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Introduction: Toward a Global History of Amateur Film Practices and Institutions

In 2003, *Film History* published a special issue entitled “Small-Gauge and Amateur Film” (vol. 15, no. 2, edited by Melinda Stone and Dan Streible).¹ It proved to be a watershed moment for amateur-cinema scholarship, signaling its entry into academically legitimate discourses on film history. It was an overdue response to the questions posed by Patricia Zimmerman in a 1988 article in the same journal: What is the significance of analyzing amateur film? What does its history illuminate?² The issue provided multiple answers, exploring the institutionalization of amateur film in the US and UK, its relationship with experimental cinema in North America and Mexico, and the role of archivists in preserving this neglected area of film history. The special issue we present here—fifteen years later and in the same journal—is intended to signal a dialogue with this legacy, as well as engage with more recent work on amateur film, thereby providing further and more varied answers to these questions by drawing from a broader range of geopolitical contexts.

When Patricia Zimmermann’s seminal *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (1995) and the later coedited collection, with Karen Ishizuka, *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (2008), established the foundations of scholarly work on amateur cinema as a distinct form of film culture, its primary focus was on the domestic space and the Western nuclear family.³ While this was an important and groundbreaking area of exploration, amateur-cinema scholars have since taken Zimmerman’s foundational work into a variety of realms that extend beyond the home.⁴ By doing this, amateur-film scholarship formed part of a larger shift within film history, significantly opening up the field in terms of its objects of study. It is worth briefly examining this broader scholarly context in order to assess the role amateur-film history plays in the reconsideration of the contours of film historiography.
THE USEFUL CINEMA TURN

In recent years, film-studies scholarship has popularized concepts such as *useful cinema*, *nontheatrical*, *orphan*, *industrial*, or—more simply—*noncommercial* to analyze the social, political, and cultural relevance of the medium beyond commercial cinema with theatrical exhibition. As Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson mention, this “necessary reorientation of the questions we ask of our film and media history” has opened innumerable avenues for research, introducing into academic discourse experiences and materials previously overlooked. Scholars have begun to reconstruct the powerful effects that these various cinematic practices had on the way modern life was experienced and imagined in the first decades of the twentieth century and beyond. These studies include, for instance, the documentation and analysis of the efforts by colonial authorities to discipline the colonized, the circulation of radical political imaginaries through informal networks of exhibition, the intersection of different educational initiatives and cinema, the use of film in the industrial environment, and the crossover between amateur and professional practices since the first decades of film history.

How can we describe these experiences, and how do they engage with the narrative of film history as we know it? As Thomas Elsaesser aptly concludes, when examining this corpus of nonfiction films, it is “advisable to suspend all pre-existing categorizations.” In other words, previous scholarly approaches don’t work well when applied to this particular history of moving images since they were based on entirely different historical paradigms. Elsaesser himself, in reference to industrial films, specifically suggests asking three questions when approaching such materials: who commissioned the films, what occasion were they made for, and to what use were they put? His approach considers the broader social, cultural, and institutional factors behind the production and circulation of such audiovisual works.

The importance of adopting this expanded understanding of the medium cannot be understated. It helps us see how the assumption that film was largely either a monetary business in search of impressionable audiences or else an aesthetic pursuit for the artistic elites has in effect obscured the rich history of cinema’s other functions. Institutions beyond production companies, motivations beyond purely commercial reasons or aesthetic pursuits, and uses of film beyond entertainment begin to draw a different—and more complex—picture of the role moving images played throughout the twentieth century and beyond. This new understanding of our objects of study allows us to focus on issues of civic engagement, education, everyday media practices, or political dissent and state control without abandoning questions of aesthetic experience.
or authorship; instead, we bring these questions into the broader spheres of cultural and social life.

Moving beyond the paradigm of industry-dominated national cinematic histories—and taking a broader view of what constituted film culture in the twentieth century—the history of amateur (and its intersections with industrial, militant, or educational) film practices around the world has a distinct historical dimension; moreover, the technical, social, and economic factors that marked their emergence and development did so in ways that sometimes overlap and at other times diverge from that of commercial cinema. The liminal position of amateur-film culture and its consequent diffusion in diverse cultural spaces—as well as the active relationship it establishes between citizens and media through consumer technology—are important points from which to rethink the history of the medium and foreground the formative role of the regimes of sociality and community that underlie such endeavors.

