A Dirty Word...

In her oft-quoted essay “Amateur Versus Professional,” American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren underscores the Latin roots of the term amateur and thereby, its designation of one who engages in a practice “for the love of the thing rather than for economic reasons or necessity.”¹ But etymology aside, she still concedes, “The very classification ‘amateur’ has an apologetic ring.” Some forty years later, the ringing has only intensified, negative connotations of the term moving up to first definition status in the dictionary of popular consciousness.

And yet, ask someone for a concrete definition and rarely do they respond with an answer of what amateurism is, constructing a meaning, instead, in terms of what it is not—not sophisticated, not technically adept, not pretty or polished, not of popular interest, or perhaps most frequently and opaque, “not professional.”

This issue of Spectator seeks to look more closely and critically at the variables by which we have traditionally deemed certain media practitioners and their works “amateur” and others “professional.” In doing so, the contributing authors, each in his or her own way, help to identify and examine the social, economic, technological, political, and ideological forces which have entrenched such valuations and made “amateur” a dirty word, rather than one laden with power and possibility.

Going a step further, all the articles that follow could be said to question the continued utility of the term at all. With the present digital revolution poised to make every desktop computer a potential site for film/video editing, web and CD/DVD-ROM design, and routes of alternative distribution, are traditional amateur/professional divides being blurred, or rendered obsolete?
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Amateur Production = Home Movies?

The fact that more often than not, amateur media production continues to be considered synonymous with “shooting home movies” speaks to the end result of a complex, and lengthy history described perhaps most comprehensively and compellingly to date by Patricia Zimmermann in her book *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*.

Looking specifically at the pre-video era, Zimmermann traces the progressive depoliticization of amateur film technologies, an “historical process of social control over representation” which she argues, ...incrementally relocated amateur filmmaking within a romanticized vision of the bourgeois nuclear family, thereby amputating its more resistant economic and political potential for critique.

The picture painted by Zimmermann is made up of several interrelated cause/effect strains involving capitalism, technology, mass media, and the entrenchment of public/private divides. Running the risk of creating deceptively reductive teleologies here for the sake of space, it goes something like this...

Hollywood developed itself along a vertical integration system and adopted an assembly-line model of production which not only established media production as an industry, but like all industries, developed fragmentation and specialization of labor, producing a series of industry “professionals,” each specialized in a task but unable to create media alone.

A few major equipment and stock manufacturers monopolized the technology production market, standardizing gauges and progressively establishing 35 mm as the “professional” gauge, and smaller 16 and 8mm gauges as amateur. Monopolization and standardization also led to a system of distribution only catering to professional gauges and thus an additional entrenchment of what would be deemed professional product and, as such, be seen by a national audience. All this concurrently led to a definition of certain aesthetic standards and conventions as “professional”—standards unattainable without amounts of money, numbers of specialized personnel, and levels of technology far beyond the amateur’s reach.

Add into the equation an increase and diversification in leisure time and with this a progressive, intractable hardening of the line between the public and private domains. Public time became characterized as methodical, controllable, and regulated. This became akin to “professional time,” the time of professional media production (an industrial product). Placing amateur production into the realm of private time allowed for an association with illusions of spontaneity and freedom; individuality and personal fulfillment. Amateur media practice became a hobby, not the activity of producing viable or important product to be shared with others beyond the immediate family.

Manufacturers and popular press magazines ingrained the amateur/professional dichotomy with every article and ad printed. Ad text touted ease of use and increasing lack of specialized knowledge required by each new camera. Images and ad copy rhetoric relentlessly underscored the private, domestic, and thus “appropriate” subjects and contexts of amateur production. Simultaneously, popular press articles wrote stringent do and don’t articles centered on how to aspire towards an unattainable, and homogenized bar of professional aesthetics in one’s amateur endeavors.

