Movies on Home Ground

Movies on Home Ground: Explorations in Amateur Cinema

Edited by

Ian Craven

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INTRODUCTION

A VERY FISHY TALE: THE CURIOUS CASE OF AMATEUR SUBJECTIVITY

IAN CRAVEN

A Very Fishy Tale is a 12-minute, silent "film play", put together by prize-winning amateur movie-maker Frank Marshall, during the summer of 1938. One of numerous drama shorts scattered through the amateur archive, the film marks a genre encouraged insistently and explored enthusiastically within the cine sector, throughout the interwar and post-1945 periods. Indicative of broader trends within a non-professional cinema increasingly organised as hobby movement, it also offers a typical example of Marshall's own steady output of such whimsical "kailyard" narratives: of the 120 or so projects completed before his death in 1979, around 50% fall comfortably into this popular category.[1] Most featured, as here, confined dramatic scenarios, involving the filmmaker's relatives or friends playing conspicuously typed roles, settings around the suburban home or various holiday locations visited by the Marshall family, and a mildly didactic attitude towards story-telling; like similar efforts such as *Payment Deferred* (1941), *Early Birds* (1956), or *Dream Holiday* (1970), *A Very Fishy Tale* is very much a parable or fable.

The combination of "kinship casting", lococentric emphasis, and vaguely "improving" narrative ambition involved, is suggestive of the mixed motivations of much amateur filmmaking—here stranding the

[1] Marshall (1896-1979) worked enthusiastically across a range of genres during his long amateur cine career: early "industrials" include *Filters and Filtration* (1934) and *From Byre to Buyer* (1949); domestic record movies such as *Our Fifth Anniversary* (1932) and *At Muriel's Wedding* (1955) are much in evidence; travelogues include *Pitlochry Welcomes You* (1958) and *Weekend in Skye* (1962), whilst "avant-garde" attitudes are well represented in work between *All On A Summer's Day* (1933) and *Joys of the Open Road* (1961).

finished text somewhere between the domestic record movie, holiday picture and one-reel "story film". A distinctive fusion of emulatory "fictional" realism, with the actuality emphases of more obviously "home mode" production, is particularly apparent,[2] indexing an aesthetic hybridisation designed to accommodate both the private-immediate and more public-distanced audiences, potentially addressed by such a work, within its envisaged exhibition environments. As the listing of family members in the credits implies, such films functioned as both memory texts (within the home) activating reminiscence for those involved, and as incentives to altogether less personal fiction-building and appreciation by the outsider (within the club, or even more public sphere such as the festival). A surviving leader-strip, inserted prior to the main title, reminds us also that *A Very Fishy Tale* was in part conceived as a competition film, entered in the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers' (IAC's) recently formalised "Ten Best" event, and recognised in the "Specially Commended" category, possibly proving something of a disappointment for its maker when it did so, following earlier successes.[3]

The narrative premise of *Fishy Tale* concerns "novice" ambitions realised and "experienced" orthodoxies over-turned, involving an endorsement of the underdog, echoed in a host of other such apparently idiosyncratic exercises. To summarise for the sake of clarity: captivated by his father's fly-tying expertise, a small boy begs to accompany his parent on a fishing trip, but is rebuffed: not to be outdone, the youngster improvises a rod, line, and hooks, from "borrowed" materials, and tackles up on the riverbank as his father does likewise, somewhere further downstream. Both settle into an afternoon's angling, as parallel editing establishes the motif of comparative enterprise that will persist throughout the remainder of the film. (see Figs. Intro-1 and -2) Despite the interruptions of nearby chickens (which steal his live-bait, and force the substitution of a feather lure), a troublesome cow (which makes off with

[2] "Home Mode" production is defined and explored in Chalfen, "Cinema Naiveté", 87.

[3] Collaboration on *All On A Summer's Day* (1933) had helped that film to gain an award in the "Interest" category at the first Scottish Amateur Film Festival, in October 1933. Marshall had, more recently, gained an "amateur oscar" for his earlier—and very similarly fashioned—work, *Christmas* (1937) in the IAC "Ten Best" competition of 1938. Many other prizes followed, including "Highly Commended" for *Coming of the Camerons* (1944) at the 1945 IAC National Contest, and "A" classification for *Mower Madness* (1938) at the 1947 UNICA festival.

