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AMATEUR FILM INGENUITY: STYLISTIC INNOVATIONS AND RESISTANCE OUTSIDE THE INDUSTRY

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The French film director Eric Rohmer once said (through a translator), 'He thinks that these new technologies… he inspires himself a lot from amateur techniques, he thinks that amateurs often have one-up on professionals, because cinema's a very archaic art. For instance, he's very interested in video and cinema took a very long time to come to video'.[1] Others have seen amateur filmmaking as the perfect place to push the boundaries of what is technologically and stylistically possible; for example the animator Norman McLaren, the agitational filmmaker Peter Watkins, and the activities of the Widescreen Association.[2] The latter group has been described as significant because, 'The dynamic of the association differed from most cine clubs. It was progressive and experimental where others were conservative and reactionary'.[3] The following consideration of the Scottish amateur filmmaker Frank Marshall aims to explore *both* the experimental and reactionary tendencies of a single filmmaker, which in the process will reveal wider issues at stake within amateur cine culture.

The amateur film sector in Scotland was comparatively well developed at an early stage and flourished as a result of at least two important factors. Firstly, the Scottish Amateur Film Festival (S.A.F.F.) was held for the first time in 1933 and provided a significant public showcase for films from both Scotland and further afield. Secondly, in 1949 the Scottish

[1] Interview on the Arrow Films DVD release of *Full Moon in Paris* in the United Kingdom. The quotation is approximately forty-five minutes into this extra feature.
[2] See David MORGAN, 'Life on the margins: The Scottish Avant-Garde Film', *Film Waves* vol. 3, no. 19, 2002, p. 32-35; John R. COOK, ''This is not Hollywood!': Peter Watkins and the Challenge of Amateurism to the Professional', in Ryan SHAND and Ian CRAVEN (eds.) *Small-Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 183-200, and Guy EDMONDS, 'Amateur widescreen; or, some forgotten skirmishes in the battle of the gauges', *Film History* 19, 2007, p. 401-413.
[3] Guy EDMONDS, 'Amateur widescreen', p. 404.

Association of Amateur Cinematographers (S.A.A.C.) was founded to encourage the development of the infrastructure necessary for this increasingly popular leisure activity, especially the establishment of a network of cine-clubs in all parts of the country. Importantly, the Scottish Film Council, established in 1934, was a publicly funded film body that co-ordinated national film policy and it supported both initiatives financially. Moreover, Frank Marshall (1896-1979) was the first Chairman of the S.A.A.C. and served on the board of the Scottish Film Council until 1972, in addition to being a prolific amateur filmmaker who entered his films in the S.A.F.F. In his films such as *Our Angel Children* (1938) and *Mower Madness* (1939) it is evident that the planning and implementation of homemade special effects was one of the chief pleasures Marshall gained from production.[4] The amateur's attitude to changing technologies will be analysed in relation to Marshall's highly creative motoring satire *Joys of the Open Road* (1961), while a creative departure is represented by *Surprise in Store* (1965), a film in which he experimented with sound for the first time. The latter film features an asynchronous soundtrack similar to many amateur productions from this period. This article also explores how amateur filmmakers dealt with the gradual transition to sound during the late 1950s and early 1960s. While it would be useful to chart this change from a technological point of view, that is not the primary focus of this article. Instead, how this debate on sound was played out in both the amateur film journals and in selected films that were made during this period will be explored for its implications on amateur filmmaking aesthetics. While debates on the adoption of sound in the professional film industry were played out much earlier, it was not until the 1960s that those within amateur cine culture began to react to this potential transformation of their creative practice. However, it seems that many amateur filmmakers demonstrated a strange *resistance* to sound; making silent productions after the technology to make sound films was available. The reasons behind this creative choice will be analysed in relation to the two films previously referenced, which illustrate diverging strategies towards sound.

Finally, three main questions recur throughout the following analysis:

- How did amateur sound technology 'evolve' over the years?
- How did amateur filmmakers respond creatively to these technological changes?
- How were issues around the use of sound used to discursively construct an 'ideal' form of practice for the amateur filmmaker?

[4] See an interview with him titled 'The Frank Marshall Story', Scottish Screen Archive, paper records, ref. 4/5/144.

Silent film aesthetic

A pre-history of amateur film sound is perhaps indicated by the following quotation:

> The first narrow gauge films for amateur use became available in the early '20s, and by 1926 amateurs had already begun to make films comparable in all but scale to those of the professional silent cinema. After 1926, the amateur naturally tried to follow the professional into the field of sound, but owing to technical and practical difficulties attending sound recording at the time, no real progress was made. The only recording system available to him then at a reasonable price was disc recording. Quality was not good, but the impossibility of editing was the limiting factor as regards sound filmmaking which went beyond simple commentary.[5]

The unsuccessful nature of early sound meant that even until the 1950s the so-called 'silent film technique' was still routinely celebrated within amateur cine culture, as can be seen from the following quotation on performance:

> Basically two main types of acting have been employed in motion picture work: the so-called "silent film technique" and the modern method developed as a result of the introduction of sound recording. As is well known, because all suggestions of atmosphere and all reactions between the actors had to be conveyed by gesture alone, the silent film technique was something quite specialized and entirely separate from the modern methods. Users of present-day narrow-gauge film are therefore in a very unusual predicament in that they naturally aim to produce films which can be shown to an audience accustomed to the modern cinema and yet, without sound, they only have at their disposal the resources of the silent film technique.[6]

