

STUDIES IN
POPULAR
CULTURE

Amateur film

Meaning and practice, 1927–77

HEATHER NORRIS NICHOLSON



Amateur film

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STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

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STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

There has in recent years been an explosion of interest in culture and cultural studies. The impetus has come from two directions and out of two different traditions. On the one hand, cultural history has grown out of social history to become a distinct and identifiable school of historical investigation. On the other hand, cultural studies has grown out of English literature and has concerned itself to a large extent with contemporary issues. Nevertheless, there is a shared project, its aim, to elucidate the meanings and values implicit and explicit in the art, literature, learning, institutions and everyday behaviour within a given society.

Both the cultural historian and the cultural studies scholar seek to explore the ways in which a culture is imagined, represented and received; how it interacts with social processes; how it contributes to individual and collective identities and world views, to stability and change, to social, political and economic activities and programmes. This series aims to provide an arena for the cross-fertilisation of the discipline, so that the work of the cultural historian can take advantage of the most useful and illuminating of the theoretical developments and the cultural studies scholars can extend the purely historical underpinnings of their investigations. The ultimate objective of the series is to provide a range of books which will explain in a readable and accessible way where we are now socially and culturally and how we got to where we are. This should enable people to be better informed, promote an interdisciplinary approach to cultural issues and encourage deeper thought about the issues, attitudes and institutions of popular culture.

Jeffrey Richards

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General editor's foreword

The philosopher George Santayana said of England that 'it is the paradise of individualists, eccentrics, heresy, anomalies, hobbies and humours'. This series has already published volumes devoted to two long-standing and cherished hobbies: steam railway enthusiasm and amateur operatics. Heather Norris Nicholson adds to that literature with this exhaustively researched and judiciously analysed study of amateur filmmaking.

Alongside the flourishing commercial cinema, there has been a long and honourable tradition of amateur filmmaking in Britain. Thanks to this hobby, a rich store of visual imagery exists to add a vivid extra dimension to our understanding of recent history: the people, the buildings, the public and private events, the ways of life and work. We can still see in these films a vanished world of cotton mills, coal mines, steam railways, air shows, funfairs, speedway, Whit Walks, Rose Queen coronations, May Day celebrations and Armistice Day commemorations, the world of the day before yesterday.

Drawing on the films themselves, interviews with the filmmakers and analysis of club records and specialist publications, Heather Norris Nicholson explores with insight, sympathy and skill almost every aspect of the hobby. She explains the significance of the local cine clubs, charts the rise of the specialist hobby press, analyses the ways in which family, community, working life, travel and holidays were constructed and depicted. She assesses the films devoted to social issues of the past and looks to the future of amateur filmmaking in the era of new technology. Several continuing themes run through the book, among them the question of how and why people got involved in the hobby, the relationship between amateur and professional filmmaking, the responses to changes in technology, the role of women both before and behind the camera.

She is fully aware of and engages with issues of construction, selection, perception and mediation which surround all kinds of filmmaking. But

what shines through this book on page after page is the dedication, passion, ingenuity and creativity of the amateur filmmakers. This volume stands as a deserved tribute to them all.

Jeffrey Richards

Preface and acknowledgements

Until the later 1990s, academic interest in amateur film in Britain was scattered across disciplines, and mainly outside the core areas of film history scholarship. By contrast, many film archivists knew their collections held significant amounts of fascinating amateur footage and broadcasters were also long-established users of amateur material in different kinds of popular history programming. Archival staff supported researchers who travelled and talked about their film holdings, just as changing public funding regimes and agenda were intensifying the demands to make archival collections more visible and more accessible to ever more diverse audiences. Amateur film as a serious topic of study, primarily as a source of evidential visual history, thus attracted a small following of enthusiasts who supported each other's fledging events and projects. Similar strategies based on a combination of pragmatism and passion created close liaison within the archival community. The present status of amateur film studies is undeniably a product in part of the determined advocacy and commitment that brings archival and academic circles into a distinctive mutually strengthening relationship, enhanced by those who inhabit both academic and archivists' roles.

Who could have anticipated the international explosion of interest and scholarship in amateur film? Conferences at national and international level have proliferated in the past five years, in turn attracting younger researchers to read once there were some published titles on reading lists, to tackle research projects and to bring their own expertise and training into different settings in and beyond academia. Both established and emerging filmmakers have found fresh creative opportunities in working with found footage as well as material of direct personal significance. The interdisciplinary appeal of cine imagery has been significant in the breadth of interest and applied contexts into which archive amateur footage has reached out to different audiences and offered new

approaches and insights. So too has been the frequently captivating nature of the material itself, as varied audiences experience the visual magic of watching fragments of past actions captured unofficially on cine-camera. Encounters with senior filmmakers, involved in the development of amateur activity either independently or as long-time members of the amateur club scene, have added compelling human detail, quirky recollections and collectively the weight of individual perspectives about past practices. An attempt at pulling different strands of interest together was now needed.