Fig. Intro-1 frame enlargement from *A Very Fishy Tale* (1938)
Source: Scottish Screen Archive

Fig. Intro-2 frame enlargement from *A Very Fishy Tale* (1938)
Source: Scottish Screen Archive

his gear), and other very literal entanglements (with surrounding undergrowth), the boy eventually succeeds in hooking and landing a sizeable fish, apparently under the nose of a patrolling game-keeper. His father meanwhile, equipped with full—one is tempted to suggest "professional"—tackle, catches nothing, and reluctantly abandons his pitch in disappointment. As the latter wanders homewards, he encounters his son, who displays his own catch proudly, makes his father a gift of his improvised lure, and offers advice on how to maximise chances of success in the future. (see Fig. Intro-3)

Fig. Intro-3 frame enlargement from *A Very Fishy Tale* (1938)
Source: Scottish Screen Archive

Father responds with appreciation and the film ends, as it began, with a neatly titled credit, introducing a formal symmetry beloved of amateur construction, which (quite literally) mirrors (via reversal dupe) the opening image of "tiddlers" swimming tirelessly upstream.

As with much of Marshall's early work, the fictional world of *Fishy Tale*, populated by apparently well-to-do nuclear families, surrounded by typed functionaries, tells us a great deal about the social milieu of such amateur filmmaking in the 1930s. Proudly displaying its coveted *Amateur Cine World* (ACW) leader-strip ahead of its titles, it speaks too of the "official" aesthetic preferences of the organised cine movement, within

which Marshall himself would subsequently play such a prominent role.[4] In a conceptual vein however, perhaps appropriate to this introductory context, the movie might also be seen as generating certain theoretical perspectives, and as tracing latent meanings for the amateur itself, thereby suggesting a useful starting point for an exploration, more specifically, of the amateur "subjectivities" at stake in a number of the essays which follow. Such an appropriation of *A Very Fishy Tale* takes its lead from the film's own understated but unmistakeable instructionalism (offering a decidedly self-conscious advertisement for the superiority of amateur approaches) and from the discursive contexts of the sector from which it emerges, within which the status and capacity of amateurism figures as a question of persistent and unresolved concern. Its focus on angling too seems to register a curiously privileged recreational instance in the evolving theoretical literatures.[5]

Social Worlds and Diverse Ambitions

Valuable explorations of the origins and forms of cine amateurism have emerged in a range of disciplinary contexts, elaborated around concerns with technological innovation (the introduction of "sub-standard" equipments offer valuable case studies), the production and maintenance of the modern family (especially in the case of the home movie), and innovative media practices shaped by the application of industrial method in the cultural sphere, and varieties of critical and more "leisure-based" responses towards them.[6] On the evidence of the essays presented here, a

[4] Marshall remained a prominent figure on the Scottish, British and international film scene for almost forty years. An early member of the Meteor Film Producing Society formed in 1932, and supporter of the Scottish Educational Film Association formed in 1935, Marshall was elected first Chairman of the Scottish Association of Amateur Cinematographers on its creation in 1949, and subsequently served on the Board of the Scottish Film Council until 1972. An active member of UNICA, Marshall reported regularly on the organisation's activities for *Amateur Cine World* and other amateur cine publications.

[5] See for example, Hobson, "Leisure Value Systems and Recreational Specialization: the Case of Trout Fishermen", 174-187.

[6] Particularly valuable inroads are made by Kattelle, 2000, who tracks significant relationships between technical innovation and social practice; Zimmermann, 1995, whose "social history" of amateur film places an early emphasis on the role of ideology in forming amateur practices and institutions; Chalfen, 1987, whose ethnography of suburban home-movie-making illustrates a film practice and senses of creative virtue very much at odds with those of professional counterparts, and Hogenkamp and Lauwers, 1993, whose study of the motivations for "hobby

promising basis for the extension of such studies now derives from a return to emphases on the *voluntary* aspects of amateurism stressed by early commentators. Bliss Perry's reminder, in a 1904 essay appropriately entitled "Fishing With A Worm", that amateur participation is "not a necessary, but a freely assumed activity, born of surplusage of vitality", grounds approaches subsequently assuming firmer academic definition within the domains of Leisure Studies, and provides a connective thread through much of the material presented here on the more specific case of amateur cine.[7]

A particularly useful body of scholarship might be anchored around the work of Robert Stebbins, a key voice within the sociology of recreation over the past thirty years or so, and an active empirical researcher into those variants of leisure activity possessing a conspicuously amateur dimension (most obviously sport, science, entertainment and the arts) akin to amateur cine. Stebbins himself has worked suggestively on the cultures of amateur theatre and amateur music, spheres usefully located well towards the "expressive" end of discursive practice, and obviously both intimately related to the rise of hobby filmmaking—from the mid-1920s many cine clubs develop as off-shoots from drama groups, whilst local music societies often trigger film production alongside audio recording activity. A particular virtue of Stebbins' work in this context is its synthetic approach, and its stress on the formative contexts of amateurism's "occupational contact network". From this perspective, creative outcomes are understood as symptomatic of multiple-determinations and contradictory needs, played out across a "social world"—a phenomenon understood in David Unruh's succinct definition as simply: "a form of social organisation, which could, conceivably, create a common 'world view' and encompass the entire life-round of social actors."[8]

Attention to the formalised "scenes" of the amateur, via the participant-observation that Stebbins undertakes in *Amateurs on The Margin Between Work and Leisure* and elsewhere, typically reveals a diverse range of ambitions, investments, anxieties, and pleasures in play within such social worlds, of which "realised" outcomes are seen to speak in remarkably pertinent and often highly *self-conscious* ways.[9] Ongoing study outlines a

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filmmaking" draw attention specifically to the importance of memory-making activity in the maintenance of "psychic security".