The prize-winning amateur filmmakers of the time were therefore specialists in employing aesthetic strategies that had become largely redundant in professional filmmaking. Yet the situation slowly began to change; in the monthly magazine *Amateur Cine World*, which had been published in the U.K. since the early 1930s, there were many technical articles on various ways to add a soundtrack to amateur films. Reading through back issues of the magazine, it is clear that there were often at least two articles devoted to these problems in each issue, and the

[5] David JONES and Desmond ROE, 'Plain Speaking on Sound', Amateur Cine World, vol. 20, no. 12, April 1957, p. 1234.
[6] Anon, 'Is Sound Necessary?' (advertisement), *Amateur Movie Maker*, vol. 1, no. 12, September 1958, p. 485.

letters page often contained at least one reader offering advice on how they came up with their own homemade solution to creating sound for their film shows. Indeed, there was even a monthly column called *'Record Rendezvous'*, written by Frederick Rawlings, in which he suggested pre-recorded songs and generic music that could accompany different types of films. This practice of selecting recorded music to add another texture to the screening experience was recalled by the filmmaker Eddie McConnell. Here he describes how music was chosen for his film *Falls the Shadow* (1957) when it premiered at the Scottish Amateur Film Festival:

> But, what really triggered everything, to make films so fascinating was when you came to show these films at the G.F.T. (which was the then Glasgow Cosmo Cinema in Rose Street). There was a guy called Douglas Gray, a big, tall, dour chappy and he was the guy that put a soundtrack on for all the films that were picked to be shown at the weekend festival of amateur films. So he'd have to contend with somebody who'd written a commentary, and of course, because your commentary wasn't attached to the film, it was just a wild tape recorder. So the films were projected mute and then he would just press a button at a certain frame when the producer was next to him and then stop it, then start, then stop it. So the synchrony of the production wouldn't get out of sync with what you saw on the screen. And so usually he would pick a bit of music (hums upbeat tune) to go over the films and all that sort of stuff, this guy. So I said to him could you pick us a piece of music for this thing shot on a deserted Prestwick beach in black and white, and he said 'yeah, I'll see what I can do' and he showed it to me one day and it was Sibelius' *Finlandia* (hums tune) and suddenly I thought I was looking at a Bergman film. This wee boy picking up a dead seagull, looking at the waves, looking at the feathers, and this terrific music that seemed to add so much to the visuals, that made it fifty times better than just any type of music, or any kind of commentary (or you can see or even not hear anything). It made it much better to get a piece of music that visually suited the atmosphere, and it was just then that I thought, 'you can't beat making films, it's just terrific'. The kind of feeling you get from it. You set the right set of music with the right pictures. And in this you weren't doing talky talk stuff, you weren't doing drama. You were just doing good stuff; the wee boy on the beach, deserted, waves coming in. You could almost feel the wind (makes blowing sound) and the dead seagull, that's all it was. Just see what you could get.
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> *Ryan: So Douglas Gray, was he a filmmaker himself?*
>
> He was a, yeah, he ran a production company called Park Films, I think. Janet McBain would know all about him. He was a big, tall, dour Presbyterian; dark glass chappy. (Imitates posh voice) 'blah, blah, blah'. Always with the best flash suits, all that. He looked unapproachable but actually he was alright, you know?[7]

[7] Douglas Gray set up both Scottish Records in Aberdeen and Park Film Studios in Glasgow. He was also a former Assistant Director of the Scottish Film Council. For more information on his life and work see Andy Young's obituary published in *The Herald* newspaper in 1997: http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/douglas-gray-1.384609

> *Ryan: I often wondered how..., you know...you watch the films in the archive and they're silent and you think they probably weren't projected like that...*
>
> (interrupts)...no, they were projected with lots of music on them and commentary at certain points. But obviously since they weren't attached to it all of that got lost. What slightly improved amateur filmmaking was the days of stripe, when you could put stripe on the film, magnetic stripe on it, and then you could put sound on it, on the stripe. But that had complications because then you had to stripe the negative or stripe the positive, or the stripe might have scratches on it. And also when it went through the gate of the film, because sound was a second ahead of the picture you would see the sound until the picture came through or in reverse in other words. In the days of S.T.V. (Scottish Television), when it first started up, we used stripe. So whenever we were doing a pipe band championship, the editor would have to just cut right across the film, because you couldn't cut it with level synchrony. With your tape here and your film there, and then shove it up to 26 frames or the 18 frames. So because stripe was attached to the film, when you did a chop on it, the chop went through, and then the shot changed then you didn't hear the music changing until a second later. It was very amateur looking, you know.[8]

Therefore the trick was not only to find the right music, but also to keep the film in sync with the music, and there were a variety of technical ways to do that; including as Eddie McConnell noted the use of sound stripe. The use of this method for maintaining the synchronisation of both image and sound was not just restricted to professional television productions. As *Amateur Cine World* explained to their readers that, 'Sound stripe is a method of adding sound to film by applying a narrow ribbon of magnetic recording material down one edge, usually in the same position as the normal photographic sound track'.[9] What is more, they advocated its use for the amateur as, 'Sound stripe is the first simple method to be devised which allows the user to record his own commentaries and to add music and effects to his silent films without having to worry about the recording process or synchronisation'.[10] However, a much larger problem was faced by the amateur filmmaker in regard to copyright.

