# 4. Video Source Material

This chapter narrates how I examined a variety of home video, chose my specific source material, edited twelve hours of material down to a two-and-a-half hour rough cut, logged this rough cut using pencil and paper, and edited it further down to half an hour. Lessons learned from going through this traditional process without the aid of a computer helped to shape the design of the computer logging system.

## 4.1 Choice of Material

In October of 1990 I posted an electronic mail message at the Media Lab asking if anyone was willing to loan me their home videos. I received tapes from eight people which included four weddings, and four tapes of children playing, including two birthday parties. I made copies of thirteen hours of material and took notes as I viewed them.

More people were willing to lend wedding videos, but I turned these offers down; four weddings was more than enough. My first observation from this process was that weddings are boring. The videos varied from twenty-minutes of a traditional Protestant ceremony in the Northeast to four hours of a new-age Jewish ceremony in California with new rituals and vows designed by the participants. Despite this variety, viewing the tapes left me with similar impressions. All of the wedding tapes contained a sea of faces I did not recognize and a set of highly-structured events.

Part of the interest of home video comes from recognizing people one knows. In narrative filmmaking, the information necessary to enjoy a work is usually contained in the film itself; all that is required in addition is some background cultural knowledge. In home video, one also needs to know and care about the specific participants. What appears to be a nondescript elderly couple exchanging pleasantries at the reception takes on new meaning if one knows that Uncle Neil and Aunt Martha have not been on speaking terms since their divorce, or that Neil died a month after the wedding. A viewer who cares about individual participants will also be more tolerant of poor video quality. For these reasons, I chose to use video shot by my family.

Weddings are made up of a sequence of typical events like walking down the aisle, exchanging rings, and kissing the bride. A child's birthday party is another example of an event with a typical structure. This inherent structure can be a guide in editing.

Less-structured information such as children playing provides interesting editing opportunities. A shot of Alicia in the pumpkin patch at age 5 could appear in a video about Alicia growing up, Alicia at age 5, or the family trip to

the pumpkin patch. The same segment of video can be used in a variety of ways and takes on different meanings in different contexts. Less-structured information can be manipulated creatively.

It could be argued that these examples of "less structured" information are really just "less likely to be well shot." A skilled documentary camera-person thinks in terms of sequences -- series of shots that can be used to tell stories. A novice videographer is likely to get enough material to make a coherent sequence of a birthday party -- for example, shots of the candles being put in the cake, the cake being brought out, and the child blowing out the candles can together form a sequence. In the example of a child in the pumpkin patch, the novice videographer is likely to take one shot of the child playing and ignore the approach to the pumpkin patch, the closeup of a pumpkin, and other supporting shots needed to make a sequence. In the absence of the material needed for a proper sequence, the video can be used more abstractly, juxtaposed with video from other times and places.

The Electronic Scrapbook explores ways to structure a video when the raw materials needed to make traditional sequences do not exist. Viewing video of children playing generated a number of ideas. I noticed that a girl named Kaya frequently appeared with two of her favorite objects, her blanket and her stuffed penguin. One could make a video of Kaya growing up by showing shots of Kaya with these objects at different ages. Another way to tell the same story would be to show Kaya at certain important firsts in her life: learning to crawl, eating her first solid food, learning to stand up, and the like. There are different ways to tell the story of a child growing up. One could create a set of story models to help users to discover the variety of stories that can be told.

## 4.2 My Family's Video

My half-sister Alicia was born in 1985, and Danielle was born in 1989. My father borrowed a friend's VHS camcorder to tape Alicia's birth and subsequently bought a Video 8 camcorder. I borrowed all of their tapes from Alicia's birth in October of 1985 until Christmas 1990.

Most of the tapes I received from my family were unlabeled, and several had never been viewed after shooting. All together, there was twelve and a half hours of video on ten tapes. A summary of the content of the tapes appears in Table 4A.

## Table 4A: General Contents of the Video Source Material

**Tape 1:**
Alicia being born
Alicia and Mari in the hospital

**Tape 2:**
New baby shots: nursing, changing diaper, etc.
Christmas 1985

**Tape 3:**
Christmas 1985, continued
The dogs' birthday
Returning from a hike (Robert and Alicia)
Easter 1986
Rachael and friend making a cake
Enid feeding Alicia
Shots of the old house (San Rafael)
Alicia in the pool
Tour of the new house (Mill Valley)

**Tape 4:**
Tour of the new house (continued)
Interview with Grandpa about life in Rumania

**Tape 5:**
Visit to Fire Island
Interviews with Grandpa and Grandma

**Tape 6:**
Interview with Grandpa
Alicia's first birthday
Everyone's birthday celebration
(Enid's 93rd, Rose's 75th, Robert's 47th, Nancy's 23rd)

**Tape 7:**
Everyone's birthday celebration (continued)
-- Alicia discovers chocolate
Alicia eating
Alicia playing with Veronica
A visit to the cabin (South Lake Tahoe)
Rachael's junior high school graduation
Amy's college graduation
Crib-club second birthday picnic
Alicia's second birthday (no party)