Certainly one cannot deny the power and importance of various avant-garde movements and individual practitioners, who appropriated amateur film technologies towards artistic and political aims decidedly at odds with such classifications. Artist collectives and individual explorations of both film’s expressive potentials and ways of seeing/transcribing the world in direct opposition to the grammar and matter of Hollywood cinema may be chronicled back to the silent era. Maya Deren’s words opened this article, and it is fitting to offer more of
All in the Family—This Eastman Kodak ad, appearing in American Photography in May of 1924, underscores how early private, familial rhetoric was placed onto amateur technologies. Dad shoots the kids’ tea party, and later, Mom mans the projection of it for them. Reduction prints of “professional releases” could also be rented for the home.
them here—a passage in which she describes the best, and most inexpensive piece of amateur technology at one’s disposal:

Don’t forget that no tripod has yet been built which is as miraculously versatile in movement as the complex system of supports, joints, muscles, and nerves which is the human body, which, with a bit of practice, make possible the enormous variety of camera angles and visual actions. You have all this, and a brain too, in one neat, compact, mobile package.¹

Stan Brakhage’s spitting on the lens, or the trembling camera movements and breathing focus found in later works of his such as Deus Ex (1971) render a subjectivity and a personal way of seeing the world outside of the prescriptions/proscriptions of amateur technology instruction books and popular press articles. In addition to utilizing amateur gauges and technologies, Brakhage even went so far as to obviate the requirement of a camera at all, making films such as Mothlight (1963) in which he affixed insect wings and plant material directly to clear leader and ran the result through the printer.

But the struggles of these renegades to produce work and to have it seen (a struggle made poignantly clear by Jonas Mekas’ Movie Journal entries) underscore how deeply amateur/professional divides had been ingrained into social and economic practice. In short, make amateur technology smaller; make film stocks reversal, so that prints can’t easily be struck; monopolize and deny access to distribution; offer no viable editing or sound capabilities...and amateur media production is rendered private, frivolous, and inconsequential. “Amateur production” becomes synonymous with “home movie making,” and “amateur” as an adjective (as in “amateur technologies,” for example) becomes tellingly interchangeable with the descriptor “consumer”—amateur works clearly not deemed acts of production, but rather, remnants of private consumption.

Sony’s Portapak emerged on the scene in 1965, and the ensuing claims for video’s democratizing potentials were certainly not all lip service, as evidenced by a vibrant history of video art and activism, along with video collectives such as Paper Tiger TV (still in existence 25 years after its founding). But amateur/consumer video technologies did not even become an economically viable reality until late in the 1980’s, over a quarter century after the Portapak. In those ensuing years, for all intents and purposes, video was a storage medium for the average consumer, not a means of amateur production.

And when camcorder culture did eventually gain full momentum, the shift from film to video and the addition of effortless sound recording really made little difference in conceptions of the amateur or amateur
production. By then, the amateur/home movie ideology outlined by Zimmermann was too deeply ingrained in popular consciousness for a change in technology to make much of a difference in its social use.

As Michelle Citron underscores in her book Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions, the code of appropriate amateur recording situations is an unspoken, but well-known one:

We film the Christmas dinner with family and not the meal eaten alone; birthday parties, not the emergency room visits; baby’s first step, not fighting with the adolescent; vacation, not work; wedding parties, not divorce proceedings; births not funerals.

Amateur video production’s possibilities thereby remain deeply ensconced in the private sphere. As Zimmermann argues, professional media was the public sphere of the twentieth century, thereby containing any possibility of a productive, participatory public sphere in Jürgen Habermas’ sense of the term.

This is not to say that pre-digital individuals and collectives didn’t hope for such a sphere, or believe in its possibility. Jonas Mekas’ October 6, 1960 Movie Journal entry, entitled “On Film Troubadors” begins:

Films will soon be made as easily as written poems, and almost as cheaply. They will be made everywhere and by everybody. The empires of professionalism and big budgets are crumbling.

And yet looking back upon the pre-digital age, with the exception of a few undeniable blips on the radar (the Zapruder footage, the Rodney King tape), the most attention/airtime amateur media ever procured within the professional/public sphere was arguably on America’s Funniest Home Videos—a far cry I would imagine, from what Jonas Mekas had in mind.

Rethinking the Amateur

Of course this dystopian characterization of amateurism in the pre-digital age was not without exceptions—several of which have already been mentioned. Recent scholarly and curatorial efforts are revealing that past amateur practice was not as homogenized as one might think, and also that even seemingly traditional home movie texts deserve preservation and valuation as historical documents.

