Beyond Place: Rethinking British Amateur Films through Gender and Technology-based Perspectives

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In 1934, *The IAC Bulletin* – the official journal of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC) – made the following declaration in relation to amateur productions:

> The serious worker believes that if a technically correct result is wedded to a careful arrangement of the material, and treated with some thought regarding sequence of shots a film will be vastly more interesting than if it had been blown together as if by accident.[1]

As Francis Dyson has argued, amateur filmmakers of the 1930s saw the word 'serious' as a way to 'differentiate between the type of practice that incorporated proficient technical skills as well as an understanding of the narrative codes of cinema with other uncontrolled, unskilled forms of film-making.'[2] For Ryan Shand, British amateur journals such as *The IAC Bulletin* and *Amateur Cine World* were therefore 'heavily involved in the active creation of an amateur film aesthetic… [that was] both parasitic upon professional practices *and* innovative toward amateur practices at one and the same time.'[3] Between the pages of these journals and in the experimentation of the filmmakers who related to those journals (as either

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[1] Anonymous, 'The Serious Worker', *The IAC Bulletin* (January 1934), pp. 41.
[2] Francis Dyson, 'Challenging assumptions about amateur film of the inter-war years: Ace Movies and the first generation of London based cine-clubs', Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of East Anglia (2012), p. 26.
[3] Ryan Shand, 'Theorizing amateur cinema: limitations and possibilities', *The Moving Image*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2008), p. 54.

contributors or readers) there is a clear push away from a model of amateur film based on travelogues, home movies, or documentary approaches towards a 'serious' engagement with fictional forms, often based around genre.

That focus on the amateur's technical skills and proficiency in genre and narrative has not always been the prevalent focus in academic work on the amateur film. Whereas amateur filmmakers would regularly experiment with aesthetic techniques, employing their own ideas and innovations, and sharing those with the community, a popular and academic approach to the amateur film has foregrounded 'the influence of evidential perspectives.'[4] This stresses the content of visual records of local or national culture through the capturing of specific events or locations, rather than the more fictional and genre-based work of the 'serious' amateur.[5] Our concern here is not to reduce the importance of the amateur travelogue or documentary modes, given one U.S. study of American amateur journals has demonstrated these remained dominant.[6] Instead, we want to argue that such dominance has arisen in part from institutional practice, not least through the division of film archives into local or regional centres, with a remit to preserve media that is located within that geographical space. In Britain, archive digitisation initiatives and screening programmes regularly tie amateur productions to issues of place and space: a recent example is the British Film Institute (BFI) 'Unlocking Film Heritage' programme. While it clearly offered an important boost to the digitisation of amateur films within regional collections, the main gateway for much of that digitised material was through the BFI's 'Britain on Film' strand, which has continually

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[4] Shand 'Theorizing amateur cinema', p. 55.
[5] Ryan Shand, 'Introduction: Ambitions and Arguments – Exploring Amateur Cinema Through Fiction', in Ryan Shand and Ian Craven (eds.) *Small Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 14.
[6] Alan D. Kattelle, "The Amateur Cinema League and Its Films," *Film History* 15, no. 2 (2003), p. 238-251.

stressed the rediscovery of local and regional footage as a key element of its programming.[7] We would propose here that this has led to a situation where more experimental, genre-focused and less locally relevant material may not be prioritised for digitisation or exhibition within the archives. With the majority of such films remaining inside the archive, often with only one original invaluable viewing copy accessible, there is less chance of the casual viewer or the academic researcher understanding the fuller range and aesthetic content of amateur film work.

What we are suggesting in this article, then, is that this bias towards the claimed evidentiary nature of amateur film does not fully represent what many amateur filmmakers were doing in terms of aesthetic experimentation or genre-based practice. We are not advocating to overthrow the local/regional nature of amateur archive work, but to build on recent work that demonstrates there is a parallel world of amateur production that contains equally rich and compelling perspectives on these 'serious' amateurs.[8] In particular, we want to outline the findings of two recent projects at the University of East Anglia (UEA) that moved away from the traditional stress on place-making to consider different production practices, technological choices, and aesthetic approaches within amateur film production. These projects, 'Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain' (hereafter WAF) and 'The Eastmancolor Revolution and British Cinema, 1955-85' (hereafter ECR) are part of a broader push to recalibrate amateur film production in relation to other areas within film and cultural history.[9]

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[7] BFI (n.d.) 'Britain on Film', http://www.bfi.org.uk/britain-on-film (accessed 11 September 2016)

[8] Francis Dyson, 'Challenging Assumptions'; Heather Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927-77* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Shand and Craven, *Small Gauge Storytelling*; Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Moviemaking* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

[9] Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927-77*, p. 240.