Reconsiderations of film history through amateur cinemas necessarily include not only production but also distribution, circulation, and exhibition. As part of the spatial turn in film and media studies, one of the more productive approaches to this shifting terrain has been to focus on screening locations beyond commercial theatrical exhibition. This includes classrooms, museums, military facilities, film societies, city squares, houses, churches, small cinemas, and libraries. Such an expanded understanding of the cinematic apparatus—which, as Haidee Wasson reminds us, was assumed as a stable “cinematic ideal” composed of a “large and dark room, celluloid, projector, screen, seated audience”—brings this history closer to our contemporary reality of media’s permeation of everyday life.

Thus, although we share many of the questions originally posed by Zimmerman, Stone, and Streible, our conception of what constitutes amateur cinema is broadened by these recent scholarly debates on noncommercial cinema and necessarily further expanded by the global reach of the issue. The spaces, networks, and institutions of amateur cinema, as the historical case studies taken from different parts of the world demonstrate here, often intersected with a range of other media practices, constituting a shared field with experimental productions, forms of political activism, and educational media. Our understanding of the distinctiveness of this phenomenon understood largely as a mode of production is further challenged by different models of the relationship between production and consumption of cinema presented here. This special issue includes essays that make use of such expanded approaches to what constitutes amateur media (Blake Atwood, Andrea Mariani, Sonja Simonyi) while still engaging with the more familiar coordinates of amateur-film culture such as cinephilia, film clubs, journals, and contests, which characterize the focus
of the other works included here (Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez, Lila Foster, Charles Tepperman). Together they mobilize a more dynamic understanding of amateur cinema as a way to remap the discipline’s epistemological and historical borders by redefining not only what cinema is but how and where it happened.

The study of amateur cinema also poses its own unique methodological challenges. The creation and circulation of nonprofessional filmmaking—with its own circuits of production, distribution, and exhibition—has always been much more informal, deregulated, and spontaneous than the professional film industry. This also means that its material history is quite difficult to trace, although the work of scholars and archivists in the last few decades has made research on the topic much easier. As scholars typically lament, archiving amateur cinema is a constant struggle in a climate lacking funding—especially given the sparse information provided when materials are donated. Amateur films arrive in such quantities that archivists can’t possibly digitize and properly catalogue all of them. However, archives and scholars are devising ways to meet such pressing needs.

The problems faced by archives can be seen as an unintended consequence of the progressive democratization of nonprofessional moving-image technology, reaching a level of ubiquity that 1930s pioneers could only have dreamed about. However, this issue stops its historical trajectory with analog video, having established a genealogy of vernacular film practices that we think greatly informs the explosion of amateur media in the last few decades. Such contemporary phenomena as the global reach of YouTube, the popularization of mini-DV and other consumer-level cameras as filmmaking devices around the world, the role of citizen media in the cycle of protests triggered by the 2008 financial crisis, the Arab Spring’s use of informal recordings, and the growing importance of institutional backchannels and user-generated content signal a critical moment in the relationship between professional and nonprofessional media. That, in turn, necessitates a look back to better understand the historical trajectories that shaped this global present.

AMATEUR CINEMA IN PERSPECTIVE

As Charles Tepperman states in his recent overview of the emergence of amateur filmmaking culture in North America, “beyond the boundaries of the institutions of high art and mass commercial culture there exists an enormous unmapped terrain for creative works.” His research, alongside that of scholars such as Jan Christopher Horak and Alan Kattelle (among others), has charted—in the Anglo-Western context—a “twentieth-century vernacular aesthetic expression that developed at the intersection of popular culture, modernism, and new technology.” As Ryan Shand and Ian Craven mention in their
recent edited collection *Small-Gauge Storytelling* (2013), this vernacular culture not only documented a particular historical time through its films but also constituted a storytelling device in its own right across the globe. For example, Heather Norris Nicholson—taking the other side of the Iron Curtain as her point of departure—has shown how British amateur travel films depicting journeys to the USSR reflect the mediated global imaginaries at play outside leftist circles during the 1930s. The material history captured by tourists demonstrated the “mismatch between rhetoric and reality” of the imaginary promoted by Stalinist authorities. It is an example of how the intersection explored by amateur-film scholarship recovers forgotten histories of images, people, and their aspirations as well as networks and institutions that have been otherwise left out of history. As Nicholson summarizes in her seminal 2013 book *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice*, “amateur film played a key role in the journey towards ‘life as representation,’” becoming a “new form of personal expression.” It stands, then, as a key point of reference for understanding our current relationship with moving images as both consumers and producers of media.

