



Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web

Rascaroli, Laura, Gwenda Young, and Barry Monahan, eds. *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 392 pages.

Book review by Enrique Fibla Gutiérrez

In an article originally published in 1998 and later reprinted in 2003, Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke recalls being asked by *Sight & Sound* about “the driving force for the development of films in the future,” to which he replied “the age of amateur cinema will return.”¹ Although his intervention is situated within the Chinese context and the popularization of mini-DV filmmaking, it does reflect upon a series of practical and theoretical developments regarding the democratization of filmmaking culture and the troubling of professional/non-professional boundaries it entails. It is in this context that *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web* intervenes, looking back and rescuing historically neglected amateur traditions, but also focusing on this current “return of the amateur” as a key component of today’s film and media environments.

Deemed unworthy of “serious” academic interest, amateur filmmaking has not received much scholarly attention until quite recently. The publication of Patricia Zimmermann’s *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (1995) changed this, slowly building an academic momentum, coupled with a growing interest in unofficial archives, preservation of orphan films, home movies and found footage work—epitomized by Rick Prelinger through his writing, films, and archivist role. Subsequent collections such as Efrén Cuevas’ *La Casa Abierta, el cine doméstico y sus reciclajes contemporáneos* (2010), and Karen I. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann’s *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (1998) have continued to reflect on non-professional filmmaking practices in

¹ The original article, “The age of the amateur will return” was published in Chinese for the book *Yigeren de yingxiang: DV wanquan shouce*, edited by Zhang Xianmin and Zhang Yaxuan (Beijing: China Youth Publishing, 2003). Yuqian Yan translated it for the digital magazine dGenerate Films.

Zhangke, Jia. “The Age of Amateur Cinema Will Return”. dGenerate Films. 3 March 2010. Web. 8 December 2014. <<http://dgeneratefilms.com/critical-essays/jia-zhangke-the-age-of-amateur-cinema-will-return>>.

relationship with micro-histories, memory, identity, and the construction of the filmic self. In 2010, for instance, Dr. Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes founded the “Amateur Cinema Studies Network” (ACSN), an open and transnational research collective and website (<http://amateurcinemastudies.org>) devoted to the study of amateur film.

In 2008, Laura Rascaroli, Barry Monahan, and Gwenda Young (of University College York), along with Kasandra O’Connell and Sunniva O’Flynn (of the Irish Film Institute) began a two-year collaborative project titled *Capturing the Nation: Irish Home Movies, 1930-1970*. The project’s goal was to recover Irish amateur movies from a period in which the lack of domestic professional film production resulted in a depiction of Irishness from the outside, mainly through the perspective of England and the United States. As part of the project, an international conference on amateur cinema was held in 2010—“Saving Private Reels”—from which the present collection stems.

As such, *Amateur Filmmaking* is certainly a widely varied and eclectic collection of articles, but also delightful in its discovery of a territory largely ignored by scholars until very recently. Indeed, the book’s table of contents reveals there is much to talk about and suggests many exciting and thought-provoking avenues for further research. But the varied nature of the collection does not mean that the book is a chaotic mixture, since the editors have divided the twenty-three articles into six chapters, each gravitating around a particular approach to amateur cinema: “Reframing the Home Movie”; “Private Reels, Historiographical Concerns”; “Nonfictional Recontextualizations”; “Amateur Auteur”; and “New Directions: The Digital Age”. Although each can be consulted separately, throughout all six there is a common aim to rescue amateur film from the outer margins of Film Studies, reworking established categories in the field such as ‘archives’, ‘national cinemas’, ‘circulation’, ‘vernacular’, ‘auteurism’, ‘the self’, ‘imperial visual culture’, and ‘micro-history’ among many others.