[7] Perry, "Fishing With A Worm", 162.

[8] Unruh, "The Nature of Social Worlds", 274.

[9] Stebbins, 1979; such formulations of "serious" leisure and "modern" amateurism" have stimulated a wide range of work in leisure studies. The "Serious Leisure

typical network of elements that help to map the social world of the recreational sportsperson, scientist, entertainer or artist, charting an imagined universe within which his or her amateur subjectivity will be projected and introjected, nurtured and sustained. Crucially, seven elements—all readily traceable in the case of amateur cine culture—emerge as axiomatic: *groups*, *events*, *routines*, *protocols*, *organisations*, *resources*, and *discourses* are all seen as playing key roles in maintaining self-definitions—which provide persistent points of reference for the non-professional "cine-participant", nurturing the "special beliefs, values, moral principles, norms and performance standards" seen as characterising the very ideology of amateurism.[10] Such networks are seen as framing the amateur as an essentially leisure pursuit, which expresses devotion to the activity involved, and generates forms of pleasurable gratification, rather than accountable remuneration—pointing towards oft-quoted definitions of the amateur as "lover" rather than worker—but never precluding levels of rational organisation and assessment akin to those of the more commercially-minded professional.[11]

What Stebbins recognises immediately, thanks to his familiarity with actual practitioners as well as definitional discourses, is that pleasurable gratification arises in *various* forms, and that the negotiation of these varieties helps to identify persistent fault-lines cutting across the generalised space of the amateur, enabling recognition of diverse configurations of its social world, and a range of attitudinal positions within it. Various essays contained here suggest clearly how such symptomatic differences find expression in the spectrum of discursive positions adopted by festival judging panels, editorial commentaries, and the promotional strategies of equipment manufacturers, as well in the preferred forms of more localised creative projects and outcomes. Stebbins' modelling therefore of the amateur's social world is scarcely monolithic, and indeed places a particular stress on the uneven-ness of its development, and tendency to fragment into cliques, factions and "subworlds".

One of Stebbins' enduring contributions in this context is his early establishment of a basic dynamic within leisure culture, between what he terms simply *serious* and *casual* activity.[12] Refining earlier taxonomies of

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Perspective" website: *www.soci.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure*, provides an invaluable point of entry into this ever-expanding field.

[10] Stebbins, "A Conceptual Statement", 257.

[11] Deren, "Amateur Versus Professional", 45.

[12] A basic formulation of the distinction is offered in Stebbins, "Two Sociological Definitions, 582-588.

involvement, the dynamic is elaborated across a substantial body of scholarship.[13] Synthesising a range of relevant formulations, the respective attributes which emerge might be tabulated thus:

SERIOUS LEISURE	CASUAL LEISURE
perseverance	intermittent interest
systematic pursuit	randomised distraction
special ethos	subsidiary element
careerist character	playful character
calculated	instinctive
outcome-oriented	process-oriented

Many other qualifications might be inserted of course, and as Stebbins reminds us, what's indicated here are "poles of a complicated dimension" rather than any set of fixed alternatives, but the general picture seems clear.[14] Although not without longer term benefits and costs, *casual* leisure is the domain of the "player, dabbler or novice" and remains typically "fleeting, mundane and commonplace";[15] *serious* leisure, by contrast, assumes many of the attributes of paid employment undertaken on professional terms, whilst remaining non-remunerative:

> serious leisure refers to the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participants to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge.[16]

Stebbins' distinction is valuable here in allowing us to become more inclusive and "connective" about the instance of amateur cinema (necessarily seen as embracing a range of rather different investments in filmmaking), enabling linkage between apparently idiosyncratic participations, and encouraging sensitivity to the aggregated motives and structural relations,

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[13] David Unruh, for example, distinguishes between "strangers, tourists, regulars and insiders", whose involvements are all readily traceable in the case of amateur cine's social world. See Unruh, "The Nature of Social Worlds", 280-282.

[14] Stebbins, "A Conceptual Statement", 255. The basic distinction may suggest further categorisations, such as "Project-based Leisure", defined as "a short-term, moderately complicated, either one-shot or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking", in Stebbins, "Project-Based Leisure", 2. Such a categorisation is especially pertinent to Ruth Washbrook's discussion of cine competition culture elsewhere in this volume.