In the French context—and in parallel with the North American and British scholarship—amateur cinema was conceptualized by Roger Odin as a “space of communication,” bound to familial memory that sometimes circulated beyond the domestic space. The recent collection *L’amateur en cinéma: Un autre paradigme* (edited by Valérie Vignaux and Benoit Turquety, 2016) expands focus on circulation beyond the familial space, ultimately offering a reconsideration of the amateur as the new subject of film history itself. This volume aims to position—from a comparative perspective—nonprofessional practices as an equally constitutive part of film history, claiming that methods of analysis based entirely on professional film are insufficient. For example, as Turquety explains, the clear-cut distinction between spectator and producer does not apply in amateur cinema, where filmmakers performed both roles interchangeably (echoing Walter Benjamin’s comment on the rising closeness of author and public in cinema). Such thorough examination of some of the foundational premises of our field, when seen together with the issues that emerged in the seminal volumes published by the Amsterdam University Press’s Film Culture in Transition series, attests to a serious reconsideration of amateur and other noncommercial filmmaking that has begun to take place on both sides of the Atlantic.

These new approaches have been further complemented by the inclusion of an array of historical and geopolitical contexts in which amateur film cultures developed—beyond the framework of liberal capitalist democracies and individual creative practices. For example, the work included in the 2016 special issue of *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, “Experimental Cinema in State
Socialist Eastern Europe” (edited by Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi), sheds light on the complex relation between state-sponsored amateur studios and experimental cinema in socialist Eastern Europe and the USSR. Nonprofessional film culture stands here as an alternative term to the avant-garde, which the authors identify with a particularly Western conception of artistic independence and creativity—one that occludes the context-specific characteristics of alternative filmmaking as belonging to the broader social realm. Amateur cinema and its intersections with experimental and oppositional media has thus become a privileged realm for scholars of Eastern Europe to show how different modes of filmmaking negotiated the tight control of Communist bureaucracies, even if they were developed in relatively complicit state-supported cultural spaces such as the Béla Balázs studio in Hungary, the Neoplanta Studio in former Yugoslavia, and the Workshop of the Film Form at the Łódź Film School in Poland. These experiences reflect how experimental/oppositional avant-garde and amateur movements were bound to the state institutions with which they constantly negotiated their creative practices.

A different, yet equally resonant, configuration between state and independent production, and experimental and amateur cinema as constitutive of the politicized alternative youth culture of the 1960s to 1970s, can be seen in the Mexican Superocheros movement—which produced Super-8 movies in Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s that are now considered classics of experimental cinema in Latin America (as explored in the special issue of Wide Angle edited by Jesse Lerner).

These different histories all point to the crucial importance of amateur-film production, not only in relation to more established cinematic modes (be it avant-garde or documentary) but also in relation to the ways we understand the explicitly political role of cinema and media both historically and in the present day. Far from being the hobby of lone individuals who filmed their families and vacation trips, amateur filmmaking occupied a wide variety of social and cultural spaces and functions. Many of these were linked to state-sponsored media practices and/or supported through alternative formations such as artistic and political collectives. The production and circulation of moving images in such spaces allow for a particularly fruitful exploration of the relationship of these institutions and practices to the state apparatus and the political effects—often enabling and restricting at the same time—that such a relationship produced. Its many consequences were frequently unexpected and unintended by the institutions themselves. In our scholarly reexamination of these developments, we would like to echo Wendy Brown’s call in her book Politics Out of History to conduct genealogy as an alternative to progressive and teleological historiography. Film history becomes, then,
not a tale of technological/aesthetic advances culminating (or, according to others, reaching its nadir) in the new media, but a global and transversal reexamination of the uses and circulation of moving images, best understood as specific instantiations of the cinematic apparatus in different historical and geopolitical contexts.

**THE APPARATUS OF AMATEUR CINEMA**

The specific frameworks of production, exhibition, and circulation of amateur cinema are perhaps analyzed most productively through Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of an apparatus as, among other things, “a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge,” which Giorgio Agamben specifically locates “at the intersection of power relations and knowledge.” The concept of *intersection* is crucial for our comparative model of analyzing amateur cinema, since this particular film culture is characterized by traversing the private and public spheres, which are themselves bound through a dialectical relationship. In this, our approach resonates with Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau’s understanding of the apparatus of industrial films as a “complex constellation of media, technology, forms of knowledge, discourse, and social organization.” Following this definition, Hediger and Vonderau describe industrial films as “interfaces between discourses and forms of social and industrial organization.” Cultural production made in such liminal spaces between institutions, power relations, and knowledge is often left out of history precisely because of its ambiguous/unclassifiable nature.