In the early nineties, for example, Karen Ishizuka, third-generation Japanese American, and senior curator of the Japanese American National Museum in downtown Los Angeles began an effort to archive and restore home movies by Japanese Americans. Ishizuka argues that early newsreels and other forms of official visual recording neglected scenes from the lives of people of color. In many cases, home movies serve as the only moving visual documentation of how these groups lived.

The museum’s collection of amateur images dates back to the early 1920’s, many entries accompanied by oral testimonials by the filmmakers. It was Ishizuka who submitted David Tatsuno’s WWII era amateur footage (shot with a smuggled 8mm camera from within the Topaz Internment Camp) to the Library of Congress’ National Registry for consideration. The registry’s selection and induction of Tatsuno’s footage in 1996 marked only the second time in history that amateur material had been given credence by the Registry (the first being the induction of the Zapruder footage in 1994).

Home movies such as Tatsuno’s, Ishizuka says, “document and present a complex time in history from the point of view of those who lived it. They remind us of the important part everyday people play in the making of America.” Something Strong Within: Home Movies From America’s Concentration Camps (1994) a video produced by Ishizuka and directed by Robert Nakamura focuses specifically on amateur Japanese American footage of the WWII internment period.
Astonishing footage from another eight amateurs besides Tatsuno is included—in all, depicting daily life in six different internment centers from the Japanese American perspective.

Intermittently, entries from camp memoirs and diaries are superimposed onscreen, allowing fragmented first person testimonies to evoke a sense of the camps rather than relying on a seamless, essentializing treatment of the Japanese American internment experience. The last such superimposition comes from Tatsuno, commenting on the status of his own amateur images:

> Despite the loneliness and despair that enveloped us, we made the best we could with the situation. I hope that when you look at these [movies] you see the spirit of the people—people trying to reconstruct a community despite overwhelming obstacles. This, I feel, is the essence of these home movies.

Though her aim certainly is to educate the American public at large about the history of Japanese Americans, and specifically about the largely unspoken reality of the WWII internment camps, Ishizuka’s primary concern is with reconnecting Japanese Americans to one another and to themselves:

> We’re not going to change everyone in society, but what we can do is reach our own people, to not only teach our children but to help many older people who were incarcerated heal their emotional scars and shame...In all my efforts, the real motivation is to strengthen and educate our own people first and foremost.  

Scholarship is also emerging by the likes of David James and Melinda Stone, on the critically ignored subject of amateur film clubs and their members, who bear the title of amateur with pride, while producing work that certainly defies all conceptions of amateur ideology previously outlined. The most recent instance of the National Registry’s induction of amateur material in 2001, was a piece by such a film clubber—San Diego amateur club member Sid Laverents. Running ten minutes, Laverents’ 16mm film, *Multiple Sidosis* (1966) is one portion of a four part autobiographical project he terms *The Sid Saga*, which has taken him thirty years to complete. A former vaudeville performer turned aeronautical engineer, Laverents, aged ninety-five, builds his own cameras, is a trick...
photography buff, and is also an amateur musician and composer. *Multiple Sidosis* combines all these proclivities, the film’s title playing off the fact that multiple images of Sid (twelve of them at one point), playing a variety of musical instruments (and a song composed by him), appear on screen via the complex, even baffling matting techniques that are Laverents’ forte. Laverents’ work is incredibly original, technically advanced, and autobiographical. It has also certainly made a foray out of the private and into popular consciousness—in addition to the National Registry induction, the American Cinematheque recently held a special screening of Laverents’ work in Los Angeles.

Several contemporary artists are turning to preexisting amateur footage as visual material for their work. Hungarian filmmaker Peter Forgacs stands out in particular as someone whose works to this point, are composed entirely of footage appropriated from private amateur collections. *Meanwhile Somewhere…* (1996), is a Forgacs work composed of footage culled from private collections across Europe, shot between 1940 and 1943. In the continuing debates on Holocaust visual representation, Forgacs’ works repeatedly prove anomalous in that they are constructed from a form of archival material, and yet, far from more customary appropriation of images from out of the anonymous, Nazi-produced archive, all of Forgacs’ material is sourced from named, identifiable amateur “I/eyes.”