A regional setting made intellectual and practical sense. Film holdings at the North West Film Archive offered variety and regional distinctiveness as well as an excellent basis for broader comparisons. Some of Britain's earliest amateur practitioners had been active in the region, there was scope to tap into a still vibrant culture of filmmaking, and many historical details were available about different kinds of amateur cine practice. A fifty-year survey using the North West as its core without limiting the opportunities to explore further afield seemed an ideal mix. The year 1927 emerged as an obvious starting date, as shown by evidence discussed in later chapters for specific regional productions, film publications and club foundation, whilst also being important for cine activity more broadly. The year 1977 was more indicative of changing circumstances, and attention extends beyond both dates to set amateur practice within a wider understanding of social and cultural change.

Tapping into the riches of amateur footage, listening to the voices of its practitioners and those of their predecessors recorded in the hobby press, and encountering those whose daily work with archival collections safeguards amateur material have underpinned the writing of this text. Its pages testify to the hidden archive work of preservation and repairing, shot-listing, cataloguing and making accessible that characterises daily routines as at the North West Film Archive where past and present staff have given me their time and knowledge unstintingly. Such activities depend upon the often thankless grind of administration, and prodigious thanks are therefore due to Marion Hewitt, for her patience and support, as well as making staff time and resources available. Thanks are also due to other archivists in the UK for their help with queries; inestimable encouragement has come from archivists in North America too. I thank them all for their inspirational dedication, professional insights and energy.

Significant conferences and workshops have been key moments in furthering critical scholarship and discussion. Thanks are due to the organisers for their breath of vision and the creative dialogues fostered by genuine inter-

disciplinarity, as well as to those who have accommodated amateur film within imaginative programming of numerous smaller multidisciplinary events.

Generous co-operation has come from within today's amateur filmmaking circles and also from second- and third-generation descendants of former filmmakers. I express sincere thanks to all those who have contributed memories, loaned films and other recordings, articles, photographs, and answered questions via emails, letters, telephone, and during interviews.

Conversations with numerous scholars and creative practitioners, near and far, have prompted my thinking in different ways. Invitations, assistance with funding, feedback and the sense of being in and able to look beyond the 'home movies bubble' have been a source of strength. So too has been the championing of this activity by former work colleagues, particularly Melanie Tebbutt. Others in North America, mainland Europe and closer to home have shared critical thinking too. I apologise for omissions that are unintentional but perhaps inevitable given this book's genesis and the occasional serendipitous nature of encounters. I also acknowledge having had the privilege to share enthusiasms and good company with now departed influential film archivists, Marianne Gomes, Michelle Morisset, Sam Kula and William Farrell, and I also pay tribute to the research on home movie-making by the late Alan Katelle.

Discussion and questioning with students, past and present, at Manchester Metropolitan University and elsewhere have been refreshingly candid. Handling scepticism and doubt has assisted with rigour, clarity and readability. Staff at Manchester University Press too have been wonderfully patient as this work evolved. Thanks are owed to my readers for their close scrutiny and comments.

Above all, I offer thanks to my family, in particular to my mother for her questioning, proof-reading and encouragement, to my husband Steve, and to our daughters, Katya and Vikka, for their forbearance and coping strategies during my times of absence and adventuring in distant places. Finally, I thank the many named and anonymous people captured on or responsible for the films discussed in this book.

Heather Norris Nicholson,
February 2012

List of abbreviations

ACA	Amateur Cinematographers' Association
ACW	<i>Amateur Cine World</i>
AF	<i>Amateur Films</i>
APC	<i>Amateur Photographer and Cinematographer</i>
APP	<i>Amateur Photographer and Photography</i>
ARP	Air Raid Precaution
BACA	British Amateur Cinematographers' Association
BFI	British Film Institute
CCTV	Closed circuit television
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
DHTA	Dartington Hall Trust Archives
EAFA	East Anglian Film Archive
FCS	Federation of Cinematograph Societies
GPO	General Post Office
HMHT	<i>Home Movies and Home Talkies</i>
IAC	Institute of Amateur Cinematographers
MM	<i>Movie Maker</i>
MO	Mass Observation
NBTS	National Blood Transfusion Service
NWFA	North West Film Archive
SAFF	Scottish Amateur Film Festival
UNICA	Union internationale du cinéma d'amateur
VHS	Video Home System
YFA	Yorkshire Film Archive

Film title conventions

Title details observe archival practice in cataloguing, as set out by FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives). [] indicate an attributed title for cataloguing purposes, where there is no evidence of a prior existing title; * or hyphenated dates indicates the approximate date of the filmstock, and may represent a date earlier than when the film was made.

