sense of unity arising from the longing for return, to the point of making it the main thread of the film.

This is a main characteristic of diasporic families, as previously mentioned, structured around the vertical axis of origin and return, which gives way to a nostalgic longing for journeying back to an idealised homeland. This journey back home becomes a myth permeating the life of the first generation of migrants, which actually hardly ever happens and usually fades away in the second generation. Naficy refers to the prominence of this issue in his discussion of accented cinema:

[e]very journey entails a return, or the thought of return. Therefore, home and travel, placement and displacement are always already intertwined. Return occupies a primary place in the minds of the exiles and a disproportionate amount of space in their films, for it is the dream of a glorious homecoming that structures exile.[19]

I for India represents a special case in this context since the Suri family did return to India after 16 years in England. However, the return was not successful and nine months later they came back to England for good, taking the family back to the original situation of so many migrant families.

To express this main thread of the film Sandhya Suri has a precious resource in the audio letters preserved in her family archive. The fragments selected for the film show a recurrent obsession with the reunion of the family: from the references to a future time where they will be able to talk together extensively to the openly tearful pleading for the return of the son who had left for Europe. This longing also shows up indirectly, as can be seen in the sombre tone of the father when he announces the extension of his stay in England to his parents, a feeling made even more poignant by the filmmaker's decision to contrast that announcement with the happy images from one of the family's birthday celebrations.

Among those numerous references three moments can be highlighted as especially meaningful in the comments of the father. In the first one he openly acknowledges the power of the return to the homeland as the myth pervading his life and that of so many other migrants: 'I was not the only one who left [India], nor the only one who believed in the myth of the eternal return.' Later on, when he talks about the purchase of a new house in an audio letter, he makes a key reflection when he says:

[a]n important change is taking place in my life. An establishment of what I would like to call a house, rather than home, because I haven't still accepted that I can settle anywhere else in the world except my own country.

Nevertheless, he is conscious of the passing of time and he keeps saying how after 10 years in England, although he loves his native country, he somehow feels like a misfit to his own people. Behind these poignant thoughts lies the idea of home as inextricably linked to one's homeland, thus creating resistance to the possibility of setting down real roots in the new country, and leaving open the possibility of returning home. The film finishes with audio recorded by the father after the failed attempt of returning to India. His voice and words sound even more full of sorrow:

[p]lease, do not underestimate Y. P. Suri with regards to his patriotism, his loyalty. No matter that he did not succeed in his own country to resettle, the love for my soil hasn't diminished. I am a true Indian.

It is worthwhile to note that Sandhya Suri does not use any archival image to accompany these words; she only shows the audio reel spinning, as if asking the spectator not to become distracted from listening to her father. She then adds a brief final image, the same one with which she opened the film: a silent, black-and-white shot of her father, walking in the snow, leaving the meaning open to be filled in by the spectator with all the layers of history and memory presented during the film.

Looking at the future: The role of live communication in transnational families

The third part of *I for India* opens a new chapter in the life of the family, and also in the role played by domestic media in maintaining the links between members of transnational families. The middle daughter decides to emigrate to Australia, and so the migratory cycle begins again. Sandhya Suri dedicates a long fragment to showing the family commenting on the departure, celebrating a last meal together, and saying goodbye to her at the airport. The segment takes a more observational approach, hardly used in the previous scenes of the film, complemented by interviews with her parents. This part finishes with a significant scene in which the parents talk with their daughter in Australia via internet (while Sandhya is filming the scene with her movie camera).



Fig. 7: Skype with daughter.