[15] Stebbins, "Costs and Benefits of Hedonism", 308-309, and "A Conceptual Statement", 258.

[16] Stebbins, "Serious Leisure", 3.

evidenced in particular non-professional stances (from the would-be filmic auteur, to the serial experimentalist, to the pre-professional trainee dreaming of "cross-over", to the "point and shoot" tourist, and even the home cinema "technicist"—with less interest in the outcomes of pushing the exposure button than the performance of his or her equipment). Suggestive examples of possible configurations emerge throughout this volume, confirming the flexibility and utility of Stebbins' paradigm, and an underlying politics of amateur intervention.

A range of possible inclinations and a tangle of motivations and ambitions are clearly at stake here. Scrutiny of British amateur cine culture confirms quickly wider suspicions that "casual" hedonism and "serious" careerism are rarely mutually-exclusive tendencies, but more often regarded as welcome counter-balances. The co-dependency of the instincts—and the legitimisation of both—is quickly underlined, for example, on examining definitional discourses circulated within amateur cine's "social world" by service publications and specialist hobby literatures. Both a matter of standardising a definition of appropriate practices and goals, and of negotiating between diverse interests and priorities, such materials characterise the amateur sector as an endlessly contested sphere, an emphasis shared by a number of the essays which follow.

The address of journal publications such as *Home Movies and Home Talkies* (HMHT) (1932-1940), *Amateur Cine World* (ACW) (1934-1967), and *Amateur Movie Maker* (AMM) (1957-1964) for example, provides orientation for a spread of—more or less "serious"—cine constituencies. Like the specialist titles characterising any organised amateur culture, each represents a sometimes uncertain fusion of the trade journal and popular magazine, offering collations of the consequential and the trivial, interspersing "definitive" technical articles that should be "retained for reference" and ephemeral inclusions, aimed at distraction and temporary pleasure ("just to raise a smile"). Precisely "semi-formal" in Stebbins' suggestive characterisation, the rhetoric of particular articles often veers between an unapologetic high seriousness, and a kind of self-mockery: interestingly, all three titles include—alongside photographic exposure tables and electrical impedance charts—cartoon strips and light-hearted graphics, parodying the very activities which much of the rest of their content elaborates with such obvious conviction.[17]

[17] Stebbins places a recurrent emphasis on the importance of "semi-formal" communication in the maintenance of amateur social worlds. One of his most recent explorations of the terms occurs in "Erasing the Line Between Work and Leisure", 9.

From their opening editorials, HMHT and ACW strike a serious editorial tone, expressing tangible senses of mission. Both associate themselves with a "maturing" of amateur cinematography, and the organisation and centralisation of a "movement". HMHT unashamedly sets out to make itself "an institution" essential to the amateur cine "worker", defining its role around the provision of technical support and information, and reserving column space for formal concerns with the attributes of the "well-made" amateur movie. The initial editorial comments:

> Each month we shall endeavour to give you help and guidance in taking, editing, and showing your pictures—in selecting the right backgrounds and "props"—in finding good subjects for "family films", in choosing the right apparatus at the right price; in fact, in doing all the things you want to do—*better*.[18]

ACW perhaps styles itself in slightly less presumptuous terms, addresses a readership conceived with palpably more international reference, and defines its role as "opening up the limitless pleasures to be derived from the intelligent use of the camera and projector". With the editors dedicating themselves to coverage of their milieu as a whole "world", and the raising of standards via a practice of constructive criticism, manifesto ambitions are considerable indeed:

> We shall not hesitate to criticise where we think criticism is necessary. It is only thus, we think, that we can deserve and retain the confidence and goodwill of our readers. Beginner and advanced enthusiast alike will find their needs catered for in our pages, for we seek to make *Amateur Cine World* completely representative of the amateur cine movement. Our title implies it.[19]

Alongside the stentorian tones of serious amateurism, softer notes are again being struck however: even as the amateur "worker" is encouraged to adhere to stricter codes and more rational procedures, casual variants are acknowledged and legitimised within the spirit of inclusiveness animating amateur cine in this formative phase. Amateur cinema is thus recognised as a "hobby"—as well as something more serious, usually termed a "craft"—thus casualised practices sit side-by-side with more dedicated enterprise and investment. HMHT even sponsors and develops a "circles movement" which it recognises alongside the "club" sector as a

[18] Harris, "The Editor's News-Reel", 7.
[19] Malthouse, "The Editor to His Readers", 5.