Making space for a neglected visual history

‘I’ve always felt that the amateur enthusiast has been an important figure in the cinematic history of this country. He has helped in the appreciation of the unusual film – film societies and cine clubs were the first to encourage British documentaries – and has always striven to raise standards and improve taste.’¹ In May 1955, *Amateur Cine World (ACW)* celebrated twenty-one years of amateur filmmaking in Britain. Directors, critics, actors and other film professionals praised how the amateur film movement had contributed to the development of national cinema. ‘Amateur filmmakers are a stimulus to the professional film industry, and provide a growing audience for whatever we endeavour to do that is mature, imaginative and experimental’, enthused John and Roy Boulting, the prolific twin-brother director-producer team and founders of Charter Films (1937).² Others acknowledged the close association between amateur and professional activity even as their very language hinted at difficulties within that same relationship: Sir Laurence Olivier observed that ‘The professional cinema has good cause to be grateful to its amateur cousins, who do so much to stimulate and keep alive technical and artistic interest in the craft of filmmaking’.³

Paul Rotha, then Head of Documentaries at the BBC, spoke of his respect for amateur activity and acknowledged the ‘number of distinguished filmmakers today who began with their own 16mm equipment’. Rotha foresaw the popular broadcast potential of amateur footage: ‘And now television has come along to widen the chance of showing such films.’⁴ Dilys Powell, then film critic for *The Sunday Times*, highlighted wider benefits of amateur interest: ‘Not only have some remarkable professional talents emerged from the amateur movement; the amateurs contribute also a truly appreciative, because truly critical, audience for the commercial cinema.’⁵ It would have been editorial suicide for *ACW* not to publish this fulsome praise. Such endorsement was

splendid material for marketing the monthly magazine in a fast expanding and increasingly competitive area of specialist literature. These comments were also a welcome boost to the hobby's reputation in a rapidly changing postwar society.

During 2007, Britain's amateur film movement celebrated another anniversary, this time the seventy-fifth birthday of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC).⁶ Founded in 1932, this umbrella organisation supported the fledgling societies and clubs that were being set up by and for amateur enthusiasts.⁷ The IAC has weathered profound social, cultural and technical changes, including the advent of hitherto unimaginable ways of being able to make, edit and circulate self-made ('user-generated' in contemporary terms) imagery. The organisation's survival is testimony to the initial fervour and continuing dedication to practical production work outside professional circles as shown by the celebratory and forward-looking events during 2007.⁸

Arguably, the fifty-two years spanned by these two anniversaries and their founding dates chart the main phases of growth and change within Britain's amateur cinema. They span the periods of pioneering interest and activity by enthusiasts with sufficient time and money to indulge a costly hobby; the postwar democratisation of cine photography as film and equipment became more available; and then, the evolutionary adjustment to successive innovations. Technological and societal shifts deterred some hobbyists but attracted the involvement of others. Innovations moved the most dedicated cinephiles into new areas of visualisation using videos, camcorders and a succession of changing opportunities for home-editing, presentation, distribution and storage. The IAC's celebratory year attested to how the spirit of amateur cinema lives on, despite the impact of new visual technologies and means to digitise and rework media for personal consumption. Indeed, non-professional interest in visual moving technologies, notwithstanding the change to different formats and the name change from film to video evident among many organised societies, is as vibrant as it ever was, even if the basic paraphernalia has changed beyond recognition.

The public celebration of IAC's continuing dynamism parallels more widespread persistence of the personal desire to produce and share moving imagery. Changing technologies, patterns of consumption and the increasing ubiquity of mimetic processes seem to intensify the visual aspects of memory-shaping and self-identification. Today's children grow up literally on camera. CCTV equipment documents their public presence. They exchange pictures via mobile phones and social networks. Family camera-users record childhood

moments and rites of passage at home, school and elsewhere that construct visual life-stories and memories from birth onwards.⁹ Today's unprecedented familiarity with being 'on camera' in voluntary and involuntary ways links to private uses of portable recording equipment that stretch back to home videos and the cine-cameras of the past.¹⁰

This attempt to examine people's fascination with sharing visual stories about themselves and others sets amateur film history alongside the diverse histories of cinema, media, social change and modernity. The evolutionary twists and turns, from early hand-cranked camera equipment and portable screen to current visualisation processes are a remarkable expression of sustained interest over time. Undoubtedly, amateur film played a key role in the journey towards 'life as representation' and our current consumption of moving pictures. This book explores five key decades of that journey from the rise of interest, first among Britain's wealthy, and then, as a more widespread leisure activity, to its retrenchment in the 1970s under the impact of video cameras.