License agreements would have to be cleared to allow well-known music to be used in public shows. If an amateur was found to be in breach of these regulations they could be fined

[8] Interview with Eddie McConnell and the author, 8 September 2011. This interview is available from the Scottish Screen Archive, Glasgow, Scotland.
[9] Anon, 'What Is Sound Stripe?', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 17, no. 8, December 1953, p. 811.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 811.

heavily.[11] Due to this, organisations such as the I.A.C. (Institute of Amateur Cinematographers) ensured that members could be exempt from these rules and as a result membership grew rapidly. Jim Wood, of Hoylake MovieMakers, explained the benefits of I.A.C. membership in this regard:

> The other thing I joined for was of course the music copyright licence, because that was such a great (pause) to my cost, I know the value of an IAC copyright licence. Doing a film show once and em (laughs), shouldn't tell you this really but there we are. I'll tell you just to... Did a film show at a certain church hall in Wallasey in the, was it '61 or '62? I can't remember which now. And em, I was very proud of the film I was showing. I think it was one of my holiday films - a canal film - and it had taped music with it. And as I came down from the projection at the end of the show there was a chap there. He said, 'I enjoyed the show, it was a very good show. Who did that film?' I'm sure it was the canal film. I said, 'I did'. He said, 'what was the music on, was it record?' I said, 'no, I copied it onto tape'. I didn't know that this chap was a representative from the Mechanical Copyright Protection Society, did I? So I got a warning and a nice little warning letter saying you know, 'if you're going to show films publically with musical accompaniment it must be on *disc* and the hall must be covered by performing rights, you know this, that and the other. You must not under any circumstances copy that. So I got away with it. Twelve months later... same venue (laughs). Did a silly thing didn't I? I copied music onto tape again; as we all did let's face it you know. But not for public, not charging admission as we did. And I came down from the projection room and guess who I met as soon as I walked out of that door? That chap. And he just smiled at me. Showed me his credentials and he said, 'you were warned weren't you?'. I said, 'yeah I was warned'. 'Sorry', he said. And I was fined heavily for breeching copyright laws and all this, that and the other. And I was paying off that loan, that I had to get to pay off that fine, until I got married in 1970 (laughs). So that's why I'm a great believer in the I.A.C. and their copyright licences which they supply. Believe you me it's the best thirty odd quid you will ever invest, because otherwise you're going to get hammered heavily for it. And I keep preaching this to people. Nowadays of course you can buy copyright free music. In those days, it was, well the first copyright free record I ever saw was produced by the *Amateur Cine World*, and that didn't come out until the mid-sixties. That was called *Music for your Movies*.
>
> *Ryan*: I've got that.
>
> You've got that? Well that came out mid-sixties which was after I was banned. Had that been available then...[12]

[11] See two short articles by Richard Dellow, 'Getting Clear about Copyright', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 21, no. 7, November 1957, p. 641-642, and 'Keeping on the Right Side of the Law', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 21, no. 8, December 1957, p. 809-810.

[12] Interview with Jim Wood and the author (with Les Roberts), 12 June 2009. This interview is available from the North West Film Archive, Manchester, England.

As Jim remembered, *Amateur Cine World* offered a potential way round this problem. They issued their own record titled, *'Music For Your Movies: No Dubbing Fees For Amateurs'*, which compiles a selection of tracks of generic music.

The marketing material on the sleeve states:

> Music- as every film maker knows- makes all the difference. It sets the scene and moulds the mood; adds a touch of magic to every movie you make. The trouble in the past has been that amateurs who want to add music to their films have been hedged around with tiresome legal restrictions. This record provides the solution. It has all the music you are likely to need for holiday and family films, plus plenty of weightier stuff for more ambitious productions. And included with it is a licence which entitles you to re-record on film or tape without payment of any additional dubbing fees.[13]

Records such as this one were immensely useful because no dubbing fees were required to use it in public shows. Licensing deals were a constant problem for amateurs trying to make ambitious

[13] *Amateur Cine World presents: Music for Your Movies*. Produced by Fountain Press Limited, 1966.

films on a low budget. The record provides music for many genres, including continental holiday, mystery and suspense, and romance. Family films could also be screened with what it calls, 'lightly orchestrated numbers to bring brightness to those treasured scenes of your children's antics'. As can be discerned from the following extracts, the debate on sound persisted in amateur circles over a number of years without much change. For example, Jack Smith was remarkably resistant to the idea of sound in amateur filmmaking:

> Why bother with sound unless it's essential to carry the content you want to express? Are producers (including Mr. Robbins) playing with their tapes and recorders just because these things are available, and they want to get one stage nearer the commercial cinema which they would like to imitate? Or do they have ideas for films which absolutely demand a sound track of one kind of another?[14]

In advocating the benefits of silent technique, Smith concluded by writing that, 'In my view, the coming of sound has added to the depressing quality of bad amateur films as much as it has increased the range and effectiveness of the good material'.[15] Later articles indicate a less entrenched position and instead focused on matters of taste and judgement in relation to choosing music:

> We have to remember that mood music discs are produced mainly for radio, television and the professional cinema - "show business," in short. Now the strength of the amateur film movement lies precisely in those domains which are outside the province of the professional - simplicity, directness of approach, originality, the use of natural locations and real people. Music that is glossy, sophisticated, crammed with clichés, adds a powerful emotional factor that is at odds with what the best amateurs are trying to do, and I shall feel justified in criticising records which possess these characteristics.[16]
>
> It is also meant to supplement the film - not over-shadow it; the common mistake made by amateurs is that they get carried away in their selection of music. So much professional music is available on hire to, or purchase by, the amateur, that he is over-powered by it, and wants his audience to know that he is using professional music, albeit copyright free library music.[17]

[14] Jack SMITH, 'Mood Music? I Loathe It', *Amateur Cine World*, May 11 1961, p. 669.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 669.
[16] Leonard DUCK, 'Choosing Mood Music Records', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 2, no. 33, September 7 1961, p. 377.
[17] Anon, 'How to Select Your Film Music', *Film Making*, vol. 12, no. 10, October 1974, p. 50.

For example, in *Oils For Neptune* (Group 5, 1964)**,** while the characters in the film are seen to talk to each other, the audience is left to guess what is actually being said. In this way, many amateur films from the 1960s resemble professional silent films from nearly forty years before. Here, amateur films display what you might call an archaic aesthetic.

The focus of the remaining part of this section is on a film that departs from the signature style of Frank Marshall's other films, yet is useful in pointing towards the pleasures of an amateur silent cinema.[18] *Joys of the Open Road* (1961, colour/silent) is a very short film, running for just three minutes and thirty-five seconds, which offers a good example of what was known in amateur circles as a 'cameo' film. A cameo film was designed to use up the left over film of an unfinished reel, and therefore often ran between one and three minutes. Such pieces were mostly pragmatic exercises, in which filmmakers could experiment by doing something a little different or unexpected. For this reason, the better results of this process were ideal films to be entered into amateur film festivals, in that they were short and often made imaginative use of limited resources. Most importantly, these films displayed a modesty that was prized in amateur cinema culture. In this respect *Joys of the Open Road* is an excellent example of the cameo film.

A modest approach to amateur film production does not necessarily mean that intelligence or wit have to be sacrificed. For instance, *Joys of the Open Road* opens with a quotation:

Come. Here is adieu to the city
And hurrah for the country again.
The broad road lies before me
Watered with last night's rain.
R. L. Stevenson

We therefore expect a travel film documenting, perhaps, the wonderful scenery of the Scottish countryside. The first two shots of the film confirm this; first we see a shot of a 'For Sale' sign on a car windscreen. Then, following a zoom away, a hand enters shot to remove the sign. This suggests the car has a new owner, someone ready to take the trip of the film's title. We watch the car pull away with a close-up of the wheels, and we settle down to view the journey ahead.

[18] Ryan SHAND, 'The Family Film as Amateur Film Competition Category: Frank Marshall's Comic Narratives' (forthcoming).

Instead, the next shot is a brief three-second close-up of a road sign that says '30', followed quickly by another which reads 'GLASGOW City Boundary', once again three seconds later, 'NO THROUGH ROAD' and so on…In fact, the entire film consists of close-ups of road signs. At first this seems quite funny, as the film has so obviously challenged the intrinsic norms it sets up. The opening few shots suggest one kind of film, while what is offered is something completely different. The filmmaker seems to be challenging the viewer to made sense of what at first seems like a random selection of shots of signs. What is happening? As the film proceeds the logic to this madness becomes clearer.

As the images warning drivers to slow down, speed up, stop, go…accumulate, *Joys of the Open Road* emerges as a satiric treatment on an excessively regulative road culture. Using seventy-five mostly static shots, Marshall builds an argument in favour of leaving the poor driver alone. Amateur cinema's inheritance from still photographic techniques comes to the fore in this unexpected treatment. What initially seemed random, now demonstrates that its structure has been carefully thought through; ironic juxtapositions are made between shots that follow each other. A list of shots 10-20 is indicative:

10. SPEED KILLS

11. NO ENTRY FOR HANDCARTS HORSEDRAWN AND SLOW MOVING VEHICLES UNLESS REQUIRING ACCESS TO PREMISES NOT…

12. NO WAITING THIS SIDE TODAY

13. TURN LEFT

13. NO TURN LEFT

15. ONE WAY STREET ➔

16. TURN RIGHT

17. NO TURN RIGHT

18. ➔ ONE WAY STREET

19. NO ENTRY

20. NO TURNING, NO WAITING

The accumulation of instructions becomes overwhelming and quite why anyone would what to put themselves through this on a day-to-day basis is exploited for comic effect. A principle of construction is clearly at work; shot 18 offers the punch line to shot 15, while at the same time this joke brackets the contrast between shots 16 and 17. Marshall examines an almost obsolete form of montage cinema; which makes little attempt to integrate itself into any more 'realised' space-time frame. This unusual technique of (psuedo) still-frame montage emerges out of the mode of production that amateurs are confronted with, one that Frank Marshall understands better than most. Just when a pattern threatens to make the jokes predictable, some unexpected creative decisions are thrown into the mix to keep it interesting; shot 23 'DANGER BLASTING IN PROGRESS' and shot 33 'TEMPORARY ROAD SURFACE' show upside-down signs left by the side of the road. Presumably these signs were as Marshall found them, and their incongruity in the context of final film was used to make the punch lines a little less predictable. There is even a joke that was timely within the context of the Cold War. Half way through the film the sequence runs:

35. KEEP LEFT

36. KEEP LEFT

37. KEEP LEFT

38. MOSCOW

39. (A red frame is inserted)

40. ROAD CLOSED

The play on political symbolism is revealing of the attitudes of the kind of humour that was appreciated within amateur cinema culture at the time. This joke functions on a number of levels: both locally (the knowledge that Moscow is also a district of Glasgow) and at a wider ideological level, as a warning against political extremes. This is illustrative of the type of humour of the participants of the contemporary amateur cinema culture. Be careful or you will end up in the actual capital of the U.S.S.R, then you will regret it. A red frame immediately followed by a sign informing that the road is closed is particularly suggestive.