less formal, more primarily social network of like-minded "funsters", linked by "round robin" packages of films and diaries, rather than by weekly meetings, collective projects or the galvanising deadlines of competition entry.[20] Suggesting its ideological necessity, ACW re-launches and helps to sustain this "circles" movement well into the 1950s and beyond,[21] before AMM acknowledges hedonism as a more key—and freshly legitimised—strand of amateurism as the 1960s approach, in terms which suggest a long-cultivated seriousness giving way to something more topical and casual:

> Over the years *Amateur Cine World* has come to be known as the amateur's Bible. We do our best to present a full compendium of fact and opinion every month, and take some pride in the authority which the magazine has attained throughout the world. Coming from the same stable, *Amateur Movie Maker* will be no less authoritative, but its main object will be to serve the comparative beginner who does not want to delve too deeply into cine.[22]

AMM then develops along these lines as a publication geared towards an altogether more casual readership: "we are dedicated editorially to the belief that film-making is fun!"[23]

Apocryphal Spheres and Invidious Contrasts

Stebbins expends much effort elaborating the dynamic between the serious and the casual illustrated here, in ever more sophisticated terms, but the main thrust of his work becomes increasingly historical, ever more concerned with the ways in which amateurism changes in relation to the shifting social contexts of modernity. Indeed the "splitting" of amateurism into the two variants recognised, is understood as a response in itself to a modernising cultural environment.

Both variants are seen as expressing senses of displacement. On the one hand, *serious* leisure represents a kind of compensation for the alienations of modernity: a space to express abilities, fulfil potentials and identify a subjectivity, in a manner no longer possible in the work-place or

[20] Harris, "Home Movie Cine Circles Leaders Wanted", 1933, 146; "The Good Companions: More about Home Movies Cine Circles", 1934, 302.
[21] Malthouse, "The ACW Cine Circles", 1951, 227-228; "Just Among Friends", 1951, 628; "Cine Circle Rally", 1957, 672.
[22] Rose, "First performance", 15.
[23] Ibid., 15.

domestic everyday, via a kind of median activity, akin to employment, but conducted in the name of play (Frank Marshall's amateur "career" seems to epitomise just such a model). *Casual* leisure, on the other hand, represents more of an evasion and a regression, a kind of longing for pre-social activity as sheer pastime, which regards success in incidental and fatalistic terms, rather than as a reward for calculated investment or scientific strategy (the serendipities of much "home mode" production perhaps?)—a strong sense of which is conspicuously at work in *Fishy Tale*, where expensive angling equipment proves ineffective, and the boy's catch is landed as much by luck as judgement. Interestingly, the operation of fate remains a remarkably persistent theme in suggestions for amateur "film play" production, as if speaking to such instincts, whilst seeking to negotiate and perhaps to transcend them.[24]

Following earlier observations of amateurism's evolution as response to the rise of professional cultures,[25] Stebbins sees *serious* leisure specifically as a kind of "modern amateurism" that infiltrates more ancient, and possibly more noble, amateur traditions—"the player of old in sport and music, was referred to as a gentleman", he reminds us.[26] At points, this feels like an account of the dilution of a "pure" amateur code, in favour of something compromising with, and increasingly *resembling*, the professional, with "modern amateurism" styling itself as a version, rather than a refusal of the professional ethos, and even seeking misrecognition *as* the professional. Although in the case of amateur cine, this tendency clearly comes to exist alongside, rather than to displace, the older tradition, with subsequent tension generated between resulting pulls towards an emulation of professional standards, and proponents of creative virtues imagined in altogether more "autonomous" and less outcome-oriented terms.[27] Stanley Godlovitch frames this elegantly as a distinction between a "strongly evaluative" *achievement-based* amateurism and an *attitude-based* amateurism "neutral as to results"—with the latter signalling an:

> aspect of amateurism deriving from its earlier tradition, but which is transfigured by modern preoccupations with institutional professionalism [and a] relative purity of spirit in a world in which career-building and the

[24] Rose, *Let's Make Movies*, 119-142.
[25] See Todd's essay "Amateur", 19.
[26] Stebbins, "Two Sociological Definitions", 583.
[27] See Godlovitch, "Amateurs, Professionals and the Ideal of the Creative Virtues", 354-367, for a useful discussion of traditional amateurism's more "autonomous" ambitions.

> desire for money, rank and status compromise many virtues which remain vital to traditions of creativity and enquiry.[28]

Illustrating well the network of instincts involved, the boy's father in *Fishy Tale* seems both to caricature and celebrate this older tradition (see Fig. Intro-4), resuscitating the disciplines and styles of the "gentlemanly", which amusingly prove no match for the more opportunistic pragmatisms of the present, and the promise of the modern amateur future, here represented by the young boy.