The projects offer different viewpoints on amateur film productions, yet share significant overlaps in collections, archive sources, and partnerships. Although developed two years apart (WAF began in 2014, ECR in 2016) both projects involved close collaboration between the University of East Anglia (UEA), the staff at the East Anglian Film Archive (EAFA) and members of the IAC. WAF was inspired by feminist research interests at the UEA, particularly the desire to position 'women as differentiated industrial workers and [to] accept the legacy of their fight.'[10] Through a cataloguing project funded by the National Archives' National Cataloguing Grants Programme for Archives, and digitisation funding from the IAC and the John & Joy Chittock Fund, this research identified 142 films by women filmmakers within the wider IAC collection.[11] The intention here was political and aesthetic in nature: to combat the doubly negated and invisible categories of 'women filmmaker' (here defined as producer, director, cinematographer, or writer) and 'amateur', but also to demonstrate the aesthetic skills of such women, and contribute to growing debates around the role of feminism in film archiving.[12] Re-evaluating the colour films was part of a larger project on the introduction of Eastmancolor to all aspects of British cinema, including British amateur colour films, and arose out of existing research interests and publications around colour and cinema.[13] The recent reappraisal of colour in filmmaking has coincided

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[10] Jane Gaines, 'Sad Songs of Nitrate: Women's Work in the Silent Film Archive', *Camera Obscura 66*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2007), pp. 176-177.

[11] Sarah Hill and Keith M. Johnston, 'Making Women Amateur Filmmakers Visible: Reclaiming Women's Work through the Film Archive', *Women's History Review* [forthcoming]

[12] Hill and Johnston, 'Making Women Amateur Filmmakers Visible'. For more on feminist film archives, see Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley, 'Is Archiving a Feminist Issue? Historical Research and the Past, Present, and Future of Television Studies', *Cinema Journal* vol. 47, no. 3 (2008), p. 152-158.

[13] Sarah Street, *Colour Films in Britain: The Negotiation of Innovation 1900-55* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Keith M. Johnston, ' "A Riot of all the Colours in the Rainbow": Ealing Studios in Colour', in Mark Duguid, Lee Freeman, Keith M. Johnston, and Melanie Williams (eds.), *Ealing Revisited* (London: BFI Palgrave, 2012), pp. 195-205; James Layton & David Pierce, *The Dawn of Technicolor, 1915-1935* (Rochester, NY: George Eastman House, 2015).

with the academic reassessment of amateur filmmaking, with the ECR project focused on the role of colour in amateur film from the mid-century on rather than the current emphasis on early and silent amateur film.[14] In contrast to the WAF project, ECR had a much more limited digitisation budget, and less time, locating and digitising seven colour films from within the IAC collection. Both projects had to contend with the fact that significant research needed to be done to locate and identify suitable films from over a thousand titles, many of which had no in-depth assessment of the aesthetic content of the films or a full record of the production teams who had worked on them.

Before moving on, it is worth pausing to consider the nature of the IAC collection, and its role in shaping and defining aspects of both projects. Although not a perfect record of the amateur film movement within Britain, the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers collection is one of the largest single collections of amateur work, drawing together over seven decades of British and international production (including work from Japan, Europe, Australia, and the United States). The WAF and EC projects, like others before them, ended up focusing on 'prize-winners and national and international contests' because organisations such as the IAC undertook to create their own archive of winning films as both a repository of best practice and as a legacy for future cinematographers.[15] When the IAC collection was deposited at EAFA in 2006, the archive began a cataloguing process to deal with over a thousand new entries.[16] In common with what has been suggested already, UK regional

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[14] Kaveh Askari, 'Early 16mm colour by a career amateur', *Film History*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2009), pp. 150-163; Marsha Gordon, 'Lenticular spectacles: Kodacolor's fit in the amateur arsenal', *Film History*, vol. 25, no. 4, (2013), pp. 36-61; Norris Pope 'Kodachrome and the rise of 16mm professional film production in America, 1938-1950', *Film History*, vol. 28, no. 4, (2016), pp. 58-99.

[15] Ryan Shand, 'Introduction: Ambitions and Arguments – Exploring Amateur Cinema Through Fiction', in Ryan Shand and Ian Craven (eds.) *Small Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 7.

[16] Guy Edmonds, 'Historical, Aesthetic, Cultural: The Problematic Value of Amateur Cine Fiction', in Ryan Shand and Ian Craven (eds.), *Small Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 39.

archive workflows that emphasise 'gauge, running time, subject matter and production locale' within cataloguing or metadata work have been claimed to overlook broader questions of 'aesthetic articulation.'[17] Because the IAC collection was not accessioned in response to questions of regional location or place, the interrogation of those films had to be undertaken in different ways such as those offered by the WAF and EC projects.