The final sequence, in which a series of repetitive images are speeded-up until utter confusion prevails, represents the logical development of the film's thesis. Shots 59 to 75 are as follows:

59. CAUTION DANGEROUS BENDS

60. BEND (left)

61. BEND (right)

62. A LITTLE CARE GETS YOU THERE

63. BEND (right)

64. BEND (left)

65. A KIND WELCOME TO CAREFUL DRIVERS

66. BEND (right)

67. BEND (left)

68. BEND (right)

69. BEND (left)

70. BEND (right)

71. BEND (left)

72. BEND (right)

73. BEND (left)

74. MENTAL HOSPITAL (swaying camera, followed by a zoom in until the are words out of focus).

75. (Returning to the medium shot of the car windscreen from the opening of the film. A hand places the 'For Sale' back down. A zoom in until the same hand removes the sign to reveal another which reads 'THE END. A MARSHALL FILM'. Fade to black).

The potential chaos that results from following the rules of everyday life is a topic ripe for satire. The film began by mocking the sentiments of Robert Louis Stevenson's poem, and the highbrow idealism it is set up to represent. It goes on to voice the complaints of the individual when he/she confronts faceless authority everywhere, and this is taken to its own absurd conclusion. It is clear that a considerable amount of time was spent on structuring this film. Each joke is set up and has its own payoff. It is also worth noting that this cameo film was most likely filmed over a long period, every now and then when the opportunity arose. This extended length of time for a single production, is a strategy common amongst amateurs, as has been written about elsewhere.[19]

In this film Marshall demonstrates the remarkable creative freedom on offer to amateur filmmakers who made silent films. Here the possibilities of editing and montage are employed for humorous effect; an approach that had interested him over around thirty years. However, even at that time the filmmaking landscape was beginning to change in the direction of sound.

Asynchronous soundtracks

For a short period, the technology to add sound to amateur films had become available, but still only offered mixed results. This is evident in an editorial column at the time, which noted that there was emerging a disjuncture between the skills developed by established amateur filmmakers:

> The trouble is that most amateur movie makers are working in a medium which is out of date and which- through no fault of theirs- they do not know enough about to bring up to date... They have grown up in the sound era and they naturally think in terms of sound. It is true that sound is coming increasingly to the fore in the amateur field, but its use must be mainly confined to music and effects and loosely synchronised commentaries. It can rarely be integrated with the picture; rather is it tacked on as an admittedly very valuable adjunct.[20]

It is interesting that the sound technology discussed here is still of limited application, i.e. better synchronisation of music and the post-syncing of effects and commentaries after initial production. The recording of actual *dialogue* during production is still beyond many amateurs at this time. The editor of *Amateur Cine World*, in the above quote, referred to the 'loosely

[19] Ryan SHAND, 'The Wick Society's Intervention into Industrial Heritage: Remaking Local Films for Future Historians', *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen* 7, 1 (2014), p. 70-97.
[20] The Editor, 'Songs Without Words', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 20, no. 3, July 1956, p. 236.

synchronised commentaries' of many amateur films of the period. Indeed, it was common for filmmakers to record commentaries for their older silent films in the late 1950s. For example, *Chick's Day*, about a day in the life of a troubled teenager in Wishaw, originally made in 1951 by Enrico Cocozza, re-emerged with a stream-of conscious voiceover from the main character in 1959. In this way, older silent films could be screened to later audiences, perhaps less accepting of amateur films without dialogue.

The next month after the aforementioned editorial in *Amateur Cine World*, W. Millar, from Stirling in Scotland, wrote this in response:

> Why is this craze for sound permeating about every page of the A.C.W.? In my opinion, sound will eventually be the ruination of the amateur film. The rot has started already; there is a lower standard in the various competitions, according to the experts, because the ingenuity and initiative of the amateur are now divided between picture-making and sound.[21]

Here, it there is a certain reversal going on, with the amateur filmmaker criticising the professional writers for lowering standards in the movement as a whole.

To explore the creative possibilities that the use of synchronous sound offered the amateur filmmaker, we can now turn to an analysis of Frank Marshall's first foray into sound in a film called *Surprise in Store*. The Scottish Screen Archive catalogue entry on this film reads as follows:

> SURPRISE IN STORE (1965, Frank Marshall) - Short humorous film of four children who find a way to slip into a toy shop at night, while their father fetches petrol — never suspecting their escapade. Interiors of the shop include a number of recognisable brands, including Corgi, Dinky, Tri-ang and Scalextric. Prize-winner at 1965 Scottish Amateur Film Festival.[22]

Made four years after *Joys of the Open Road*, rather than a revised strategy towards the issue of sound, this film represents an alternative approach by a filmmaker perhaps sceptical of the benefits of the new technology. At a time when many advanced amateurs had already enthusiastically embraced the possibilities of sound, Frank Marshall had continued to resist this transition. In some ways, Surprise in Store is the equivalent of Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight* (1952) or *A King in New York* (1957), in that the film is designed around an aesthetic developed

[21] W. MILLAR, 'Ruinous Sound', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 20, no. 5, September 1956, p. 451.
[22] This film is available in full via the Scottish Screen Archive website: http://ssa.nls.uk/

for the silent era. Running at an approximately ten and a half minutes and shot in anachronistic black and white, *Surprise in Store* is a short story about children grabbing fleeting fun in an empty toy shop while adults are otherwise occupied.

