

# 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 – 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.<sup>1</sup>

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’.<sup>2</sup> 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’.<sup>3</sup> Between the pages of these journals and in the experimentation of the filmmakers who related to them (either as contributors or readers) there is a clear push away from a model of amateur film based on travelogues, home movies or documentary approaches and towards a ‘serious’ engagement with fictional forms, often based around genre.

<sup>1</sup> ‘The serious worker’, *The IAC Bulletin*, January 1934, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Dyson, ‘Challenging assumptions about amateur film of the inter-war years: Ace Movies and the first generation of London based cine-clubs’ (PhD Dissertation: University of East Anglia, 2012), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Shand, ‘Theorizing amateur cinema: limitations and possibilities’, *The Moving Image*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2008), p. 54.

4 Ibid., 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*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2003), p. 238–51.

7 BFI, 'Britain on Film', <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/britain-on-film>> accessed 21 November 2019.

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

That emphasis on the amateur's technical skills and proficiency in genre and narrative has not always been the prevalent focus in academic work on 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 amateur film has foregrounded 'the influence of evidential perspectives'.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Our concern here is not to question the importance of the amateur travelogue or documentary modes, given that one US study of American amateur journals has demonstrated how these remained dominant.<sup>6</sup> Instead we would 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 digitization initiatives and screening programmes regularly tie amateur productions to issues of place and space: a recent example is the British Film Institute's 'Unlocking Film Heritage' programme. While this clearly offered an important boost to the digitization of amateur films within regional collections, the main gateway for much of that digitized material was through the BFI's 'Britain on Film' strand, which has continually stressed the rediscovery of local and regional footage as a key element of its programming.<sup>7</sup> This, we propose, has led to a situation where more experimental, genre-focused and less locally relevant material may not be prioritized for digitization 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. New digital techniques and digitization tools clearly offer the potential to address issues around materiality, space and place, but there is also a danger that they replicate those patterns rather than resolving them and introducing new perspectives.

What we are suggesting, 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.<sup>8</sup> In particular we want to outline the findings of two recent projects at the University of East Anglia (UEA), which 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, and to gauge the importance of new digital tools to exploring such collections.<sup>9</sup>

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 in 2014, ECR in 2016) both projects involve close collaboration between the 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’.<sup>10</sup> Through a cataloguing project funded by the National Archives’ National Cataloguing Grants Programme for Archives, and digitization funding from the IAC and the John & Joy Chittock Fund, this research identified 142 films by women filmmakers within the wider IAC collection.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 concerned with colour and cinema.<sup>13</sup> The recent reappraisal of colour in filmmaking has coincided 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.<sup>14</sup> Through this approach the ECR project shifts the focus away from the earlier adoption of colour processes towards the aesthetic choices made by the ‘serious’ amateur, which situates this work outside of the ‘point-and-shoot’ philosophy of the evidentiary-based amateur films. The significance of colour here is twofold. First, for amateur journals such as *Amateur Cine World*, the measured application of colour was fundamental to the construction of a ‘serious’ production and a clear indication of the aptitude of the filmmaker. Second, and most significantly, the introduction of Kodachrome in 1935 provided amateur filmmakers with good-quality colour images some thirty years before the feature film industry’s transition to full colour. The amateur aesthetic developed during this period is crucial to academic and archival understanding of amateur filmmaking practices: these films allow a partial representation of the influence of the mainstream industry upon the amateur, and vice versa. In contrast to the WAF project, ECR had a much more limited digitization budget and less available time for locating and digitizing seven colour films from within the IAC collection. Both projects had to contend with the fact that significant research was required to identify suitable films from over a thousand titles, many of

<sup>9</sup> Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film*, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Gaines, ‘Sad songs of nitrate: women’s work in the silent film archive’, *Camera Obscura*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2007), pp. 176–77.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Hill and Keith M. Johnston, ‘Making women amateur filmmakers visible: reclaiming women’s work through the film archive’, *Women’s History Review*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2020), doi: 10.1080/09612025.2019.1703541.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 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), pp. 152–58.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Street, *Colour Films in Britain: The Negotiation of Innovation 1900–55* (London: BFI Palgrave, 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 and David Pierce, *The Dawn of Technicolor, 1915–1935* (Rochester, NY: George Eastman House, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Kaveh Askari, ‘Early 16mm colour by a career amateur’, *Film History*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2009), pp. 150–63; 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 Shand, 'Introduction: ambitions and arguments', p. 7.
- 16 Guy Edmonds, 'Historical, aesthetic, cultural: the problematic value of amateur cine fiction', in Shand and Craven (eds), *Small Gauge Storytelling*, p. 39.
- 17 Ian Craven, 'Sewell, Rose and the aesthetics of amateur cine fiction', in Shand and Craven (eds), *Small Gauge Storytelling*, p. 56.
- 18 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.
- 19 Kattelle, 'The Amateur Cinema League', p. 243.