While digitisation projects focusing upon individual filmmakers or specific regions arguably allows for easier identification of specific titles, the broader remit of the WAF and ECR projects required significant further research in order to avoid running hours of, often irreplaceable, material through the film viewer. As the majority of films included in the IAC collection were often winning entrants at the annual amateur film competitions, research focused upon discussions of these award winners within *Amateur Cine World* and *Movie Maker* following their annual Ten Best competitions. This follows a similar approach taken by Alan D. Katelle to the US *Amateur Movie Makers* journal 'Ten Best' competition, which stresses the award-winning focus is a useful starting point to write key filmmakers and films 'into history for the first time.'[18] As with Katelle's work, where the pages of amateur journals were often the only evidence available for these films, the WAF and ECR projects struggled with a scarcity of data when making selections. A large percentage of the IAC collection is in colour due to the variety of colour processes that were available to the amateur filmmaker from the 1930s on, including a number of Ektachrome stocks, Kodacolor, Dufaycolor, Gevachrome, Fujichrome, Kodachrome and Eastman Colour. To make a selection within that range, the ECR project was partly aided by looking at winners of the Kodak Award for Best Colour Photography, first introduced to the competition in 1971. In the case of WAF,

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[17] Ian Craven, 'Sewell, Rose and the Aesthetics of Amateur Cine Fiction', in Ryan Shand and Ian Craven (eds.) *Small Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 56.
[18] Kattelle, 'The Amateur Cinema League', p. 243.

individual articles on award-winning films or filmmakers (as well as information gleaned

from the films themselves) would offer details that complicated authorship and production

histories, particularly around wife-and-husband teams such as Eunice and Eustace Alliot,

where existing records might only have listed Eustace as the sole filmmaker.[19]

  The difference in selection criteria for digitisation purposes for these projects was

driven largely by time and cost. The WAF collection of 142 films was fully digitised across

an 18 month period, while the ECR project had to reduce an initial shortlist of twenty-six

titles (highlighted specifically for their use of colour) down to seven. The WAF project was

also genre-neutral in its cataloguing and digitisation stages, in that its aim was to gather the

widest possible range of women filmmakers, whether that occurred across travelogue, home

movie, documentary, fiction or animation. In contrast, the ECR project had to carefully

consider which of the larger shortlist would demonstrate the creative uses of colour alongside

the various techniques, generic styles, and productions practices employed – not least any

perceived difference between Eastman Colour, Ektachrome and Kodachrome stocks.

  Beyond that stage of initial selection, the wear and tear of the prints became a key

concern. As the IAC collection is made up of films from their original hiring library, many of

which had seen repeated projection across the years, evaluating and gauging the aesthetic

intent of the amateur filmmaker from these well-worn film prints became a significant issue.

While there have been technological improvements that can correct some of this damage,

most digitisation projects undertaken by amateur film custodians are unable to invest the kind

of funds required to treat more severe problems, or at least to do so without significantly

altering the look of the film. Print inspection raised a familiar concern around colour fading –

just as important for the WAF project as ECR, given the presence of colour films by directors

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[19] EAFA, 'TNA Project: Cataloguing of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers Women Film-Makers Films', http://www.eafa.org.uk/documents/TNA-Project_Women-Filmmakers_Research-Guide_pm-31-7.pdf, p. 2. [accessed 5 July 2018]

Mollie Butler, Marjorie Martin, or animators Sheila Graber and Joanna Fryer. In most cases, we were working with direct prints taken from the original reversal masters made on a variety of print stocks, some of which (including earlier Eastman Colour) were more susceptible to fading. As no further reference copies for the faded films were available within the collection, the decision was made not to attempt to correct the image digitally. In the case of the ECR project, specifically, the aim was to highlight the creative use of colour. It seemed inappropriate, therefore, to attempt to recreate the look of the original image without the input of the filmmaker or access to a good quality reference print. Further research would be needed to create a more 'accurate' representation of the original image.