This is certainly the case for amateur films, as most were not produced in the same way as their top-down industrial counterparts but mainly as grassroots-level productions that usually blended with other noncommercial initiatives and had only occasional institutional support. This liminal status, however, can open not only new possibilities of expression but also different relationships to such hegemony. As Turquety points out, the nonprofessional filmmaker, unlike the traditional spectator, becomes both a producer and an active user of image-making technology, not necessarily bound to strict social and cultural frameworks. While still subject to social and economic regulations, this condition creates the possibility of challenging and reinventing social spaces and cultural norms—and this is the history that several of the essays selected here explore in different ways, together offering a strong case for a historical reading of amateur experience as potentially creating an emancipatory space for its participants.

Taking these insights as our point of departure, we propose a comparative model of analysis for amateur cinema that examines nonprofessional film
as a creative practice that inhabits a liminal space between public and private spheres, state institutions and civic platforms, politics, and leisure. The model orients itself around the following questions: What have been the purposes behind amateur film production on the ground level? What motivation existed behind its institutionalization in different contexts around the globe? What social, cultural, and political spheres has it inhabited? What political, social, and cultural effects did it enable? How can we understand these developments in relation to each other?

Once such an inclusive history is slowly unearthed, we discover that amateur filmmaking—like all vernacular media—has played an important role within the more familiar developments (technological, institutional, economic, political, and cultural) of the cinematic apparatus and its dialectical relation between power and knowledge. And yet, it can also reveal unexpected spaces and conjunctures leading to our present moment in the global media culture. The dream of democratization of media—as well as its uses and abuses by hegemonic powers—informs current media practices, discourses, and institutions. But the same impulse played an important historical role in the increasing centrality of audiovisual media to the global cultures of the past century, and this is most evident in the history of amateur cinema.

The work on Eastern Europe perhaps demonstrates this with particular force. Take for instance the exhibition Enthusiasm: Films of Love, Longing, and Labour (2005), in which Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska explored Polish amateur films produced by workers from the 1950s to the mid-1980s. As Carles Guerra suggests in the catalogue of the exhibit, the Polish workers discovered, in their creative practices, a time after work that opened up new modes of social productivity beyond the factory. Amateur film clubs became a space from which to critically engage the social reality that official media ignored. The subsequent historical subsumption of concepts like passion and enthusiasm into the media economy of cognitive capitalism—with its primacy of creative industries that depend on unpaid and/or casualized labor in its different forms, from fans creating online content to internships—should not devalue a moment in which the concept of socialist labor was questioned and reconfigured in such spaces through means of affective engagement with media production.

In this issue, those contributions examining amateur cinema beyond North America (Atwood, Fibla-Gutierrez, Foster, Mariani, Simonyi) focus particularly on the complexities and paradoxes of the use of nonprofessional media in the interests of the state and/or particular social collectives, highlighting both its complicities with the hegemonic practices and discourses, and its potential for dissent. More than any large-scale commercial media practices, amateur filmmaking emerges here as an important battleground of conflicting
ideologies and civic engagements. Consequently, what becomes visible through a comparative global analysis is how the North American example constitutes the historical exception rather than the norm in regard to the relationship between amateur production and the state as both the guarantor of the institutionalization efforts and the enforcer of ideological pressures. While in the US this relationship was limited, almost all other historical cases under examination show the state as a powerful player in this process, as the essays gathered here demonstrate.

Similarly, almost all cases beyond the US reflect the force of the nationalistic rhetoric on the institutional shaping of the amateur-film culture as part of a demand for the development, rebirth, and/or strengthening of a national cinema. Here, as elsewhere in global film history, the conflict between the national(ist) cultural imperatives and the domination of Hollywood creates striking divergent dynamics between the US mainstream film culture, including its amateur reiteration (although certainly not its more politically radical manifestations) and the rest of the world.