Produced for Hungarian Television, *Meanwhile Somewhere…* includes footage from non-Jewish Krakow Army Resistance fighter Tadeus Franszyn shot just outside the fences of the Plaszow Concentration Camp with a hidden camera, as well as 16mm footage of Westerbork Concentration deportations to Auschwitz, shot by a Dutch Jewish amateur, Rudolf Breslauer, under orders from the camp’s commander.

The home movies of Nazi soldier Götz Hirt-Reger, shot in Breslau, Warsaw, and the Ukraine, are also present, including a disturbingly uncontextualized sequence in which stuffed animals hanging by rope nooses are drenched with gasoline and immolated to ash. Other footage sources include the Belgian Goavert family, sitting to a lavish tea party in their estate’s gardens, and a Polish amateur’s transcription of a Polish teenage girl and her
young German lover being publicly shamed for their physical contact. As their heads are shaved, they stand with signs around their necks, which read, “I’m the traitor of the German people” and “I’m a Polish pig.”

Forgacs consistently maintains the link between footage and its source, naming the amateurs behind the images through superimposed titles. One is thereby faced with amateur footage captured under a striking range of conditions, by “I/eyes” of profoundly disparate subjective positioning. What results is a piece without a singular line of argument or a synthesizing, didactic claim, that, instead, offers a dizzying array of conflicting private glimpses into World War II Europe, subverting traditional positivistic modes of historical telling and forcing audience members to derive their own knowledge claims.

In terms of rethinking amateur video and searching for instances of the medium’s use beyond the birthday party and the wedding, it certainly bears underscoring that the emergence of the video medium coincided with a cultural shift from social movement politics to identity politics, catalyzed largely by the emergence and proliferation of ‘70s feminism.

Feminist artists, many coming from a performance art background, seized onto the medium at its outset, and though they shared Portapaks (which could hardly be deemed amateur technology for the masses, being prohibitively expensive), these women took profound steps towards redefining conceptions of amateur and professional media.

If individuals operating outside mainstream, professional circles are defined, by negation, as amateurs, then these women—Martha Rosler, Susan Mogul, Dara Birnbaum, Lynn Hershman, Vanalyne Green, et al—were amateurs of a sort never seen before. Their work profoundly shattered customary amateur distinctions between public and private, making, as the old adage goes, “the personal political.”

Though the role of amateur video technologies in the expansion of agency and program content may certainly be traced through any number of social and political contexts, video’s implications therefore carry special significance in the emergence first of female, then gay and lesbian, and more recently, of queer bodies, from out of a decidedly patriarchal and heterosexual media history.

Perhaps one of the most cited examples of such amateur innovation is Sadie Benning, whose teenage works were shot in her bedroom on the most amateur of technologies—a Fisher Price Pixelvision toy (which recorded black and white, pixellated images and sound onto an audio cassette tape).
Me and Rubyfruit (1989), If Every Girl Had a Diary (1990), It Wasn’t Love (1992), and other gender/sexuality-challenging autobiographical works by Benning sparked critical acclaim across academic, art, and activist communities, offering evidence that acts of embodied politics, produced outside the realm of professional aesthetics and technologies, can be not only subversive, but also beautiful.

Granted, when Tom Joslin began recording his daily battle living with AIDS, he was already an accomplished artist, but the video camera he chose as his medium was decidedly amateur. The resultant film, Silverlake Life: The View From Here (1991) is very much a home movie, culled solely from thirty-five hours of home video by Joslin’s former student, Peter Friedman, who inherited the task of editing the film, after both Joslin and his partner, Mark Massi, died from AIDS. Joslin’s transcription of a Silverlake, California life repeatedly transgresses Michelle Citron’s list of “appropriate” home movie filming situations, recording both the emergency room visit and the funeral. But the ideology of traditional amateur images is subverted not only by the situations filmed, or by the fact that this “private” footage was made public, but also, and perhaps most importantly, by the constituency of the American “family” and “home” transcribed therein.

Through the imaging of their domestic space and daily life, AIDS discourse became personified for early 1990’s audiences for one of the first times and on a remarkably wide scale—the film was shown on PBS, garnered a theatrical release, and is still widely available on video and DVD over a decade later. Joslin and Massi offered (and continue to offer) visible proof that equally powerful feelings of commitment (twenty-two years for Massi and Joslin), love, and loss exist outside the hegemonic heterosexual model (though societal attempts to invalidate this fact extend all the way to Joslin’s “official” death certificate which listed him as “never married”).