Fig. Intro-4 frame enlargement from *A Very Fishy Tale* (1938)
Source: Scottish Screen Archive

One of the things that Stebbins make clear, is that what's at stake here is a matter of choice: the amateur can adopt a serious or casual approach, but that either way, his or her achievement will be measured against an absolute standard—in this case that defined by the mainstream professionalised cinema. The decision about how to proceed as an amateur is indeed triggered by *confrontation* with such definitional criteria on a day-to-day basis, especially in the sphere of cultural production. Encounter with the spectacular realisation of such standards here is routine-ised and intensified within modernity, by the increasingly insistent provision of

[28] Ibid., 355.

cultural goods (as services, performances or products), mass-produced to high tolerances, and delivered with an awesome regularity and efficiency inconceivable in earlier periods. It takes little effort to construe the commercial cinema of the 1930s, circulating somewhere in the background of *A Very Fishy Tale*, as epitomising this very modern—and intimidating—provision. Technically reinvigorated by the arrival of sound, and increasingly anchored by the formal protocols of the "classical", it is no coincidence that such a cinema quickly forms a very axiom of the "culture industry" within founding texts of Cultural Studies such as those generated by the Frankfurt School. In Adorno and Horkheimer's celebrated formulation, it quickly emerges as an ideological apparatus deemed socially coercive in its construction of the subject as consumer and *reproducer*, rather than genuine originator, of social meanings:

> Far more strongly than the theatre of illusion, film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination—contained by the film's framework but unsupervised by its precise actualities—without losing the thread… The withering of imagination and spontaneity in the consumer of culture today need not be traced back to psychological mechanisms. The products themselves, especially the most characteristic, the sound film, cripple those faculties through their objective makeup.[29]

Stebbins' would-be amateur participant appreciates the proficiency—if not the political and social effectivity—of such "apparatuses" more intensely than most:

> With today's mass availability of professional performances (or products), whatever the field, new standards of excellence confront all participants, whether professional or not. The performances of the professionals are frequently impressive for anyone who beholds them, but no one is more impressed than the non-professional participant who, through direct experience, knows the activity intimately. Once he becomes aware of the professional standards, all that he has accomplished there seems mediocre by comparison.[30]

Social encounter with the professional is then imagined here in distinctly primal terms, with its modern spectacle figured as a dazzling image, which may well prove incapacitating. Elizabeth Todd concurs in 1930 that such confrontation with the provisions of the culture industry may block productive instincts:

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[29] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Enlightenment as Mass Deception", 99-100.
[30] Stebbins, "Two Sociological Definitions", 583.

> The radio and moving pictures, social intercourse based on objective amusement, have made the individual of the present generation very largely a recipient rather than a communicant. He is more inclined to pay for his recreation than to supply it through his own efforts.[31]

Squaring such theoretical disincentives to participation with the steady expansion of organised leisure activity represented by the growth of amateur cine, represents a considerable critical challenge, and the inertias of "spectatoritis" will haunt even enthusiast discourse for decades.[32] For Adorno and Horkheimer, non-professional "transmissions" can only be acknowledged as a prelude to political dismissal:

> No mechanism of reply has been developed, and private transmissions are condemned to unfreedom. They confine themselves to the apocryphal sphere of "amateurs" who in any case, are organised from above.[33]

Subsequent social historians have tended to stress the more critical and creative dimensions of such voluntary "unfreedom". John Stevenson notes, for example, in *British Society 1914-1945*, that from the 1930s, a key reaction to the expansion of the culture industries was the growth, alongside mass commitment to particular activities, of more self-consciously specialised groups, furnished with managerial frameworks, dedicated literatures and retail outlets—described in terms which echo Stebbins closely, and anticipate emphases explored by essays included in the present volume:

> Dancing might have been a mass activity for millions on a *casual* basis, but a few thousand might take it *seriously* enough to develop ballroom dancing competitions, run dance schools and make it their principal leisure activity. Similarly, as jazz music became an increasingly commercialised and popular form, its *real devotees* formed themselves into jazz clubs and patronised more specialised outlets. The same thing happened in the cinema, where those impatient with an endless diet of Shirley Temple, George Formby or Clark Gable formed their own clubs or private cinemas to watch foreign-language films ... even individual leisure choices tended to operate within an increasingly *organised* and *centralised* framework. [34] [my emphasis]

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[31] Todd, "Amateur", 19.
[32] Czurles, "Art Creativity Versus Spectatoritis", 104-107.
[33] Adorno and Horkheimer, "Enlightenment as Mass Deception", 96.
[34] Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945*, 401-402.

For Stebbins, the aftermath of encounter with the professional is understood in more psychological terms, with the amateur struggling to resolve a complex—perhaps a "mediocrity" complex—that may develop along various lines, and stimulate conflicting drives.