Opening on images of a busy city centre street in Glasgow, with Christmas lights hanging over the road, while upbeat, jaunty music plays over the titles, signalling to the viewer that they are about to see a light comedy with an upbeat tone. Out of the mass of passing cars an individual vehicle pulls in, and following an insert shot of an empty petrol gauge which quickly explains the reason for the diversion, a young man gets out and speaks to the passengers in the back before heading off into the night. The father is played by Nairn Marshall, the grown up son of the filmmaker and a veteran actor of his family films from a young age. Often playing a young troublemaker as a child, he is here cast against type as the absent parent; a role previously occupied by his mother Chrissie in films going back to the late 1930s. Significantly, the viewer cannot hear this conversation; we can only guess at this point what is actually being said as he leaves the scene. When he is gone, two boys and two girls (played by Susan and Roy Lewis, Caroline and Frank Marshall- the grandchildren of Frank Marshall) quickly open the door and run towards the window of the toy shop located close to the car. As the children gaze into the window at the abundance of toys on sale, the film cuts to a shot of two workers in the shop staff room; an older man reading a newspaper with a Santa costume hanging in the background and a younger man closer to the camera. Again their conversation is unheard, as this appears to be another silent comedy in the family film tradition. This pattern of parallel editing between the activities of the children and those of the adults continues throughout the rest of the film, allowing the spectator to compare and contrast their differing approaches to life.

When the younger worker leaves the shop to go to the chip shop he leaves the metal gate over the front entrance open with enough space for the children to sneak through. As they arrive at the top of the stairs leading to the huge collection of toys, we surprisingly hear their excitement as they rush into the deserted consumer space. Going against the grain of our previously established expectations about the lack of sound, the following sequences offer us the chance to eavesdrop on their reactions and conversations away from adult supervision. When the novelty of their excited voices fades, what is noticeable is that the noises are mostly indistinct and it is difficult to make out the individual words. Their frenzy of activity is contrasted with the lethargy of the adults when a cut reveals that the older security guard is now asleep in the staff room.

The planned nature of the narrative is most evident in the sequence showing a traffic warden spoting Nairn's parked car, which at this point remains incidental, but it will become more important as the film draws towards some form of closure. A humorous editing choice then moves from the authoritarian adult, on the lookout for traffic offences, jumping immediately to the boys driving their newly acquired toy cars at a fast speed around the shop inside. The girls and boys have separated and focused their attentions on toys of particular interest to them. The boys gravitate towards, toy cars, guns and model racing tracks, while the girls are drawn towards blowing bubbles, roller skates and scooters. These scenes have a documentary feel with little evidence of direct shaping and intervention from the filmmaker.[23] The children are seen enjoying themselves as they rush around trying to make the most of the seemingly unrestricted access they have to all the toys that surround them. One of the girls lets excitement get the better of her as she unwisely attempts to get on a scooter while still wearing roller skates. Unsurprisingly, she falls over and when sitting on the floor she briefly looks towards the camera with a shocked expression on her face. These highly energetic scenes are accompanied by a variety of voices emanating from general background noises of children playing. We hear a girl say 'pick up a pair of roller skates' as she does just that, while later her friend shouts 'whoo' when riding a tricycle at high speed. These and other combinations of sound and voice, presumably recorded at a distance (or mixed at a low level), accumulate as the film develops. Except for the individual moments cited above, most examples are not

[23] Similar to scenes in the filmmaker's earlier *Christmas* (1937).

necessarily synched to the image, so might not even have been recorded at the same time. Yet even at this point in the narrative, with the use of sound now well established, when it cuts back to the staff room, showing the younger security guard eating his recently purchased chips, we still cannot hear the conversation between the two adults. It is as if the sound exists only in the toy shop. It is a fantasy space that allows a joyous expression, not freely available in the everyday outside world, for all those who enter.

Despite an ironic cutaway to a 'Please do not touch sign' the children continue to play while we also see Nairn leaving a petrol station and walking back in the direction of his car carrying a container. Up until now the soundtrack has been merely a welcome addition to the images, with no implication for the development of the narrative. However, this changes when the action moves back to the shop floor and the girls pick up a Native American drummer toy. Initially, it is humorous watching the surprised reactions of the girl to the toy as it vibrates in her hand while the soundtrack is filled by a synced drumbeat. Unexpectedly, Marshall then uses this incident as an opportunity for visual trickery, as he animates the heads of toys moving in the direction of the noise using the simplest form of pixilation technique. The girls now hold their hands over their ears as the toy drums away incessantly, while the boys run over and grab the toy from them in order to turn it off before they are discovered. It is too late though, as the shadow of Santa emerges from the staircase, like a German expressionist figure from the silent era.