**CHANGING THE GEOGRAPHIES OF FILM STUDIES**

The work included in this special issue places amateur filmmaking within the broader context of other noncommercial cinematic practices and institutions with which amateur cinema frequently overlapped and intersected. Furthermore, this constellation of cinematic practices is shown to be equally constitutive of the medium’s history alongside (and sometimes even in place of) national commercial film industries, thus challenging the assumed marginality of such production. This shift toward the expanded understanding of what constitutes a national cinema provides us with the framework to analyze geopolitical contexts previously ignored by scholarship, which—despite their lack of a strong film industry—have been instrumental in the development of film and media culture. For example, amateur filmmaking shaped local film cultures through its participation in institutions such as film societies and clubs, specialized publications and archives (both formal and informal), and different forms of oppositional media and artistic experimentation. Many of these initiatives extended internationally through festivals, symposia, and other regular exchanges, creating networks that are yet to be fully accounted for, often placing their centers in unexpected locations (be it Barcelona, Caracas, Kelibia, or São Paolo).

Amateur cinema therefore allows us to create a more complex map of global film culture and circulation by placing an equal focus on small nations and the superpowers of cinematic productions, resisting the solidified divisions between the West and the non-West (or the North and the Global South or Western and Eastern Europe). Such an approach emphasizes the transnational
circuits and geographic fluidity of filmic practices while firmly grounding them in local, culturally specific contexts with distinct historical forces and geopolitical configurations. The study of these “neglected works left in the wide margin of the century” (to quote Raymond Williams) radically reconfigures the geopolitical map of film history in a way that also alters our understanding of the role of the medium in global developments socially, culturally, and politically.39 This special issue participates in the redrawing of such a map by bringing together essays dealing with the history of amateur filmmaking around the world: Catalonia, Italy, Hungary, Brazil, and Iran (Fibla-Gutierrez, Mariani, Simonyi, Foster, and Atwood) while including the US within this global vision (Tepperman).

Although the temporal focus offered by the essays ranges from the 1930s to the 1980s, the period of the 1930s and 1940s remains one of the key points of reference for Western European and North American cases due to the absorption of the media into state structures and cultural or educational institutions at the time. The broader geographic range of these essays, however, demonstrates how this complex historical dynamic played out under various geopolitical conditions, creating different historical time lines for the development of organized amateur-film production and exhibition around the world (and here Brazil and Hungary in the 1950s and in the 1960s through the 1970s respectively emerge as interesting departures from both the Western European and the North American cases, which were already establishing recognizable spaces for amateur film culture in the 1930s). For example, Tepperman’s essay, “‘A Recognized Screen’: The New York Annual Movie Parties from Parlor to Public,” focuses on the changes in film exhibition practices in the US in the 1930s and 1940s beyond the commercial screen, showing how an annual amateur movie night evolved into an established and well-attended public venue for amateur films from around the world with institutional connections to Columbia University.

Together, these essays provide a reflection on the specific configurations and problematics of amateur film culture and its formal and material specificity as a cultural practice. In other words, without abandoning the importance of related terms such as noncommercial, nonprofessional, or nontheatrical for the conceptualization of amateur cinema, it’s time to move toward a mode of analysis that addresses its distinctiveness and seeks a better understanding of it as a historical phenomenon beyond what it was not. Based on the current scholarship as we see it, a few key issues that emerge as variables for such an approach are amateur cinema’s position at the intersection between public and private spheres; its ambiguous and yet productive relationship with state institutions and the professional film industry; the mobility enabled by technological developments, resulting in direct engagement of the amateur within the modes
of production, exhibition, and distribution; and, finally, the social, cultural, and political effects of such practices.

One example of the intersection between technologies, spaces of circulation, and uses of the medium is the outstanding reach and circulation of small-gauge celluloid formats such as 8, 9.5, and 16mm beginning in the 1920s, even in realms where consumer capitalism was still not fully developed. Despite the still incipient nature of widespread consumer culture in Catalonia and Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, a solid community of amateurs emerged with its own publications, dedicated stores, and clubs. Within the Brazilian film community of the 1950s—analyzed by Lila Foster in this issue—amateur photography stands out as an obvious and important predecessor of small-gauge cinema and its important role in the projects for a national cinema. Indeed, the spread of amateur filmmaking, facilitated by the mobility and portability of film equipment, brought moving images into spaces and contexts that the commercial film industry had yet to conquer.