which had no in-depth assessment of the aesthetic content of the films or full records 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 IAC's 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 USA). The WAF and ECR projects, like others before them, ended up focusing on 'prize-winners and national and international contests' because organizations such as the IAC undertook to create their own archive of winning films as both a repository of best practice and a legacy for future cinematographers.<sup>15</sup> When the IAC collection was deposited at EAFA in 2006, the archive began a cataloguing process to deal with over a thousand new entries.<sup>16</sup> In common with what has been suggested already, UK regional archive workflows that emphasize 'gauge, running time, subject matter and production locale' within cataloguing or metadata work have been claimed by some to overlook broader questions of 'aesthetic articulation'.<sup>17</sup> 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 ECR projects.

While digitization projects focusing upon individual filmmakers or particular regions arguably allow 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 material, often irreplaceable, through the film viewer. As the majority of films included in the IAC collection were winning entries in annual amateur film competitions, research focused on discussions of these award winners within *Amateur Cine World* and *Movie Maker* following their annual 'Ten Best' competitions.<sup>18</sup> This is a similar approach to that taken by Alan D. Kattelle towards the US *Amateur Movie Makers* journal 'Ten Best' competition, which stresses that the award-winning focus is a useful starting point for writing key filmmakers and films 'into history for the first time'.<sup>19</sup> As with Kattelle'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, 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

20 EAFA, 'TNA Project: Cataloguing of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers women filmmakers films', July 2015, p. 2, <[http://www.eafa.org.uk/documents/TNA-Project\\_Women-Filmmakers\\_Research-Guide\\_pm-31-7.pdf](http://www.eafa.org.uk/documents/TNA-Project_Women-Filmmakers_Research-Guide_pm-31-7.pdf)> accessed 21 November 2019.

around wife-and-husband teams such as Eunice and Eustace Alliot, where existing records might have erroneously listed Eustace as the sole filmmaker.<sup>20</sup>

The difference in selection criteria for digitization purposes for these projects was driven largely by time and cost. The WAF collection of 142 films was fully digitized across an eighteen-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 digitization 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 considered which of the larger shortlist would demonstrate the creative uses of colour alongside the various techniques, generic styles and production practices employed – not least any perceived difference between Eastman Colour, Ektachrome and Kodachrome stocks.

Key considerations after that initial selection included the wear and tear of the prints, the debate around creating raw versus graded digitized scans, and the extent to which digital colour grading tools should be applied through the digitization process. 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 digitization projects undertaken by amateur film custodians do not have the kind of funds required to treat more severe problems, or at least to do so without significantly altering the look of the film. Digital scans of films have already opened up the possibility of repeat viewings while reducing concerns about causing further damage to master film materials. The introduction of tools such as a new digital film scanner at EAFA enabled the ECR project to create raw digital scans that allowed for the selection and aesthetic analysis of a wider range of film titles. Print inspection raised a familiar concern about colour fading – just as important for the WAF project as for ECR, given the presence of colour films by directors Mollie Butler, Marjorie Martin and Joanna Fryer. Both projects worked 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. In the specific case of the ECR project, digital tools were used to highlight the creative use of colour; yet this raised questions about maintaining the legacy of the surviving colour print, and the assumptions that have to be made when digitizing it. Despite the availability of digital tools for colour correction, we deemed it inappropriate to attempt to recreate the look of the original image without either the input of the filmmaker or access to a better-quality reference print (all existing reference copies were contained within the

- 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.
- 22 Frances Lascot, 'My very first film', *Amateur Films*, December 1928, p. 75; Jean Horne and Marion Hobbs, 'Let's make a musical', *Movie Makers*, October 1971, pp. 638–40, 644.
- 23 EAFA, 'TNA Project', p. 3.
- 24 Mollie Butler 'A cartoon of note', *Amateur Film Maker*, June 1981, p. 11; Sheila Graber, 'Animation my way', *Movie Makers*, December 1974, pp. 852–53.
- 25 Pope, 'Kodachrome and the rise of 16mm', p. 61.
- 26 Askari, 'Early 16mm colour', p. 157.