Both projects identified films produced under different industrial conditions, normally by lone workers or groups at cine-clubs. For ECR, where colour aesthetics and techniques were most prominent, this industrial context was helpful in understanding how reviews and discussions around the 'Ten Best' competitions had an impact on the development of the much-mooted 'serious' amateur aesthetic.[20] This was often passed on to the reader through articles written by the filmmakers themselves who shared the techniques employed whilst working on their films. A specific finding of the WAF project was identifying three particular industrial structures: the wife-husband partnership, the lone worker, and the cine-club partnerships. Women were identified as a market for cine equipment in early advertisements, constructing them 'as hobbyists' alongside important projection technologies such as 'self-erecting screens' and 'Ampro sound projector', but not suggesting specific creative roles or licence.[21] The WAF project revealed further details about married creative partnerships,

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[20] This competition was inaugurated by *Amateur Cine World* in 1936 with a judging panel comprising John Grierson, Andrew Buchanan, Oliver Bell of the BFI, Norman Jenkins of IAC, and *ACW* editor Gordon Malthouse.

[21] Matthew Kerry, 'Representations of the family in postwar British amateur film: family histories in the Lane and Scrutton collection at the East Anglian Film Archive', *The History of the Family*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2016), p. 235.

many of whom collaborated on more traditional domestic or travelogue productions; and cine-club work, including the all-woman production *Sally Sallies Forth* (Frances Lascot, 1929), or the work of Marion Hobbs and Jeane Horne for *The Sound of Cine* (1971).[22] Along with lone workers, many of whom worked in animation, the work of these women filmmakers (and their treatment as serious filmmakers in amateur journals) can be seen as partial evidence of a 'long history of democratisation' in the amateur movement, but also underlines the continued 'problems that women had to overcome in male dominated production environments', even the more democratised amateur ones[23] Over the course of the seven decades covered by the WAF project, women do begin to feature more regularly in these discussions of the amateur aesthetic (including working with colour), with filmmakers such as Mollie Butler and Sheila Graber following in the tradition of Lascot and regularly discussing their animation and live action filming techniques.[24] Graber's career is emblematic here: she read the instructional guides featured in amateur journals that tried to mould aesthetic approaches, won multiple awards at the Ten Best competitions, and then through her contributions to those journals became a model to be emulated.

Although women filmmakers contributed more articles on filmmaking practice and technique as the 20th century wore on, specific technical debates on colour filmmaking found in the ECR project were almost exclusively a male practice. The development of colour cinematography by amateur filmmakers is often overlooked in film histories: early experiments with Kodacolor and Kodachrome in the 1930s occurred in parallel with the introduction of three-strip Technicolor to the mainstream industry, with colour on non-

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[22] Frances Lascot, 'My Very First Film', *Amateur Films* (December 1928), p. 75; Jean Horne and Marion Hobbs, 'Let's Make A Musical', *Movie Maker* (October 1971), pp. 638-40, 644.
[23] EAFA, 'TNA Project: Cataloguing of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers Women Film-Makers Films', p. 3.
[24] Mollie Butler 'A cartoon of note', *Amateur Film Maker*, June 1981, p. 11; Sheila Graber, 'Animation My Way', *Movie Maker*, December 1974, pp. 852-53.

standard gauges initially judged to be superior quality to the professional Technicolor.[25]

Colour was far more viable for amateur film productions than sound on film, with colour film

stocks seemingly 'made for amateur experimentation.'[26] This early adoption meant amateur

filmmakers were arguably more adept at using colour than the majority of professional

cinematographers (who were still working largely in black-and-white), particularly with

Kodachrome, which quickly became the standard amateur colour process. By 1955, 90% of

amateur films in the US were being shot on colour, with a similar demand reported in the UK

for 8mm users.[27] By 1958, the choice to film in monochrome was one of artistic preference

rather than cost.[28] However, even at this stage, colour film was linked specifically to home or

domestic use, described as capturing 'sunlight from the past', linked to the desire to capture

vivid (in terms of both colour and importance) life events.

The adoption of colour for the more dedicated, aesthetically minded and 'serious'

amateur production (as found in both WAF and ECR projects) was more complex,

particularly around the need for high quality shots, as distinguished from those that had been

'blown together as if by accident.'[29] A 1958 *Amateur Cine World* article identified the

differences between a 'family film maker' and a 'creative film maker' as being around

appropriate technique, skill, and the problem of 'colour continuity':

how to ensure that there are no abrupt and disconcerting changes of the succeeding

scenes; how to ensure that background colour does not dominate foreground interest;

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[25] Pope, 'Kodachrome and the rise of 16mm', p. 61.
[26] Askari, 'Early 16mm colour', p. 157.
[27] Centre Sprocket [Pseud], 'The 9.5mm. reel', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1955), p. 60.
[28] Anon, 'Beginning with colour', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 21, no. 10 (1958), p. 994.
[29] Anonymous, 'The Serious Worker', pp. 41.

how to compose scenes of good colour harmony. How to use colour to create mood is the ultimate refinement of the problem'[30]

The negativity surrounding colour and the serious amateur (male or female) filmmaker coalesces around the potential for lack of control or technique. The perfection of colour is seen to come after a 'brief honeymoon period when they [the creative amateur] cram their shots with colour'; this is contrasted with the majority of films submitted to *Amateur Cine World* for the Ten Best competition, where the quality of 'colour technique is good enough.'[31] Again, the emphasis here is on learning and technique, with amateur journals such as *Amateur Cine World* offering 'how to' guides and suggestions for the appropriate use of colour for the 'serious' amateur.