For instance, Fibla-Gutierrez’s essay, “A Vernacular National Cinema: Amateur Filmmaking in Catalonia (1932–1936),” includes a 1924 advertisement from a newspaper that announced the high sales volume—1,500 units sold for a demand of over 3,000—of the 9.5mm Pathé-Baby projector and the soon-to-be introduced Pathé-Baby camera. Such numbers speak of a remarkable expansion of small-gauge devices in a country with a very small film industry. These new filmmakers, most of whom belonged to the wealthy segments of society, soon began to create numerous clubs throughout Catalonia, where members shared technical know-how, screened their films, and organized contests and congresses. Most importantly, they pointed their 9.5 and 16mm cameras beyond the domestic space (which was certainly the initial realm of production) and captured the cultural and political changes taking place in a country on the brink of civil war. They also significantly expanded the reach of cinematic culture as they organized improvised screenings in small villages, something that was not possible for the expensive commercial film infrastructure. The creation of distinct circuits of amateur-film exhibition is mirrored in Tepperman’s essay, which details the evolution from private film showings to public screenings of amateur film in the US during the 1930s. Tepperman shows that nonprofessional portable film projectors, which scholars have proved to be much more numerous than theatrical ones, allowed for a distinct exhibition circuit that might compete with the big screen.

In the Italian context, as explored by Andrea Mariani in “The Cinerguf Years: Amateur Cinema and the Shaping of a Film Avant-Garde in Fascist Italy (1934–1943),” such developments were soon instrumentalized by the Fascist regime, which became aware of the formidable potential of a medium that now
reached well beyond the confines of the theater and into the homes and clubs of enthusiast filmmakers. The Italian amateur film movement (called Cineguf) quickly turned into an organized cultural practice that facilitated social and political engagement by placing the budding technological experts in the middle of the process of social construction. Given that their films were commissioned by Fascist client institutions and industries, their private technology was put to a very public use.

Beyond the European context, Foster’s essay, “The Cinema Section of Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante: Ideals and Reality of Amateur Film Production in São Paulo, Brazil,” locates the establishing of a Kodak branch in São Paulo in 1923 as one of the key factors in the creation of an amateur film club that became central to Brazilian film culture in the 1940s and 1950s. The difficulties of developing a viable commercial film industry in Brazil, due to the lack of proper funding and infrastructure, made amateur cinema a key point of reference from which to begin to consolidate a national film culture. Such instrumentalization of amateur cinema at the service of a national cinema follows the example of Catalan amateur cinema analyzed by Fibla-Gutierrez (and, in part, the Fascist appropriation of small-gauge filmmaking described by Mariani). In these contexts, amateur filmmaking was seen as a viable vernacular national cinema alternative to the development of an otherwise expensive commercial film industry.

Indeed, the discourse on amateur filmmaking as a mode of professionalization (assumed to be a first step or a learning experience on the way to working within a professional film industry) is present in all the historical contexts we present here. However, the understanding of the contours and purpose of such professionalization differs greatly. While we can see that commercial (Hollywood) practice is often held as a golden standard of technological expertise, the use to which such expertise is understood to be put by both the practitioners and their umbrella institutions reflects an ambiguous relationship to the commercial cinema industries and to Hollywood in particular. In this respect, most essays included here (Fibla-Gutierrez, Foster, Mariani, Simonyi) are indicative of the dialectical relationship between amateur cinema and professional film production as well as state institutions, especially in contexts with a weaker film industry and lack of infrastructure. Such is the case of the Catalan amateurs, who very strongly rejected the commercial film industry but later participated in a state-sponsored project for a national vernacular cinema. In Brazil, as Foster’s essay demonstrates, amateur film production was institutionally supported precisely as a way to build an authentic national film culture while reflecting many of the same preoccupations and problems facing the Brazilian film industry. Likewise, the Balázs Béla Stúdió, as analyzed by Sonja Simonyi in "Artists as Amateurs:
Intersections of Nonprofessional Film Production and Neo-Avant-Garde Experimentation at the Balázs Béla Stúdió in the Early 1970s,” was inclusive and yet suspicious of amateur film production, thus demonstrating with particular force the conflict between the demands for professionalization and the desire for autonomy that characterizes amateur filmmaking. Hungarian authorities tolerated an extra level of experimentation and creativity precisely because of amateur film’s not-yet-professional nature. Simonyi’s essay may appear to exceed the confines of what is narrowly understood as amateur cinema, but its inclusion is important precisely because it reflects the intersection of amateur-film culture with experimental practices, as well as the ideological complexities of the relationship between the two when mediated by the state apparatus. This unique case study shows the overlaps and divergences between both realms—experimental and amateur—and their mutually constitutive origins in small-gauge technology, state-sponsored institutions, and noncommercial circuits of production, exhibition, and circulation.