IAC collection). 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. A specific finding of the WAF project was identifying three particular industrial structures: the wife-and-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.<sup>21</sup> The WAF project revealed further details about married creative partnerships, many of whom collaborated on more traditional domestic or travelogue productions, and about cine-club work, including the all-woman production *Sally Sallies Forth* (Frances Lascot, 1929) or the work of Marion Hobbs and Jean Horne for *The Sound of Cine* (1971).<sup>22</sup> These women filmmakers, along with the lone workers who tended to work in animation, gradually came to be treated as serious filmmakers in amateur journals. This 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 democratized amateur ones.<sup>23</sup> Over the course of the seven decades covered by the WAF project, women began to feature more regularly in these discussions of the amateur aesthetic, with filmmakers such as Butler and Graber following in the tradition of Lascot and regularly discussing their animation and live-action filming techniques.<sup>24</sup> 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 emulate.

Although women filmmakers contributed more articles on filmmaking practice and technique as the twentieth 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-standard gauges initially judged to be superior quality to the professional Technicolor.<sup>25</sup> Colour was a far more viable option for amateur filmmakers than sound, with colour film stocks seemingly 'made for amateur experimentation'.<sup>26</sup> 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, ninety per cent of amateur films in the USA were being shot in colour, with a similar demand

- 27 Centre Sprocket [Pseud], 'The 9.5mm. reel', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1955), p. 60.
- 28 'Beginning with colour', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 21, no. 10 (1958), p. 994.
- 29 'Equipment materials technical developments services', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1954), p. 41.
- 30 'The serious worker', p. 41.
- 31 'Beginning with colour', p. 994.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 994.

reported in the UK for 8mm users.<sup>27</sup> By 1958, the choice to film in monochrome was one of artistic preference rather than cost.<sup>28</sup> Even at this stage, however, colour film was still linked specifically to home or domestic use, described as capturing 'sunlight from the past', a desire to capture vivid (in terms of both colour and importance) life events.<sup>29</sup>

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 when related to the need for high-quality shots, as distinguished from those that had been 'blown together as if by accident'.<sup>30</sup> The difference between a 'family film maker' and a 'creative film maker' was defined by 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; how to compose scenes of good colour harmony. How to use colour to create mood is the ultimate refinement of the problem.<sup>31</sup>

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 amateurs] 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'.<sup>32</sup> Again the emphasis here is on learning and technique, with journals such as *Amateur Cine World* offering 'how to' guides and suggestions for the appropriate use of colour for the 'serious' amateur.

The control of colour is most evident in amateur genre fiction film. Colour was used in films that drew on 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: Butler's *A Game for Three* (1977) combines naturalistic colour in its domestic scenes with forest scenes imbued with strong green tones; Sharon Gadson's *Freak* (1988) relies on colour to emphasize the transformation of schoolgirl into punk fan; while Marjorie Martin's *The Stray* (1965) opts for a gloomier palette, with the striking colour used in set-dressing and costume working to differentiate between a returning woman and the rural marital home.

The ECR amateur fiction films demonstrate interesting application of colour across genres: Gerald Wills's *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. Digitized films reveal different approaches to stop-motion and hand-drawn animation: from the looser hand-drawn woman dreaming of potential suitors in Fryer's *Make-up* (1978), through the animated animals in Graber's *The Cat and the Tune* (1977) or *Be a Good Neighbour* (1978), to the stop-motion puppets of Tara Fletcher's *The Burglar* (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 respectively, back-winding the film in the camera for each pass while 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 Spence's *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 female filmmakers as their male counterparts.

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 those commonly held perceptions that emphasize 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 Makers* demonstrate, these genre films were crucial to 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 deepen our understanding of the amateur community: projects such as WAF and ECR offer just two examples of how alternative approaches to digitization and analysis reveal more about the filmmakers themselves and the technical and creative choices they made. This



collaboration – between two research projects, a film archive and a third-party organization such as the IAC – bore fruit in the sharing of different historical, archival and practical research expertise. The increase in digital scanning capability alone has meant that raw digital scans could be utilized by the ECR project to improve selection and increase research access: a real opportunity to explore collections in more depth. As we have shown, the impact of the work of amateur filmmakers reaches far beyond their own community. It is important that amateur experiments with early colour stock are written into the bigger story of colour cinematography within film history, while female amateur filmmakers offer a compelling parallel to the invisibility within other gendered work in the creative industries. In both cases, an improved understanding of the community-inspired aesthetic that underpins amateur filmmaking, and the community of academics, archivists and external partners that can come together to tell those stories, offer a challenge to established histories and ideologies within the amateur and professional industries.

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