Viewing works such as Silverlake Life, it becomes far more difficult to dismiss the matters raised as simply “someone else’s problem.” By 1991 many audience members owned or had access to a camera similar to the one utilized. The grainy video and poor sound quality (so poor as to mandate subtitling at times) arrest us, disarm us with the familiarity of their aesthetic qualities and the unmediated, hand-held spontaneity of their captured real-time moments. The occasional flashing date and time in the bottom corner of the frame do not distract or push us out of the diegesis, but rather pull us in further. The “home movie” format provides a point of engagement, making private, amateur images a matter of public discourse, extending the potential means of production to individuals, voices, and subject matters heretofore excluded from mainstream programming.

The Digital Age

With every new technological era come utopian prophecies of democratizing the means of production and expanding agency to the heretofore-passive recipients of professional programming flow. Consumer digital video, increasingly replacing home analog formats since 1996, certainly has narrowed the gap between consumer and professional image “quality” to a point
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heretofore unseen in the history of video.

The introduction of consumer digital editing platforms is quite another matter, however. Desktop programs such as Final Cut Pro, Adobe Premiere, and i-Movie, now coming factory-installed on many computers, are not digital improvements on prior consumer editing options; there have never been other viable consumer editing possibilities in the history of audiovisual media. Certainly there were amateur filmmakers who cut and spliced their home movies (David Tatsuno being one of them), but most families left their images unedited, silent, and private. Similarly, the occasional ambitious camcorder family might have edited crudely in-camera or from camera to VCR, but even the simplest of linear video editing systems was never marketed at the consumer level in any widespread or economically viable form.

Desktop editing platforms therefore constitute the first ever attempt to make editing capabilities accessible at the nonprofessional level in the history of audiovisual media at large. And through the oddity of “technological leapfrogging,” picture and sound editing has now not only been introduced into the home, but in a digital, computer-based, nonlinear fashion, which reduces the difference between present amateur and professional editing platforms largely to a matter of drive space.

It is important to face the reality that marketing of such newfound post-production capabilities (along with equally astonishing new potentials in output formats) most often takes the form of advertisements such as a recent i-Movie television spot from Apple Computers in which a young couple breaks the news of their tropical elopement to family members via a home-edited and burned DVD-ROM. Perhaps more disturbing was 2001’s offering of the “Lego Studios Steven Spielberg MovieMaker Set” with which children can build studio sets out of Lego and then make mini-movies on them with a camera that attaches to any home computer’s USB port. Simplified kiddie-editing software is also provided in the package, which includes the ability to send movies via e-mail or post them to the Internet. Such mainstream marketing and packaging may obscure destabilizing and politically agenting applications of digital postproduction and distribution technologies, aligning them, instead, with the traditional amateur ideologies. Or they may contextualize digital propensities in a fashion that makes emulation of mainstream/professional media form and content (with the goal of someday becoming the next Spielberg) the brass ring of amateur producers. Such realities are certainly powerfully present in my mind. And yet even with circumspection, I still feel the question—has the historical lack of any truly viable means of organizing private images at a level beyond in-camera or deck to deck edits been a profound limiting agent, thus far, in the process of transforming the private and personal into public and political documents?—is a valid and exciting one to ask.

One could argue that the media forms offered up by the present “digital age” are certainly more diverse than in past “revolutionary moments,” offering at least greater odds for the creation and distribution of work produced outside the professional realm. And yet, mainstream media and corporate powers seem intent on privatizing the Internet and focusing the aims of other digital technologies towards the ability to play video games with a random partner on one’s cellphone, or towards replicating the “look of film” on digital media, as a means of eliminating film print processing and duplication costs.

But despite these corporate/professional pressures, what constitutes an “act of media production” is rapidly and undeniably changing. From web page design to the simple act of penning an e-mail, media production is becoming an inescapable part of daily life, rather than the domain of a select professional elite.

