



Global Perspectives on Amateur Film Histories and Cultures

ed. by Masha Salazkina and Enrique Fibla-Gutiérrez

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After having edited, in 2018, the Spring issue of *Film History* entitled 'Towards a Global History of Amateur Film Practices and Institutions', Masha Salazkina and Enrique Fibla expand their research on amateur cinema with this substantial collection of essays, in which the term *global* returns. The declared objective of the volume is, indeed, the widening of the geographical scope of the scholarship on amateur cinema beyond the Western world (mainly Europe and the USA, such as in the pioneering works of Roger Odin and Patricia Zimmermann) and beyond the bourgeois environment, to include non-Western and unconventional practices, from China to Venezuela, from Tunisia to the stateless Yiddish community.

The opening essay — written by Benoît Turquety, who has recently devoted pivotal studies to small-gauge cinema — provides a solid theoretical foundation by considering the amateur as the *true subject* of film history, and focusing not so much on single inventors as on the multifarious ways of using small-gauge technologies (and not only: there is also a way to use standard gauge as amateurs, as demonstrated in the second essay of the volume, referring to a 35mm film made for an amateur competition, that was never shipped).

However, this proposal does not result in a

mere hierarchical overturning 'from the center to the margins', which would run the risk of forcing amateur cinema to be considered as a mainstream, rather than minor, phenomenon. Following the methodology of media archaeology, the volume invites us instead to deviate from a linear historical development, in order to shed light to the dead ends of film history (for example the utopian and unsuccessful attempt to institutionalize amateur cinema in Vichy France), to the even heretical forms of appropriation of technology (for example, repurposing the amateur media infrastructure by activists in the political environment of Bologna's social movements in the late 1980s and early 1990s) and, more generally, to the continuities in the viewing experience instead of the breaking points (e.g., the same representations of travel recur across decades). To this end, it is essential, as many of the authors of the essays collected here do, to broaden the range of sources and also include oral testimonies, newspapers, booklets, and the underground press.

The plural adopted in the book title — *Histories and Cultures* — signals the heterogeneity of the historical and geopolitical contexts of the practices under analysis. Indeed, the volume focuses mainly on economic, political and cultural issues in relation to amateur cinema,

without, however, neglecting technological aspects (for example, the transition from film to video is also a transition from analog destructive editing processes to a nonlinear and nondestructive editing; the weight of the U-Matic equipment had an impact on the mobility of the amateur filmmaker; the commercialization of Kodak's synchronized Super8 cartridge in 1973 eliminated the need for separate sound recording equipment). The case studies under consideration can in fact be arranged on an ideal continuum between two poles. At one end there is the peak of normativity: amateur cinema is conceived as 'an extension of the apparatus of state power and regulation' (p. 97), a practice that confirms hegemonic modes of production and consumption, which are subjected to direct institutional control. This is the case, for example, of the small-gauge films made in the corporate culture of Sulzer factory in Switzerland, or of Israeli commemorative home videos endorsed by the state itself. At the polar opposite, amateur cinema is instead conceived and used as a radical alternative to dominant power and hierarchies, as a countercultural and subversive agent of self-representation. This is the case, for example, for the activist orientation of one of Detroit's amateur film cultures in the 1960s or of the Mexican *superocheros* movement of the 1970s.

Most of the case studies collected here, however, are located not at the extremes but in the central area of this ideal continuum that stretches between norm and subversion, in that 'neither / nor status [...] beyond center-and-periphery binaries' (p. 55), 'supplementing already existent amateur film forms and practices rather than supplanting it' (p. 73), and, in so doing, challenging historical and cultural classifications. An example of an intermediate position between the purely oppositional and the purely cooperative-collaborative, in relation to power, can be seen in the essay on Latvia (annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, the country obtained independence in 1991): the corpus of

amateur documentary films of the late Soviet era on the ethnic Latvians of Siberia, analysed in chapter 13, challenges the political institutions of the Soviet Union not openly but *from within*, thanks to the minor status of amateur cinema as compared to professional cinema and also thanks to the peripheral position of this national minority. This nuanced and complex relationship with the socio-political context is just one among the many other occurrences that the volume enlightens.

One of the most striking pieces of evidence of the breadth of the meanings of amateur, which runs through the entire collection like a common thread, is the lexical choice to define texts and practices: different words are needed to illuminate different elements of amateur cinema. For example, while the adjective amateur had a certain stigma in the debate on American experimental cinema of the 1930s, in the 1960s an underground author like Jonas Mekas was proud to call himself amateur. Or, preserving the space between film and maker (film maker instead of filmmaker or film-maker) aims to point not to an already codified profession, but to an artisanal practice in which it is the gesture of construction, of manufacturing, rather than the finished product (the making, rather than the film) that is to be emphasized. In some cases, the term independent rather than amateur is preferred (chapter 4); when amateur is used as a noun, it is also frequently made even more specific, in expressions such as 'advanced amateur' or 'expert amateur' (or 'serious leisure'), culminating in significantly long and clumsy phrases ('amateur-though-progressively professionalizing quality of the [...] work', p. 159). Similarly, as the last essay demonstrates, the term vernacular functions in several registers and it suits even substandard cinema very well.

The category of the amateur throughout the book also crosses the three steps of the traditional theatrical production chain: alongside an amateur production mode, there are also an *amateur distribution mode* and an *amateur*

exhibition mode, for instance in occupied university classrooms; in neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood tours of screenings as opportunities for conversation (this happened in Santa Fe); in participatory and performative gatherings like the Galician Xornadas do Cine, where the boundaries between amateur and professional were negotiated. According to Vivian Sobchack's proposal, it is even possible to trigger an *amateur reception mode*, which is placed not in the film itself, but in the spectator's viewing experience: when the 'home movie attitude' is adopted, 'any type of film can be experienced as a home movie' (p. 125). The amateur mode, finally, can also be applied to the pre-production of a film, as in the case of the *fotodocumentales*, inherited from Neorealist *foto-documentario* as an informal teaching tool. In this case — paraphrasing the famous phrase on Neorealism — amateur is a moral attitude more

than a cinematographic style, insofar as the term indicates a provisional stage in the elaboration of an idea, a visual research project and a social investigation that are still in progress.

What all the essays gathered in the volume share is, ultimately, the recovery of the etymological meaning of the term amateur, with its reference to the Latin root *amare*, to love (even the term 'enthusiast' bursts out on many pages): as Erik Kessels and Patrice Flichy — the former is a Dutch artist, designer and curator whose target are creative professionals; the latter is the well-known French sociologist — suggest in two recent small books,¹ it is necessary, in spite of the rhetoric of hyper-specialization, to interpret the enthusiasm and the lightness of the amateur not as starting points, but as goals to be achieved. One suspects that continuing to call them amateurs is no longer enough.

Elena Gipponi
[Università IULM, Milano]

Notes

¹ Erik Kessels, *Complete Amateur. A Pro's Guide to Become More Amateur* (Milan: Corraini, 2022) and Patrice Flichy, *La sacre de l'amateur. Sociologie des passions ordinaires à l'ère numérique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil et La République des Idées, 2010).