A hobby takes shape

Notwithstanding the anniversary tributes, cited earlier, the origins of amateur cinema may be traced back to the very earliest experimentation in moving imagery.¹¹ Rival photographic companies in Europe and the United States developed products suitable for the home market from the late nineteenth century onwards.¹² Some early attempts were promoted as novelty toys before 1910 although more sophisticated equipment and published manuals were also aimed at adult audiences.¹³ Advertising targeted people who wished to watch commercially produced films at home as well as those who were interested in screening their own motion pictures. Manufacturers brought out a succession of innovations that each sought to reduce the overall costs of camera, projector and film. Birt Acre's Birtac camera, dating from c.1898, was one of several devices that used 17.5mm rather than 35mm film and combined a camera with a projector.¹⁴ The availability of cellulose-based 'safety' film from Pathé and Eastman Kodak in c.1911 helped to replace unstable nitrate-based products and boosted the appeal of home-based moving image shows.¹⁵ As companies continued to explore ways of improving the safety and performance of products aimed at the amateur, a number of motion picture cameras had short-lived success before 1920.¹⁶

The early 1920s saw the real breakthrough in marketing equipment that appealed to the early enthusiast who was interested in making as well as showing

commercially made films at home. Pathé brought out an amateur gauge 35mm film in 1922, and the following year Eastman Kodak launched a 16mm film gauge plus a lightweight, handheld Cine-Kodak camera and the Kodascope projector. Bell & Howell, among other companies, followed Kodak in making available equipment for 16mm, but manufacturers companies recognised that the profitable expansion of the home-based market could really come only through reducing costs, particularly the cost of film. Pathé introduced its first 9.5mm film and its Pathé Baby projector in time for Christmas in 1922, and its immediate success resulted in the Pathé Baby camera becoming available some months later. Efficient, safe, easy-to-use products had finally arrived in a form that would attract sizeable interest among the leisured classes.¹⁷

Further adaptations still had to occur if the new hobby was to achieve greater popularity and wider marketability, during times of company retrenchment and limited disposable income. Companies saw that the nascent amateur market might boost revenue during the Depression but only if purchasers could afford their hobby.¹⁸ The launch of Standard 8 film involved 16mm film being run through the camera twice, exposing half of the film each time and offered the amateur user a fourfold reduction in operating costs. After processing, the film was then split and joined to make one new length, 8mm wide. The Cine Kodak Eight camera using 8mm film dates to 1932, and rival products included the Filmo Straight Eight by Bell & Howell in which an 8mm film gauge ran through the camera only once. Perhaps early amateur enthusiasts were less ready to purchase new cameras or more affected by broader economic conditions than manufacturers anticipated, and, even though the trade press responded quite positively to the new gauge, many of Britain's amateurs continued to use 16mm until after the Second World War.

This rapid succession of early amateur cine products may be traced through the exuberant advertising of the pioneer specialist press and trade magazines. Enticknap¹⁹ charts early cinematic technologies while Wade's concise guide offers a well-illustrated overview.²⁰ Katelle's in-depth study of home movie origins in the United States includes many references to European developments too.²¹ The strength of US commercial interest in promoting amateur home movie-making is seen by Zimmermann to have been central to the development of non-professional activity in North America.²² Undoubtedly, advertising benefited sales elsewhere but, as this book explores, amateur film practice in Britain should be seen as being more than the result of commercial persuasion alone. Intellectual, social, cultural, aesthetic and other influences also helped to attract a variety of enthusiasts to the new hobby.

The complex interplay between amateur interests and commercial cinema went far beyond the nurturing of a lucrative domestic market that offered the means to show films at home and to emulate film industry professionals.²³ As Rachael Low points out in her classic studies of British filmmaking during the 1930s,²⁴ and as indicated by some of the opening quotations, early professionals were amateurs in all but how they earned a living when they started. Indeed, Katelle instances the framed image of Auguste Lumière with his wife and baby daughter having breakfast as a still from possibly one of the earliest home movies!²⁵ Many early amateur and professional filmmakers shared interests in exploring cine technologies' capabilities and, regardless of their occupational status, home movies permitted opportunities for personal filmmaking untrammelled by worries about censorship or box office success.²⁶