This last scene brings to the fore the changes taking place in the role played by domestic media in the last two decades. The rituals of home moviemaking, so cherished by Yash P. Suri, are gone. The long processes required by home movies, culminating in the ritual of their projection, so eagerly anticipated because it was so infrequent, have been substituted by the sharing of photos and videos in social media or immediate communication via webcam, in a conversation that by its very nature is ephemeral. The archival desire behind home moviemaking has been somehow replaced by the desire for simultaneity or telepresence, making it possible to be together despite the distances. Home is therefore no longer simply linked to a physical place, such as a house where the family gets together. For families who are increasingly more scattered around the globe, home is gradually being transformed into a more virtual space. As Susan Aasman points out, tele-technology such as a Skype offers 'tools to create a symbolic space of home and family in a globalized world', a virtual space where 'the family can perform as an enacted space'.^[20]

Within the specific framework of transnational families the images of the Suri family talking by internet force us to reflect on how these families will handle the bonds of their common identity in the near future. The accessibility of communications technology is facilitating a more integrated growth within these transnational families since it helps them to maintain

their traditions in different social and cultural contexts, and to endure the difficulties of setting down roots in a new place thanks to the more immediate support of the family members that they have left behind. As Myria Georgiou points out, 'new communication technologies [...] can bring together the diasporic homes – in plural – into a new relation; they become nodes in networks that are culturally distinct and transnationally connected'.[21]

Nevertheless, a certain nostalgia for the cultural and social values attached to home movies still persists, since their images (and sounds) retain the virtue of being a unique document, worthy of being preserved, open to being watched by the families repetitively, and in which they can see themselves reflected and strengthened as a protective community. These stand in contrast with live communication, which is more ephemeral but also much more accessible, and therefore very relevant in the configuration of the family identity, especially in transnational families which have to endure situations of permanent separation.

Author

Efrén Cuevas is Associate Professor at the School of Communication of Universidad de Navarra, Spain. His areas of research include autobiographical documentaries, home movies, and family memoir. He co-edited the books *The Man without the Movie Camera: The Cinema of Alan Berliner* (2002) and *Landscapes of the Self: The Cinema of Ross McElwee*(2008), and edited the book *La casa abierta. El cine doméstico y sus reciclajes contemporáneos* (2010). He has also published articles in journals such as *Studies in Documentary Film, Biography, Cahiers d'Études Romanes, Archivos de la Filmoteca*, and *Secuencias*; and chapters in books such as *The Cinema of Me* (2012) and *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web* (2014). More info at www.efrencuevas.com.

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Notes

- [1] Bryceson & Vuorela 2002, p. 3.
- [2] Berghahn 2013, p. 21.
- [3] Berghahn 2013, p. 23. The author takes the idea of the axis of origin and return from Clifford 1994, p. 321.
- [4] Morley 2000, pp. 46-47.

- [5] Cf. Van Dijck 2007, especially chapters 1 and 6.
- [6] From now on I will use the term home movies as referring also to home videos. James Moran proposes the term 'home mode' to include the different physical supports (film or video), without intending to erase their differences. Cf. Moran 2002, pp. 33-63.
- [7] Odin 1995, pp. 32-33.
- [8] See Brunow 2012, pp. 153-160; Berghahn 2013, pp. 94-100; Cross 2014; Lebow 2012, pp. 224-229; Linke 2014, pp. 55-74.
- [9] Cross 2014, <http://iafor.org/archives/journals/media/media-journal-voll-issue2-contents/I-for-India.pdf> (accessed on 8 July 2016).
- [10] Eakin 1999, pp. 175-182.
- [11] Wong 1991, p. 149.
- [12] Berghahn 2013 pp. 86-88; Hirsch 1997, pp. 17-40.
- [13] Naficy 2001, p. 4.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- [15] Cf. Baron 2014, pp. 18-35. Baron says that the main intentional disparity that occurs when documentaries use home movies comes from making these movies available to the public beyond the family circle. However, here (as in other films), the main intentional disparity comes from the reversing or amplification of their original intended meaning through editing with different types of verbal commentary.
- [16] Suri 2010, p. 388.
- [17] Lebow 2012, p. 225.
- [18] A more in-depth analysis of the value of documentaries made from home movies as microhistory can be found in my chapter 'Change of Scale: Home Movies as Microhistory in Documentary Films' (Cuevas 2014, pp. 139-151).
- [19] Naficy 2001, p. 229.
- [20] Aasman 2012, pp. 162, 166.
- [21] Georgiou 2006, p. 99.