Beyond incapacitating neurosis, or the distraction and carelessness often construed as the very essence of the "amateur*ish*", *Fishy Tale* reminds us that a memory may be formed in the encounter, that can easily institute a desire for participation—precisely the scenario played out at the start of the film in familial microcosm, as the small boy spies on his father through a closed window, and yearns to get involved. (see Fig. Intro-5) As well as retreats into the specialist "appreciation" of professional provision—a reading strategy understood as something more than mere consumption—outcomes may include a determination to succeed as producer "against the odds", a move characteristically expressed as the obsessiveness or over-ambitiousness, frequently reported in accounts of amateur enterprise. That such a "mediocrity complex" usually remains unresolved, is suggested perhaps by the *simultaneous* occurrence of such tendencies in differing strands of amateur activity, and in conspicuous attractions between them. In *Fishy Tale*—in one of a series of identificatory exchanges patterning the film—the boy seeks to emulate his father's (supposed) skill, whilst the father indulges a passion that allows him to regress (temporarily) to childhood. Through the work of the narration, serious and casual instincts are thus validated and re-charged, in an endless circuit of mutually reinforcing desires.

Stebbins' sense of amateurism as grounded in "lack" is certainly suggestive, sometimes palpably internalised within the cine sector, and surfacing within even the most encouraging of "how-to-do-it" discourses. Thus advice is often prefaced by an acknowledgement of disincentives and apparent obstacles. Tony Rose, editor of *Amateur Movie Maker* comments in his influential 1950s manual, for example:

> As he contemplates the vast complexities of the cinema industry and the many specialised skills which contribute to the production of a professional film, he [the novice amateur] may feel overwhelmed. How can he, with a minimum of equipment, little money, no studio and—possibly—a handful of helpers, hope to make a film that is worthy of the name?[35]

[35] Rose, *Let's Make Movies*, 9.

Fig. Intro-5 frame enlargement from *A Very Fishy Tale* (1938)
Source: Scottish Screen Archive

Even if accepted however, the formulation clearly authors a range of symptomatic amateur behaviours. Feelings of intimidation may find expression in, precisely, a "high" seriousness, that bespeaks a determination to match professional standards, or alternatively develop into a full-blown "inferiorism" and a casualness indexing a kind of refusal of identification, anticipating withdrawal into highly privatised spheres of activity, and very personal senses of affective value. In Stebbins' own summary:

> The amateur is faced with a critical choice in his career as participant: restrict identification with the activity to a degree sufficient to remain largely unaffected by such invidious contrasts, or identify with it to a degree sufficient to spark an attempt to meet those standards.[36]

Whilst probably indexing the latter, rather more than the former option—the "story film" is often seen as the most challenging of amateur genres precisely *because* it invites comparison with its professional counterpart[37]—and ratified in this ambition through its commendation by

[36] Stebbins, "The Amateur: Two Sociological Definitions", 583.
[37] Malthouse, "In Defence of the Film Play", 225-226; Malthouse, "Amateur Story Film", 122-127.

the judges of ACW's competition, *A Very Fishy Tale* also points nervously perhaps towards a third responsive option. Involving relish of amateur difference as potential *transcendence* of professional standards, this finds expression in senses that amateur movie-making retains a creative integrity now lost to the merely "proficient" cinemas of the "culture industries". For Godlovitch, quite unambiguously, amateur traditions "enshrine and preserve in an unmortgaged fashion the best that the professions aim to achieve", and reminders of creative virtues beyond the reach of professional codes, often assail the amateur filmmaker.[38] Review sections of cine journals, for example, routinely scrutinise professional as well as amateur movies, finding instructional value in mainstream releases, whilst critiquing the former's failure to reach amateur standards. Entirely without irony, reviewers may be found "congratulating" professional films, for being *almost* as good as amateur ones, in a determined re-configuration of Stebbins' field-of-force, to the advantage of the amateur.[39] Something of this instinctive superiorism is perhaps tangible in even as polite as narrative as *Fishy Tale*, where "sub-standard" resources and improvisatory approaches win out over their supposedly better equipped, and more rationalised professional counterparts.

What emerges from this glance at Frank Marshall's fatalistic little parable on amateur accomplishment, and Leisure Studies accounts of the non-professional participant? Certainly, a sense of the amateur practitioner as an anxious and unresolved subject, whether "serious" devotee or "casual" dilettante, and that the amateur sphere might be most productively understood critically—very much as it sees itself—as a *relational* category, rather than the separate zone implied by the notions of "independent" or "alternative" cinema to which such filmmaking has sometimes been assimilated.[40] Whatever its particular configuration, designation as amateur probably implies a parallel cine world, elaborated less according to intrinsic norms or customised counter-strategies, than "similar" agendas and unapologetically emulatory reflexes, suggesting a kind of "echo cinema" simultaneously struggling for its own resonances. As Tony Rose puts it succinctly: "I think we must face the fact that audiences' mental reactions to amateur films are conditioned largely by what they see at the local cinema or on television."[41]

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[38] Godlovitch, "Amateurs, Professionals and the Ideal of the Creative Virtues", 358, and "Lynx", "Why Not Try To Be Better?", 541-542.
[39] See for example, Hill, "Amateur Feature Beats Professional Picture", 560-562
[40] MacPherson, *Traditions of Independence*, 191-207.
[41] Rose, *Let's Make Movies*, 150.