Amateur cinematography was an expensive hobby, particularly in the interwar years, and affordable mainly to people from wealthier backgrounds. The critical discourses that accompanied its first fifteen years of development (see [Chapter 3](#)) suggest that the hobby's appeal and widening social involvement were not due purely to advertising. Less tangible cultural and psychological links between visual memory-making and societal change were significant too. Amateur emulation of professional cinema was unlikely to have been the sole motivator either, and strident criticism of 'would be screen aspirants' was probably directed as much to those being filmed as those in charge of the camera.²⁷

Developments elsewhere in cinema and newsreel encouraged public interest in home cinemas and encouraged both watching and film production.²⁸ Film rental companies and lending libraries grew, and trade publications circulated details of new films on formats available for home and cine society audiences. During the early 1930s, advice on how to set up and run a cinema at home borrowed its vocabulary from commercial venues, as did discussion of how newly formed amateur cine societies might attract women members to help in the box office or projection room or with serving refreshments.²⁹ The possibility that nascent cine societies might produce filmmakers whose home-grown talent could boost a flagging British cinema also helped to raise the profile of early amateur activity.³⁰ A film-watching audience, more critically informed about film interpretation through familiarisation with cinematic developments elsewhere in Europe and practical first-hand experience of making and showing their own material could, some enthusiasts claimed, could help to sustain and enhance a British cinema industry.³¹ Class attitudes underline such assumptions that amateur cinephiles could potentially help to protect

members of the cinemagoing public from the excesses of imported North American films.³² Such debates echo the moralising rhetoric uttered by some commentators and sections of the establishment about the damaging threat of other popular cultural forms upon the general public, in particular, Britain's working classes.³³

Just as the nascent corporate film industry extended existing professional and commercial interests into photography, exhibition and entertainment, the early decades of amateur film activity (c.1910–35) saw non-professional and professional interests intermesh with wider processes of cinematic development, commercial realisation and developing production practices.³⁴ But gradually a rather different kind of amateur interest began to occur both in Britain and elsewhere. These new amateurs were financially independent of the film industry taking shape around them.³⁵ They made films for pleasure and were, for the most part, separate from economically based professional enterprise, even though there are clear indications of shared aesthetic influences and overlapping interests. They functioned outside commercial imperatives: they were free to be spontaneous, whimsical, subjective and quite personal in decisions about how to develop their hobby.³⁶ They were pioneers of a fast-growing new branch of photography that came to be known variously as cine photography, home movie-making and amateur cinematography. While some filmmakers sought to be professional in all but how they financed their hobby, others inevitably never proceeded very far.

Typically, Britain's early hobby enthusiasts were affluent, white, middle-class and male, although exceptions as discussed later exist and some women's early participation centred on fiction films. Organised activity may be traced with certainty to 1923, when university students at Cambridge formed an amateur cine society (see [Chapter 2](#)). Given that Kodak and Pathé launched their own products for the amateur market within the same twelve-month period, the timing is indicative perhaps of the cine-camera's initial novelty appeal and desirability. Other pioneer users who functioned independently of any organisation predate the Cambridge group, but its formation may be taken as an indicative starting point for Britain's amateurs.³⁷ Importantly, there were numerous amateurs who used their cameras for personal reasons who remained outside formal networks of like-minded enthusiasts.

From its socially restricted use by middle- and upper-class groups in the 1920s and early 1930s, amateur film production developed into a small but flourishing middle-class leisure activity. As a distinctive offshoot of still photography, it soon spawned a supporting network of clubs and societies.

The recreational interest in amateur cinema coincided with a fervent adoption of film as a critical art form and a tool for communication by organisations on the British Left. As Hogenkamp points out, the costs of early filmmaking meant that the film camera was taken up by Labour sympathisers rather than by workers themselves although trade unions and workers' groups were inspired by film's propagandist role in the Soviet Union to set up their own film units.³⁸ For instance, *Liverpool – Gateway of Empire* (1933) was made by Merseyside Workers' Film Society on 16mm.³⁹ Elsewhere in the North West, companies made their own productions although surviving material is predominantly concerned with promotion rather than politics.⁴⁰ Shooting scenes of working practices as part of self-marketing (see [Chapter 5](#)) readily appealed to amateur cine users within the region's managerial and professional classes. If as Burton suggests, use of film by the co-operative movement for promotion and publicity both in and beyond its regional roots in Lancashire contributes to a fuller understanding of British workers' cinema and use of film on the Left, amateur practice affirms that bourgeois interests in filming people working were also flourishing.⁴¹