Take, for example, Liz Czach’s “Home Movies and Amateur Film as National Cinema”, in which she shows how non-professional films can become a national cinema in the absence of a strong professional film tradition (as in the case of Ireland, Wales and Luxemburg). Moreover, Czach points to the mistake of

acknowledging only professional film as official national film production—since it allows key cultural artifacts to slip into oblivion—and calls for scholars to devise methodologies and models that draw out the significance of these texts in innovative ways. Her claim resonates with Heather Norris Nicholson’s “Cinemas of Catastrophe and Continuity” in which she suggests that we approach amateur film as an under-recognized twentieth-century vernacular art form. Both articles involve a move from the scholarly consideration of amateur films as mere historical artifacts to an assessment that includes their aesthetic and affective qualities.

Given the young age of this new area of interest, a concern for finding adequate methodologies for the study of amateur film is consistent throughout the volume. Roger Odin uses a semio-pragmatic method, theorizing a “space of communication” created by home movies, both in their private viewing and subsequent public circulation. It is interesting to contrast this communicative approach with the negotiation of the self put forward in most of the articles dealing with the digital age and the amateur as auteur. This space of communication and the negotiation of the self leave aside the political and cultural economy of amateur film, which is the approach put forth in the closing chapter. These last three articles look at how amateur films can circulate as commodities, but also provide an alternative political economy for film. Despite these differing methodological approaches, all contributions consider amateur films worthy cultural and historical objects of study. In this, they follow the work of Giovanni Levi (2001) and Ranajit Guha (2003), among others, who approach microhistories as an alternative to hegemonic historiography.

Throughout the book, there is also an attempt to engage with what exactly “amateur film” is, and where to locate it in media histories. Without supplying a definitive answer to this question—which is certainly not the objective of the book—the different articles move between the private and public realms, considering in each step the wider social, political, and cultural inscriptions that amateur films carry with them. Indeed, in the first article, Roger Odin locates the place of amateur films—especially home movies—in the private and intimate space of the family, looking at what happens when they circulate through public channels such as TV shows and archives. In this vein, Maija Howe suggests a transmedia reading of amateur film as a mass cultural phenomenon, linking it with the previous tradition of snapshot

photography. Her article links the amateur gesture to issues of travel, leisure, and the impulse to capture the “everyday”, as in Mark Neumann’s piece on the Jackson family’s road trip films.

But this relationship between amateur film and leisure can hide much deeper socio-political considerations, as in Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes’ exploration of “uncensored” British imperial politics in home movies made by colonists in India. When analyzed closely, apparently trivial films of excursions and gatherings reveal troubling logics of exclusion/inclusion. These logics also appear in Janna Jones’s analysis of Tad Nichols’ film *Navajo Rug Weaving* (1939), in which a close personal relationship between white and Indian neighbors disappears when the latter become filmic objects of the former.

Moving beyond the private realm, chapter four, “Amateur Auteur”, considers amateur films that inhabit the margins of professional film, produced with very little means by authorial figures such as Joseph Morder or Peter Forgács. Continuing this move towards the public sphere, the last section analyzes the status of amateur films in the current media-pervasive societies, exploring the increasing reuse of archival material (Patricia R. Zimmermann and Susan Aasman), the negotiation of the self (Tianqi Yu), and the commoditization of private life through profitable Youtube videos and viral pranks (Lauren S. Berliner and Abigail Keating). The collection ends with Max Schleser, who brings our attention to the possibilities of amateur film as an alternative cultural production system in the 2.0 age of user-based histories and mobile media. This statement certainly resonates with Jia Zhangke’s prediction of a “return of the amateur film”, urging scholars to direct their attention towards emergent non-professional media ecosystems.

Indeed, the recent explosion of multiple non-professional technologies of expression, distribution and exhibition—digital cameras, phones, editing software, Youtube, social media and sharing platforms, mobile apps such as Instagram, etc—calls for further engagement with the figure of the amateur. But it is important to remember that this is a “return”, not a new phenomenon. This is precisely the biggest virtue of *Amateur Filmmaking*; to look into the future of amateur film by looking back first,

highlighting what scholars have missed until very recently, and tracing from there new avenues of research.

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