Without pushing analogies too far, the value of *Fishy Tale* in this setting is that it helps us to see, within this peculiar field-of-force, just how deeply the professional functions as "alter ego" for a modern amateurism, involving a curiously self-conscious mix of resentments and infatuations. As the essays which follow suggest, the structures of feeling played out in this little film are reiterated in an endless inter-layering of identifications and refusals across much amateur cine activity. Contributors reveal inter-connectedness with the professional at articulated levels, from the institutional (competitions, societies, governing bodies), to the behavioural (protocols surrounding shooting, assembly, exhibition), to the aesthetic (the qualified simulation of and allusion to professional modes of representation), and throughout the extended discursive field (of journals, newsletters, and incidental commentary) effectively marking the boundaries of amateur cine's social world. Such linkages are certainly evident it seems, in apparently "innocent" little films about angling, and the limited appeals to the trout of even the most professionally-tied fly.

Implications and Explorations

Understandings of amateurism as a structured subjectivity formed within concrete historical conjunctures and evolving social relations, ground the explorations which follow, as they present a range of overlapping, but distinct perspectives, on the amateur cine enterprise from conception to consumption. Together, the essays volunteer a unified introduction to the study of amateur cinema, exploring its constitutive relationship with notions of "professional" film practice, and offering specific case studies of amateur film production, circulation and critical reception. Starting from loosely Leisure Studies perspectives, amateur cinema is understood throughout as a "social world", as well as an assembly of texts, or critical-creative project, defined by a rich network of determinants, practices and locations. To clarify continuities and discrete levels of analysis, the essays are divided loosely into three sections: addressing activities, controversies and creativities, which aim to sketch the borders of this extensive field.

Activities

Part I, focussed on "activities", explores selected dimensions of amateur cine's social world, as expressed in particular behaviours, shaped by questions of creative evaluation, equipment supply, and the development of neighbouring leisure cultures. Ruth Washbrook's opening discussion of the Scottish Amateur Film Festival (SAFF) provides a suggestive starting

point for the analysis, up-dating existing research on this key event in the amateur cine calendar for over fifty years, and offering a fascinating insight into the role of competition culture more generally within the amateur sector, variously endorsed as creative incentive, showcase for excellence, and stimulus to the overall improvement of technique.[42] Washbrook illuminates, in particular, ongoing tensions between SAFF's "serious" and "casual" participants, the work of evaluative discourse in disseminating aesthetic standards and cultural values, and the function of competitions in propagating a self-generated canon of amateur cinema, subsequently circulating alongside the authorised "Society" counterparts, discussed elsewhere in this volume. Such competitive activity is seen as playing a crucial role in integrating amateur cine culture, whilst simultaneously functioning as a prime site for direct contact with (and for some entrants, actual point of "cross-over" into…) the professional sector. In these contradictory respects, competitive activity is regarded as fundamental to "modern" amateur movie-making, helping to consolidate senses of an autonomous amateur cine world, whilst expressing and even realising dreams of cultural "equivalence" with the professional.

Technical specification plays a significant role within early definitions of amateur practice, initially seen as rooted, as Zimmermann notes in "nonconformity to more dominant professional standards."[43] Clare Watson's account of the Pathé company's 9.5mm "substandard" film gauge and its use as a medium for projecting films in Britain between 1924 and 1960, provides an opportunity to consider the significance of technical parameters in characterising amateur exhibition modes and their social uses, slowly emerging elsewhere as concerns in current scholarship.[44] Pathé launched their 9.5mm gauge in France in 1922, and from 1924 it was sold and distributed energetically in Britain by the Pathéscope Limited Company, as a compact standard which supposedly sacrificed nothing of the quality of broader formats, whilst offering users considerable cost-savings.[45] Although now primarily a collector's gauge, 9.5mm was widely used for over thirty years, both for the purposes of amateur filmmaking and for the domestic screening of professionally-

[42] Anon, "Our First Competition", 198-199; Malthouse, "Film Making and Film Judging", 990-1004; Watson, "How To Give Your Film A Better Chance", 106-117.
[43] Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, 12.
[44] Chalke, "Early Home Cinema", 223-230; Edmonds, "Amateur Widescreen", 401-413.
[45] Malthouse, "The Story of Pathéscope Apparatus." [Parts 1-3] 249-252; 367-369; 472-474.