This book charts a more liberal interest that remains distinctively different from the filmic activities undertaken by and on behalf of the British Left. Its ideological messages may be less apparent but the footage still discloses contemporary concerns, attitudes and often the perspectives of the person behind the camera. Amateur fiction and non-fictional material exude prevailing understanding and sensibilities. Their subjects range from identity (personal, family and civic to national level), to contemporary issues (from animals in zoos and anti-war protests to urban development). Their geographical scale extends from the micro-politics of children playing or a family reunion to migration, travel, living or working overseas and Cold War politics. The cine-camera became a new form of personal expression, something through which people could make visual statements that, in different hands and on different occasions, could inspire, educate, entertain and, at times, be shocking. Almost in anticipation of Reithian principles of public broadcasting, some amateurs saw how their motion pictures could have considerable impact upon family members, friends and others who became their audiences at home and elsewhere. Cine equipment offered a new democratic means of participating in everyday life as amateur filmmakers found themselves in the role of commentators, journalists, record-makers and chroniclers at local and civic level.⁴²

Unsurprisingly, there are echoes of the middle-class social engagement found among members of Britain's documentary film movement during the

1930s.⁴³ Amateurs shot local interest films as well as footage of relief work undertaken by Britain's Quakers during the Spanish Civil War.⁴⁴ Missionaries, teachers, government representatives, military personnel, and others filmed overseas too.⁴⁵ For some cine users, being there, witnessing and personal filmmaking was an antidote to the tide of visual factual and fictive narratives now washing through many people's lives and localities. For others, trying their hand at fictional story-telling brought pleasure and companionship. Yet the value of film in society still divided opinion even at the highest level.⁴⁶ For the Burnley cabinet-maker who became a woodwork teacher and filmmaker (see [Chapter 6](#)), the struggle to convince his local education department as to film's classroom benefits reveals that the British establishment was still far from unanimous in acknowledging film's potential as visual information.

Notwithstanding ideological differences, amateur enthusiasts increased in number during the 1930s as cameras became easier and more efficient to use. Technical improvements included experiments with synchronising sound and film production. Standard 8mm colour film appeared in 1932. Different sound projectors were commercially available in Britain by 1933 for showing films on 16mm at home, while in 1937 Pathé launched its Pathé Vox, a sound projector system for 9.5mm film. Eastman Kodak continued to adapt professional design features for the amateur market: technical developments included variable shutter speed, reflex viewing, wide angle and telephoto lens facilities, and a detachable film magazine that enabled easier loading and reloading of longer film lengths.⁴⁷ Cameras gained built-in light meters, and moved from being hand-cranked and clockwork-operated to being electric-driven. The widening choice of camera and projector equipment influenced how usage and practice evolved. There are instances of filmmakers who started in c.1925 using 9.5mm and within four years had changed to using 16mm.⁴⁸ Many enthusiasts did not simply replace equipment as new products appeared, despite the wishes of the manufacturers, and, from early on, people became accustomed to working with specific types of film gauge and camera. A minority of early amateurs also used 35mm film but the equipment's bulkiness limited filming to within the grounds of the family home.⁴⁹ Practical rather than financial reasons may account for these instances of a novelty hobby being discontinued within a few years, judging by the amount of high-quality footage that sometimes depicts a few garden parties, people playing tennis and other domestic scenes.

Another major innovation was the introduction of colour film for 16 and 9.5mm equipment by the mid-1930s. Colour film had been available earlier but the new potential for obtaining rich and natural colours was profoundly

exciting for amateur filmmakers. In contrast to its more widespread adoption in the United States, use of colour film by British amateurs remained fairly limited until the early 1950s, and during the Second World War it disappeared almost completely. Surviving colour footage from the later 1930s probably reflects the income level of early hobbyists. Some footage of families at home and on holiday combined monotone with colour, perhaps indicating variations in availability (see [Chapter 7](#)). As wartime approached and stocks dwindled, filmmakers saved colour for particular moments, for instance a child's christening or first birthday or a specific scenic stretch of a touring holiday. Captured in bright colour, these moments seem to have had particular significance in an era when newsreel and commercial footage were still predominantly in black and white. At times the shifts between colour and monotone seem to have no obvious reason other than film being loaded in a hurry or at random. Through the 1940s, the amateur use of black and white footage predominated. One exception, a headteacher's eleven-minute film of his primary school made using black and white as well as colour during 1942, is discussed elsewhere.⁵⁰ Rationing, as evidenced by the survival of amateurs' correspondence and ration slips, also limited postwar colour film availability. Many filmmakers continued to use black and white filmstock or to combine small amounts of colour with monotone in the late 1940s much as they had done a decade earlier.