The ambivalent positioning of amateur cinema in relation to other practices was in part provoked by its own rapid development from an innocent domestic hobby to a relevant cultural practice with multiple ramifications. As the essays in this special issue suggest, these ramifications point to the democratizing potential of amateur cinema beyond individual self-actualization discourses, revealing instead the creation of specific communities and collective social structures. These range from the movie-parties exhibition circuit analyzed by Tepperman to bourgeois amateur film clubs in Brazil and Catalonia as explored by Foster and Fibla-Gutierrez, as well as spaces for the reaffirmation of Fascist ideology in Italy (Mariani) and experimental and informal artistic dissident communities in socialist Hungary and Iran (Simonyi and Atwood).

The similarities between the Brazilian, Italian, Catalan, Iranian, and Hungarian contexts demonstrate the strong historical relationship between amateur filmmaking and state institutions. Regardless of the particular political order in which this relationship developed—liberal or authoritarian—the state became a key factor for the creation of such spaces (this appears to be the case practically everywhere except the US). This, in turn, problematizes the presumed division between Western free creative realms and Eastern state-controlled societies. The different essays in this issue also illustrate and explore the many attempts—some successful, others not—to instrumentalize nonprofessional filmmaking, by the state, industry, consumer business, political movements, and so on. Overall, amateur filmmakers reacted rather ambivalently to such attempts, attracted by the possibilities opened by material support and increased visibility (Mariani, Fibla, Foster, Simonyi) but also wary of the potential control that such institutions could exercise over their
activities (Fibla-Gutierrez, Simonyi). Such an ambivalence may also further explain amateur cinema’s exclusion from film history, despite the assumption (both historically articulated in amateur film publications and later reinforced within film scholarship) that amateur filmmaking was the first step toward a professional career. In reality, amateurs rarely participated in commercial film structures, preferring instead to create their own institutions (as exemplified in Tepperman’s account of the Little’s Annual Movie Parties and their explicit estrangement from the industry).

Blake Atwood’s article “The Little Devil Comes Home: Video, the State, and Amateur Cinema in Iran” provides a fascinating counterexample to these instances of state or institutional support of amateur cinema. Atwood examines the convoluted relationship between public and private spheres in nonliberal states, which often creates liminal or alternative spheres that stand in between these realms. In so doing, he offers a complex understanding of amateur cinema that doesn’t sharply demarcate between the production and circulation of works as separate analytical categories; this is an especially important point when trying to understand our current informal media ecosystems of user-generated content and digital distribution. Instead of attempting to control and instrumentalize the video circuit for their own purposes, the Iranian government saw amateur technology as ultimately uncontainable and issued a ban on its use by citizens that was only lifted in 1992.

Atwood touches upon a key topic for the analysis of amateur cinema: the different modalities of cinema as public sphere. If we first understand this term in its classic Habermanian sense of a space “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state,” then we see a clearer alignment with the types of movements described by Tepperman. But if we go beyond the model of a liberal capitalist democratic public sphere, which in fact constituted a small percentage of the everyday reality for most people throughout the twentieth century, a different cinematic public sphere emerges. In nonliberal contexts like postrevolutionary Cuba, China, Iran, the former Soviet bloc, pre–civil war Spain, or Fascist Italy, the public sphere created by amateur cinema resembles more what Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt describe as a nonhomogenous and complex set of counter publics that can either reaffirm state-sanctioned ideology or “dis/organize social and collective experience.” Simonyi’s description of the liminal and fragmented public sphere created by nonprofessional film institutions in socialist Hungary is especially useful when trying to understand such possibilities for disorganization or reaffirmation. This is particularly resonant under authoritarian regimes but can also speak to contemporary radical media practices (especially those inspired by anarchist ideologies) under the neoliberal regime.
While Tepperman shows the move of amateur cinema from the private to the mixed private/public sphere and the uneasiness this transition was met with among some of the filmmakers as it was perceived to lead to the loss of the informality and comradeship of the first screenings, the essays by Mariani, Fibla-Gutierrez, Simonyi, and Atwood explore different configurations of how a public sphere as a site for amateur cinema may be imagined under different political formations and ideological pressures. Mariani describes the process of forced institutionalization by the Italian dictatorship of a series of clubs that had been formed in universities throughout Italy during the 1920s and 1930s. As Fibla-Gutierrez details, this process was followed with great anxiety by the Catalan bourgeois amateurs, who feared that a similar process could take away their precious cultural space largely reserved for a wealthy minority. Given the convulsive nature of Spanish politics, their approach was to separate the public sphere of amateur cinema as much as possible from political action and the state. However, their later institutional affiliations show the ambivalent nature of amateur cinema as at once a public and private sphere.