A key place where the control of colour is most evident is around amateur genre fiction film. Colour was used in films that used generic elements from comedy, drama, fantasy, horror, melodrama, and science fiction (as well as experimental and art films, documentary and travelogue), with many featuring in the work of women filmmakers identified by the WAF project. It is another place where the two projects most closely align: Mollie Butler's *A Game for Three* (1977), for example, combines naturalistic colour in its domestic scenes with forest scenes imbued with strong green tones; Sharon Gadson's *Freak* (1988) relies on colour to emphasise the transformation of school girl into punk fan; while Marjorie Martin's *The Stray* (1965) opts for a gloomier colour palette, with striking colour used in set dressing and costume, partly to differentiate the difference between the returning woman (who has been away to the city) and the rural martial home.

[30] Anon, 'Beginning with colour', p. 994.
[31] Anon, 'Beginning with colour', p. 994.

The ECR amateur fiction films demonstrate interesting application of colour across genres: Gerald Wills' *Nebelung* (1976) contrasts the plain backgrounds of the schoolteacher's classroom with the bright orange glow of the setting sun during the fantasy sequence of a boy at play on the beach; the combination of natural lighting and period costumes in Keith Pollard's period-thriller *Where the Woodbine Twineth* (1984) offers an ethereal quality lending itself to the supernatural elements in the film; while in his ode to science-fiction monster movies, Roy Spence's *Specimens* (1983) employs vivid whites and dazzling electronic lights for the alien space craft, while metallic greys and neon-red lightning effects are used for the creature from space.

Animation is key to films across both projects, another place where specific 'serious' technical and creative skills were on display, and debated in the amateur journals. Digitised films reveal different approaches to stop-motion, cel and hand-drawn animation: from the looser hand-drawn woman dreaming of potential suitors in *Make-up* (Joanna Fryer, 1978), through the animated animals in Sheila Graber's *The Cat and the Tune* (1977) or *Be a Good Neighbour* (1978), to the stop motion puppets of *The Burglar* (Tara Fletcher, 1984). In the more experimental colour films of the ECR project, techniques such as back-winding, time-lapse, and repeat exposures are on display. In his experimental short *The Magic Sea* (1979), Ron Chapman exposed each shot of Marsden Bay, South Shields, three times through red, green, and blue filters, backwinding the film in the camera for each pass whilst maintaining a fixed camera position. Using this method, moving objects such as waves, seagulls and clouds show tricolour effects, providing a blend of psychedelic colour against natural backgrounds. Double and triple exposures were also employed in *Specimens* for the addition of colourful laser effects and shots of the actors interacting with the creature from space which towers above them. Taken together, then, these displays of 'serious' amateur technical expertise and skills are clearly just as important to the women filmmakers as their male counterparts.

Conclusion

Focusing on the experimental and genre-based films found in collections such as the IAC library held at EAFA offers an alternative view of amateur productions to commonly held perceptions that emphasise the importance of period and place. While the evidentiary approach played a key role in highlighting the significance of the work of the amateur filmmaker, this has also restricted broader understandings of 'amateur' to a specific type of film: one that risks excluding the genre and experimental films of the 'serious' amateur. As articles published in journals such as *Amateur Cine World* and *Movie Maker* demonstrate, these genre films played a key role in shaping the amateur aesthetic, particularly during the annual competitions where discussions and critiques of these films served as guidelines for readers looking to develop their own style of filmmaking.

Further research into the aesthetics of amateur filmmaking is required in order to improve upon our understanding of the amateur community: projects such as WAF and ECR offer just two examples of how alternative approaches to digitisation and analysis reveal more about the filmmakers themselves and the technical and creative choices they made. As we have demonstrated here, the impact of the work of the amateur filmmaker also reached far beyond their own community, with their experiments using early colour stock being recognised as key to advancements in the application of colour cinematography. Working towards an improved comprehension of this community-inspired aesthetic contributes to a necessary intervention within studies of amateur filmmaking, challenging established ideologies relating to both the amateur and professional industries.