**Tape 8:**
A trip to the beach

**Tape 9:**
Danielle being born
Easter 1989
Danielle at 9 weeks
Danielle at 10 weeks
Alicia playing on the back porch
Mother's day 1989
Alicia's fourth birthday party
(at Chuck-E-Cheez)
Alicia's birthday, continued at home
-- pinata
Alicia and friend playing at being ghosts
Danielle at 13 weeks
Alicia's new nightie
Danielle's first solid food
Alicia and Lonnie in the wading pool
Danielle learning to scoot backwards
Danielle learning to crawl
Danielle and Alicia take a bath together
Danielle's new airplane swing
Enid doing the dishes
Danielle at 6 months, 3 weeks old

**Tape 10:**
Alicia's first day of school
Alicia's 5th birthday party
(at Chuck-E-Cheez)
Alicia's class singing performance
A visit to a pumpkin patch
Alicia's school gymnastics performance
Alicia and Danielle carving a pumpkin
Alicia's school Halloween parade
Christmas 1990, at the Gilbert's house
Danielle wearing Mari's shoes

There were five primary reasons why the camera was brought out on a given day: a holiday, a birthday, a family outing, a child doing something that she had never done before, or an interview of one of the older members of the family about his or her life before coming to the United States. Video was rarely shot without some special occasion to bring out the camera.

I edited the tapes in chronological order, transferring selected shots to 3/4" tape. I chose shots on the basis of content-based criteria such as importance in family life, and ability to resonate with other shots I had seen, and aesthetic criteria such as lighting and steadiness. The resulting rough cut was two hours and ten minutes long. I made a careful and detailed log of the rough cut. An excerpt from this log appears in Table 4B. The rough cut was later edited down to half an hour, the amount of video that can fit on one side of a laser disc.

I chose to log the rough cut the old-fashioned way, taking notes on paper and then entering those notes into a word processing program. The process of taking notes took approximately eight hours, and typing the notes took seven hours more. The process was grueling and the resulting log contains errors and is not fully detailed.

It was instructive to me to discover how time consuming the process was. While I have logged video for other projects, in the past I had generally made rough notes to jog my own memory. A phrase such as "Alicia and the strawberries" conjures up in my mind an entire sequence which involves some costume jewelry pearls, a sand box, and a slide as well as the watering can and the strawberry plants. While four words are sufficient for my own purposes, a representation that would make sense to another person or to a computer takes up a third of a typed page. (See Table 4B.) Even that would mean little to someone who has not seen the footage and conveys only a fraction of what I remember about it.

Logging camera motion, pans, and zooms was particularly challenging. In professional filmmaking, these factors are usually carefully planned and what was done can therefore be accurately documented.[1] In home video, the camera might jiggle, pan a bit to the right, pan back to the left, and then start to move to follow the subject; the camera properties can be complex and difficult to document. How detailed the documentation should be is an open question.

To describe a segment from the footage of Alicia being born, I copied the entry from the previous segment about that event and modified it. The event, date, people present, source tape, and the like, frequently stayed the same.

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[1] Alan Lasky's "Slipstream" project studies continuity supervision, the process of keeping records during professional filmmaking. [Lasky 1990]

While this method saves time, it also leads to errors. For example, objects present in one segment are sometimes incorrectly listed as being in the next segment as well. From this experience, I refined my strategies for how a computer logging system could use defaults to save the user work.

The computer can help to lessen the amount of work required to log video through defaults, semantic inferences, and information derived from audio and video signal processing. Natalio Pincever's master's thesis addresses the issue of obtaining information from the audio signal [Pincever 91].

## Table 4B: An Excerpt from the Log of the Rough Cut

This is a short excerpt from the log of the rough cut. The complete log is 35 pages long and describes 2.5 hours of video taken from the original 12.5 hours.

**Time:**

25:10 Danielle and Baby Mickey

| | |
|---|---|
| People: | Danielle |
| In audio only: | Mari |
| Location: | Home: the kitchen |
| Objects: | Baby Mickey doll, infant seat |
| Camera: | Medium shot |
| Source Tape: | 9: Danielle being born |
| Rough Cut Tape: | 2 |

Mari narrates that Danielle is 2.5 months old.
Danielle plays with a Baby Mickey doll attached to her infant seat.
Mari comments that Danielle looks like the Gerber baby. Danielle smiles.

26:03 Alicia on the porch

| | |
|---|---|
| People: | Alicia |
| In audio only: | Mari |
| Location: | Home: the back porch |
| Objects: | Watering can, pearls, jungle gym, sandbox, strawberry plants |
| Camera: | Medium shot; zoom in and out |
| Source Tape: | 9: Danielle being born |
| Rough Cut Tape: | 2 |

Mari asks Alicia about her new pearls. Alicia denies having pearls on.
Mari asks Alicia to look down at her neck. Alicia says "oh yeah."
Camera pans to Alicia's sandbox and strawberries.
Alicia waters the strawberries.
Alicia climbs on the jungle gym. Zoom in on Alicia's face.
Alicia won't go down the slide because it's wet.

28:19 Curls

| | |
|---|---|
| Event: | Mother's Day 1989 |
| People: | Alicia, Danielle, Robert |
| In audio only: | Mari |
| Location: | Home: Robert & Mari's bedroom |
| When: | Mother's day 1989 |
| Objects: | A mirror, an infant seat |
| Source Tape: | 9: Danielle being born |
| Rough Cut Tape: | 2 |

Alicia shows off her hair, which has been curled for the first time.
Danielle is sitting in an infant seat on the floor.
Pan to follow Robert as he takes Alicia into the bathroom to see her hair in the mirror. Pan back to Danielle and zoom in.