The noise from above has alerted the older security guard to some unexpected activity on the shop floor and he is now intent on discovering its source. This initiates a closing suspense sequence, in which the dominant narrative question is; will the children be caught? While they hide, he looks. The spectator is aligned with his point of view, as we see him surveying the layout of the shop. Finally, he discovers the source of the sound as he picks the toy up and it continues to drum in his hands. Here sound is heard in the presence of an adult for the first time in *Surprise in Store*, and it turns him into a figure of comedy, as he hopelessly tries to turn the toy off as his colleague, who laughs at his predicament, watches him. While the toy distracts the adults, the children manage to sneak down the stairs, under the metal gate and escape outside into their father's parked car. The children have had their fun, yet escape without any further repercussions, a narrative situation perhaps most commonly found in light comedies. However, after Nairn arrives back, puts petrol into the tank and drives away without any notion of what has occurred behind his back, the traffic warden (seen earlier) spots his car pulling away and blows his whistle, which we hear loudly on the soundtrack. This is the only time sound is heard outside the shop in the entire film, making this like the punch line of a joke. Despite behaving reasonably throughout the narrative, in contrast to his children, Nairn is the only one to be punished; an irony typical of Frank Marshall's family films. Finally, a brief travelling shot following Nairn's car as it drives away, is replaced by an inter-title announcing *The End*; these shots giving the audience room to laugh at the final joke the film has played on the unknowing adults, at the expense of the naughty children.

What is most fascinating about this film is the sense that Marshall did not quite commit himself wholeheartedly to sound. Basically it is a silent film, with sound added on in select scenes, rather than a sound film *per se*. This hybrid sound and silent production is perhaps a symptom of the divided nature of the opinion amongst amateur filmmakers when it comes to the issue of sound, an issue that will be explored in the final section.

The Discursive Construction of an Ideal Amateur Aesthetic

Finally, this article will explore the arguments about sound that were being hotly debated within the pages of journals such as *Amateur Cine World* and *Amateur Movie Maker* during the late 50s, 60s and even into the 70s. While amateur efforts were now incorporating varying degrees of acceptance of sound technology, some commentators even argued that this was a regressive development that should be reversed:

> I should like to propose, in all seriousness, that all future IAC competitions should be restricted entirely to silent films. Now these are the truly amateur films and the Institute is for amateurs. Let it do the job for which it was really created- encouraging all amateurs everywhere to make better films.[24]

This surprising advocacy of the silent film techniques at a time of new possibilities for amateur sound films was moreover justified in terms of preserving opportunities for filmmakers with lower purchasing power in being able to win prizes in amateur contests, 'Already, I know, their Council are perturbed that richer members can slap a tape-recorded commentary on their rough and ready colour visuals and thus get better placings for less expertly constructed films'.[25] In addition to concerns about the supposed erosion of a level playing field for amateur filmmakers, another columnist worried that sound technology was having a detrimental effect on the quality of visual storytelling:

> We have now reached a point in so-called amateur film making when we must have sound, and that in some standard form, and the production must be suitable for nationwide distribution. It is only a short step to the truly amateur effort being completely shut out. Yet sound can be the ruination of a film. In the old days the picture had to tell a story; now everyone is so obsessed with sound that the picture is of very little importance.[26]

In many ways this eerily echoes the debates about the introduction of sound into the professional cinema in the late 1920s. Two letters published in *Amateur Cine World* are instructive in this regard; demonstrating that this perspective was not confined to the critics, but was also shared by filmmakers. The heading over the letters page states, 'Ideas Exchanged Here' and that is precisely what is so useful about this exchange. First, one amateur filmmaker argues that:

> The extraordinary acceptance of the most grotesque incompetence in the average family film seems to continue, but I would suggest that it is now time for you to lead the faithful into the new promised land- that of sound.
>
> I do not think that much more can be expected of silent film. Even the great classics got their effect by being, in the main, dramatically interpretative of great themes (Battleship, for instance). Now the pictures which we might expect

[24] Denys DAVIS, 'Plan For A Revolution in Amateur Movies', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 21, no. 1, May 1957, p. 44.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[26] D. HART, 'Sound - and Screens', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 21, no. 6, October 1957, p. 546.

> from the amateur should not be dramatic; in fact. I think that all the difficulties of the movement arise from attempts at this without the equipment, the artists, or the talent.
>
> Efforts to emulate the great works are doomed to failure, and worse, they have distorted the "movement" (if one can use so portentous a word), by luring the best and keenest workers in a direction which can only end in disappointment.
>
> We should abandon the point of view that there is something to be regretted about sound, and recognise the fact that the complete unity is picture plus sound, not picture alone. In my opinion this has already been tacitly conceded as no one seems to think of putting on a show nowadays without a recorded accompaniment of some kind. But the "official" view is that there is something "not quite nice" about sound, rather the attitude of the yachtsman towards engines.
>
> Surely this is rather out-of-date, for tape is now commonplace, and the hardiest of all annuals is some new method of obtaining synchronisation. I suggest that what is now needed is a lead from you, through the medium of the Ten Best, to get rid of what remains of an attitude which the passage of events has rendered obsolete.[27]

D. W. O'Kelly sees the potential for amateurs if they move with the times and embrace changing technologies, however he realises that this does not sit well with he called the, '"official" view'; that sound is another step in the professionalisation of amateur film. Yet, it is clear that his is a personal perspective and not one shared by all amateurs at that time. In reply to the previous letter D. J. Reynolds wrote:

> Sir, - Mr. O'Kelly's plea for sound (Jan.) is more eloquent than convincing. He is probably right when he says that efforts to emulate the great silent classics of the past are doomed to failure. But it is not likely that technical mastery of sound recording will lead to an even more fatal tendency to imitate current professional successes?
>
> In my view, the fact that sound has, in the past, been beyond the resources of most amateurs, is a blessing. It has compelled them to concentrate on simple subjects, within their artistic range.
>
> Sound, far from being the gateway to a promised land, is only another booby trap for the pretentious and over-ambitious.[28]

Frank Marshall would most likely agree more with the second letter than the first. Rather than seeing sound as the 'promised land' leading to a new aesthetics of amateur film, he seemed to view it, like D.J. Reynolds, as a lost opportunity for amateur film art. What is clear is that Frank Marshall effectively acted like a silent filmmaker long after sound equipment was available, not

[27] D. W. O'KELLY, 'Plea For Sound', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 19, no. 9, January 1956, p. 960.
[28] D. J. REYNOLDS, 'Silence, Please!', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 19, no. 10, February 1956, p. 1050-51.

for reasons of cost, but perhaps in an attempt to stay true to an inherited spirit of amateurism. Even five years after this exchange of letters, Ivan Watson wrote the following:

> If ever a subject needed to be discussed, this is it! Consider the facts. Not one amateur in a thousand is equipped- nor ever likely to be- to produce a fully-synchronous soundtrack. So we compromise with commentaries, incidental music and a few arbitrarily chosen sound-effects- on tape or stripe. Beyond that, most of us are sunk without a trace.
>
> *Why* do we do it? Why have we let ourselves be so mesmerised by sound that we've almost forgotten cinema is primarily a visual art? The answer is- our audiences. They've been pre-conditioned by commercial cinema and TV. They *expect* sound. If they hear nothing but Auntie's asthma and the whirr of the projector, they think they are seeing something as old-hat and amateurish as a magic-lantern show.[29]

Here Ivan Watson recasts the debate in almost ideological terms, with the language of indoctrination, resistance and conflict being summoned in this aesthetic debate with perceived wider ramifications for the amateur film movement:

> We ought to decide, once and for all, that we're going to create our own primarily *visual* art and develop it in new and exciting ways. Then we shall hear no more nonsense about silent films being 30 years out of date. Films will simply be films- good, bad, or indifferent.
>
> As I said, let battle commence!
>
> And- please- whose side are you on?[30]

As these examples have shown, debates on sound were often conflated with discourses on how to be a 'true' amateur. In this way the unique contribution of the amateur to cinema was to be the official torchbearer of cinematic values that were seen by some as having been abandoned by professional filmmakers in the rush to increase their profit margins by adopting sound, yet neglecting visual poetry. However, at least one writer in *Amateur Cine World* understood the problems with of the arguments being put forward by the amateur film purists: the Editor, 'The amateur cinema is now the only stronghold of the silent film, but to regard it as the last refuge of a forgotten, obsolete art is to condemn it to extinction'.[31] While acknowledging the contribution that amateur cinema could have on wider film culture, here the editor of the most popular publication in the United Kingdom highlighted the short-comings of this seductive, yet

[29] Ivan WATSON, 'Sound or Silent?', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 2, no. 48, 21 December 1961, p. 1004.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 1005.
[31] The Editor, 'Sense in Sync', *Amateur Cine World*, vol. 20, no. 11, March 1957, p. 1134.

limiting, perspective. These exchanges demonstrate that many within the sector were still divided on just how separate and distinctive it was necessary for the amateur cine movement to be from its professional equivalent.

Conclusion

In order to understand how the introduction of new technology changed the way amateur filmmakers employed sound in their films, it was necessary to explore aesthetic strategies that were determined largely by the problems associated with amateur acting. It is clear that while there were difficulties with the use of pre-recorded music during public screenings in relation to copyright, it was also significant that acting became more demanding with the addition of sound and non-professionals struggled to maintain convincing performances, even during the relatively short narratives of amateur productions. Therefore, for this reason, amateur filmmakers attempted various creative ways around this problem, by either becoming more experimental with their visuals, as seen in *Joys of the Open Road*, or using sound in a relatively restricted way, as in *Surprise in Store*.

Scholars have often tended to focus their attention on innovation rather than conservatism, in order to argue that the amateur cine movement was part of a progressive cultural tradition. Yet while this view of the amateur as someone willing to embrace technical and stylistic innovations is certainly true, it is also the case that many amateur filmmakers showed a peculiar *resistance* to sound; effectively making silent films long after the technology to make sound films was available. The intellectual generosity of this retrospective view can often overlook the inherently ambivalent nature of amateurism. In response, this article has argued for a *dual* vision of the amateur; a set of practitioners who were as likely to demonstrate *resistance* to technical and stylistic innovations, as they were to celebrate and adopt them as their own.

* All titles are available from the Scottish Screen Archive: Scottish Screen Archive, c/o: National Library of Scotland, Collections Department, 39-41 Montrose Avenue, Hillington Park, Glasgow G52 4LA, United Kingdom; tel.: 0845 366 4600; http://www.nls.uk/ssa/; email: ssaenquiries@nls.uk

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