In fact, as Mariani argues, the Fascist university filmmaking groups, while being fully integrated into the objectives of the regime, nonetheless created a space of experimentation and new engagement with the local reality that eventually gave way to Italian neorealism. Simonyi’s case study also reflects such a dialectic, focusing on a socialist state-sponsored institution that was initially devised for recent film-academy graduates but that later accommodated informal film cultures such as experimental and amateur production. This institution inadvertently promoted experimentation and dissidence due to its distance from the tightly controlled commercial film industry. Atwood’s essay expands the complexity and dialectical characteristic of the amateur-cinema public sphere even further, analyzing why the Iranian regime initially censored nonprofessional filmmaking in the 1980s—a decision that it later revoked in 1992 when its control of both public and private spheres was deemed sufficient enough to prevent any organized form of dissidence through media. As Atwood concludes, the later works of Jafar Panahi, especially *This Is Not a Film*, actually show how even in such a tightly controlled media environment as contemporary Iran, discourses on amateur media have enabled a mode of dissidence that brings nonprofessional film back to the home, but this time it is converted into a political gesture.44

As the work gathered here demonstrates, from movie parties at Columbia University to the latest trends in the art-cinema circuits, amateur media has been a constitutive part of film culture around the world. By exploring the variety of functions it performed in different places in various moments of history, its continuously evolving relationship with technological innovations, and
the promises—some fulfilled, and others yet unrealized—it held for the people and institutions invested in it, the essays in this special issue provide points of reference from which to contextualize the recent explosion of amateur media. Together they expand our understanding of what constitutes cinema history and by doing so further bring it into conversation with the present day.

Notes


3. Zimmermann had also previously published two important articles on the intersections between amateur cinema, the North American avant-garde, and professional film industry and aesthetics, but later scholarship on amateur films favored the home-movie approach. See Patricia R. Zimmermann, “The Amateur, the Avant-Garde, and Ideologies of Art,” Journal of Film and Video 38, nos. 3–4 (1986): 63–85; and Zimmermann, “Professional Results with Amateur Ease,” 267–81.


of Sponsored Films in Postwar Italy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); and Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds., Inventing Film Studies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).


10. See Nicholson, Amateur Film; and Tepperman, Amateur Cinema.


15. See, for example, the Northeast Historic Film Archive in Bucksport, Maine; North West Film Archive (Manchester, UK), Home Movies; Archivio Nazionale del Film di Famiglia Bologna (Italy); CinéDidac (France); INEDITS; Memory of Europe, Péter Forgács Private Hungary (Hungary); Cinemateca Brasileira (Brazil); and Filmoteca Catalunya (Spain).

16. Susan Aasman organized a conference titled “Changing Platforms of Ritualized Memory Practices” (September 10–12, 2015, University of Groningen) that aimed precisely to “grasp the technical, social and cultural dimensions and changes in the use of technologies of memory, such as home movies, home videos, sound recording and digital technologies” (https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/events/changing-platforms-memory-practices). The recently released Exposing the Film Apparatus, according to the publisher’s description, discusses the need “to see media technologies themselves as objects of conservation, restoration, presentation, and research, in both film archives and film studies” (http://en.aup.nl/books/9789048524495-exposing-the-film-apparatus.html).

17. Tepperman, Amateur Cinema, 2.


22. Nicholson, 63.


27. This includes, among others, Hediger and Vonderau, Films That Work; Thomas Elsaesser, Film History as Media Archaeology (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016); and François Albera and


35. Hediger and Vonderau, 11.


42. Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 176.

43. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 39.

44. The recent Iraqi documentary Nowhere to Hide (Zaradasht Ahmed, 2016) provides another poignant example. In 2013, the director entrusted paramedic Nori Sharif with a small digital camera to film what was happening around him in the so-called triangle of death in central Iraq. Sharif explicitly promises at the beginning of the film to not only film his “home and family” but is ultimately forced by the extreme violence of the situation to retreat to different precarious domestic spaces (first the family car as they flee their home town from ISIS, then a refugee camp) as the only places from which to explain the crude realities of war and forced migration.

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