Retrenchment and resurgence

Amateur activity did not stop entirely during wartime, either among those left at home or among those on active service. Archival records from the Imperial War Museum and other collections attest to instances of military personnel who took their cameras with them but the amount of material is generally less than from among American and some Commonwealth units that saw active service.⁵¹ Costs and the still socially restricted availability of cine equipment probably account for this difference, and surviving examples of cine footage tend to derive from military personnel in higher-ranking positions.⁵² Footage filmed at home during the war years likewise offers a representation of society and self through predominantly middle-class eyes. Gender, class, status, generation and place affected who was available to record images at home or with their local cine club. Some wartime amateur footage derives from particular circumstances, for instance filmstock being available to a filmmaker ostensibly for other purposes including the making of training films, or a filmmaker not seeing active service for personal or occupational-related reasons.

Cine-cameras remained in use in some homes throughout the Second World War. Holidays, outings, birthdays, weddings and other family events were important occasions to document, perhaps the cinematic memory gaining new significance as a record of events being missed by absent family members. Sports days, camping trips and more routine aspects of school life likewise remained popular material to film. Activities associated with wartime attracted attention, including drill and training practice by home guard, scout groups and other local volunteers who assumed auxiliary wartime roles. Cine groups made instructional films on topics that included local emergency planning, disaster management and road safety. National and civic events attracted individual filmmakers' attention, so records survive of War Weapon Week in Bolton,⁵³ community commemorative events, royal visits, parades and wreath-laying. As with any photographic image taken after or at the start of a period of absence, the apparent jauntiness of soldiers being filmed during return visits home on leave or departing for service carries weightier undertones amidst the general air of jollity that pervades much of the surviving wartime family footage.⁵⁴

After the war, the amateur scene changed greatly (see [Chapter 2](#)). Although some cine clubs had suspended their activities by the end of 1939, regular meetings resumed after 1946 and new societies arose as interests grew. Sometimes new or revitalised clubs emerged from just two or three like-minded enthusiasts joining together after years of restricted activity. Technical improvements in strategic and professional camera design gained commercial application and, as the relative costs diminished, amateur cine photography attracted a wider following. Recreational filmmaking reasserted itself as a more broadly based leisure activity and, where personal details are known, it is clear that between the late 1940s and mid-1950s more films were produced by white collar and public or commercial service sector workers, including teachers, civil servants and office staff.

Hobby filmmaking documented a new phase of domesticity postwar. Its novelty combined with the desire to establish or return to family life. Its focus and escapism also distracted from the destabilising effects of death, injury, separation and other problems of readjustment. While permitting familial focus, nascent club structures offered peacetime scope for legitimate male non-sporting activity and companionship outside the home. Among the broadening managerial, commercial, public service and professional middle classes of postwar Britain, cine-cameras became an affordable accessory to record and memorialise early years of national peace and social and economic

reconstruction. Renewed production of prewar models, sometimes with little more than a name change or minor change in design, occurred in the immediate aftermath of war. Sales swelled as first-time camera users were able to purchase from a profusion of new and improved products. They filmed offspring born into the postwar baby boom and charted each progression from cot to walking, pedalling their first tricycle and sitting on swings in the local park. Cameras monitored other shifts in family and economic status, including the move to a new house, buying a car and the first (and subsequent) holiday abroad.

National events including the Festival of Britain, the Coronation and diverse centennial civic anniversaries provided additional impetus for new cinephiles.⁵⁵ Improvements to the smaller film gauges and simpler camera design attracted new users, while the launch of more affordable amateur colour film that no longer included a processing charge within the selling price led to competitive rates among different companies. Standard 8mm filmstock gained wider use in Britain during the 1950s, gradually moving into the 9.5mm market that persisted well into the later 1960s but, unlike in France, never regained its prewar popularity. Meanwhile 16mm became the preserve of the more serious non-professional and remained important across Britain for some club productions.

Amateur cinema, boosted by cheaper materials, better colour filmstock and a stream of publications, thus ceased to be a minority leisure activity and was taken up increasingly by men, some couples and, more rarely, single women during the later 1950s and 1960s. Kodak's launch in 1965 of the Super 8, shortly to be followed by Fuji's Single 8 version of an equivalent cassette-loading system, widened cine photography's appeal further. The positioning of the sprocket holes on the film made splicing and home editing easier and the resultant projected picture larger. Trimly designed cine-cameras, largely made from plastic and which operated with an easily loaded cartridge system that allowed the film to run through the camera, attracted fresh interest. Making and showing home movies no longer required specialist knowledge and people could point and shoot with their lightweight camera just as they could take multiple holiday snaps in colour. Enthusiasts claimed that democratisation of amateur cinematography had been achieved in just over forty years. People could take their cameras on honeymoons, package holidays, days out, into their local school, place of work and elsewhere. They could replicate the quirkiness of such broadcast successes as *Candid Camera* (presented by Bob Monkhouse on British television, 1960–67), relive special occasions or enhance their own importance through showing films about themselves and others in