The pedagogical buzz term of the moment in media studies is “media literacy.” But it seems this preoccupation speaks to only half the equation. Existence is increasingly
demanding not only media literacy, but also media fluency.

My undergraduate students at the moment astonish me in their fluency, truly coming close to being media “troubadours,” evoking a Jonas Mekas-like excitement in me. The “empires of professionalism and big budgets” may not be crumbling as Mekas prophesied, but students with no formal production training are suddenly arriving in my classroom talking about their journal blogs, downloading power point displays for what I intended to be informal class presentations, and turning in audiovisual, time-based media projects of increasingly technical and conceptual complexity. Where once I simply encouraged students to submit final projects for publication, I find myself increasingly telling them to submit their final projects to exhibitions, symposiums, and festivals.

It is with such changing realities in mind, that the authors of this issue approach their investigations of “the amateur,” with a compelling blend of optimism and pause. Katrien Jacobs examines the Internet and emergent digital technologies as means for the production and distribution of amateur pornography, an area that, on one hand, allows for serious discussions about increasing government regulation of the Web, while also celebrating the political and empowering opportunities for self-expression afforded by new technologies.

Daniel Chamberlain introduces us to the “blog” or web-log, an increasingly popular new form of media production that occupies a liminal space between classifications of amateur and professional. Blogging encompasses two-way communication and community formation as two of its central characteristics—components that, amateur film clubs aside, have never been fully expressed or explored by past amateur media.

Heidi Rae Cooley looks to the imaging capabilities of cellphones and other mobile screenic devices, making a claim for their imaging as a new mode of amateur production. She goes further, however, arguing that these technologies foster a potential new way of seeing the world around us in opposition to past forms of amateur imaging.

Jorie Lagerwey addresses issues of amateur aesthetics and their assimilation/co-opting by mainstream media. Examining MTV’s Jackass—the series and the movie—she makes initially surprising, but quickly compelling claims for the Jackasses’ ties to American avant-garde traditions in their aesthetics, their spirit, and their reactivation of public space.

Industry “professional” Eric Wenocur offers an important and unique perspective on the current deluge of consumer and “pro-sumer” equipment and technologies, revealing that such advancements are impacting the professional post-production world in ways one might not imagine. It is one thing to use Final Cut Pro to circumvent professional routes of top-down media production; quite another to think that owning a desktop editing system entitles or qualifies one to seek employ, and thus professional status, within the mainstream/professional media structure.

With related pause, Kyle Conway takes a closer look at the emancipatory rhetoric surrounding digital-age developments, underscoring that whatever technological advances have been made in the realm of media production, access to viable modes of distribution still arguably remains the greatest hurdle between amateur and professional valuation. Technophiles and new-media junkies will perhaps be surprised at the mode of alternative distribution he chooses to focus on most closely.

Alan Kattelle looks back, rather than forwards, offering a pictorial history of amateur motion picture equipment. But in doing so, he makes us take a closer look at now and towards tomorrow, offering an important reminder that all old technologies were once new. Discussed, theorized, and advertised within the rhetoric of “newness,” today’s cameras and computers will also be artifacts one day.

What the non-Lucases of the world do with
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their potential digital power remains to be seen. Will it involve revolutionary new forms of media production and means for their distribution? Or will new digital amateurs remain rooted in the hold of a home movie ideology that has proven deep-seated enough to transcend medium?

The technology may have changed, and the debate may have shifted and re-centered around new questions specific to the digital age. But Deren’s closing words to “Amateur Versus Professional” still remain a vital corrective nearly a half-century later. I offer them again as my closing words here:

The most important part of your equipment is yourself: your mobile body, your imaginative mind, and your freedom to use both. Make sure you do use them.11

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NOTES

2 Patricia Zimmermann, Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xv.
3 ibid, x.
4 Deren, 46.
6 Karen Ishizuka, quoted in the program for Topaz Footage and Something Strong Within screening, Japan America Theater, Los Angeles, Apr. 3 1997.
7 ibid.
9 Steven Soderbergh recently utilized the same Apple-based Final Cut Pro software I utilize to edit my own autobiographical works to edit Full Frontal (2002). Editing maestro Walter Murch has apparently also decided to experiment with Final Cut Pro on an forthcoming editing venture.
11 Deren, 46.