their living rooms to family and friends. In some families, 'the man with the camera' was dad, granddad or an uncle with an interest in recording family life. Some couples became seriously involved in filmmaking as a shared hobby, and sometimes became actively involved with a local cine society too. While regional news coverage gradually spread from its introduction to television in 1957,⁵⁶ amateur cinema enabled ordinary people, with no previous expertise in using a camera, to be able to tell their own stories about how, where and with whom they lived.

In one sense amateur film passed from being a specialist leisure activity to being an adjunct of modern living.⁵⁷ Prices continued to restrict use and availability. Passing around snapshots from a still camera remained cheaper and easier than showing films even on the living room wall. Social changes perhaps meant that family gatherings – the typical audience for many home movies – happened less frequently than in the past. The cost of four-minute films, together with their processing and postage meant that they did not reach everyone. Film was used sparingly even by many who did take up the hobby, attracted by the availability of second-hand equipment and cheaper models. Even from the later 1960s, certain sections of Britain's population remain underrepresented within the visual historical record of amateur film footage that has so far reached Britain's regional film archives. Amateur films depicting family life within Britain's Black and Asian communities remain very rare, although it seems possible that some material may still not have come to the attention of public archives. Exceptions exist, as in the personal films of Raj Malhotra, whose filmmaking included personal footage shot at and close to his home in Coventry as well as extensive coverage of public events, including marches, concerts and demonstrations where he filmed his friends and associates within the Indian Workers' Association.⁵⁸

Widening ethnic diversity found within the medical and other professions during the 1970s also means that family footage of life at home and with friends as well as overseas holidays may be found within regional archival collections, as shown by footage of the Misty and Kapur families made in the North West and during holidays in India (see [Chapter 7](#)). The adoption of children of mixed parentage or other backgrounds into cine-wielding white families occasionally offers glimpses too of households that sought to defy prejudices in postwar Britain.⁵⁹ Younger filmmakers, of varied backgrounds, attracted by the cine-camera's potential as a tool for visual expression and documentary, also helped to diversify the contexts in which cine footage was made. Experimental films, perhaps unconsciously exploring issues of identity and belonging, made

by Jem Norris on Super 8 in the early 1970s used Victorian funerary art and family-owned antique toy lead soldiers. Menelik Shabazz, already emerging as a figure within what Cameron Bailey has described as the 'cinema of duty' socially engaged strand of 1970s Black British filmmaking, used a cine-camera to produce uncompromising imagery of crowd restraint and police violence during the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival.⁶⁰ Alongside the use of personal and found footage already popular in avant-garde artistic circles on both sides of the Atlantic and well-suited for reworking into new productions,⁶¹ cine equipment acquired fresh status for its facility in producing documentary realist and eye-witness material. Cine-cameras had also become cheap enough for Britain's growing numbers of university students to receive as a birthday present or to purchase after a summer vacation working.

Amateur film never attracted the mass appeal sought by its early exponents, but by the mid- to later 1960s, it attracted enthusiasts who varied in gender, age, background and occupation. Changes in family life, leisure time and, above all, the introduction of the video camera and its rapidly developed compatibility with television for home screening, from the later 1970s precipitated the gradual decline of popular interest in cine film. It seems ironic that the very time when cine equipment reached its lowest price relative to other consumer goods, and when membership levels in many cine societies were at their peak, video technologies began to undermine amateur practice.⁶² While some societies accepted video users within their midst and adapted their names to accommodate changing practice and preferences among some of their members, the new technology's arrival was more contentious among other parts of the formal network. Its cassette-loading format, different ways of being edited and then playback via a television seemed far removed from the painstaking techniques of working with small-gauge film and a projector. In common with the history of Britain's organised recreational activity during the 1970s and 1980s, cine clubs witnessed falling membership and regular attendance at meetings dropped (see [Chapter 2](#)). Across the regions, nonetheless, many enthusiasts and cine societies continue to make films. Indeed some groups still remain active, often with small numbers of dedicated and sometimes now quite elderly members. Many of today's amateurs are also already retired or close to retirement. [Chapter 2](#) taps into the determination and enthusiasm that typifies Britain's amateur filmmaking scene during the past half century. This, in essence, is the British amateur film movement that this book seeks to explore through reference to its societies, filmmakers, specialist literature and, in particular, the films produced between the mid-1920s and c.1977.