From loss to reconsideration: rethinking silent film historiography through amateur cinema

Abstract

If we understand cinema only as commercially produced and exhibited films then we are bound to a silent film history marked by loss and irreversibility. But what if we expand our conception of cinema to the numerous film experiences that happened beyond the commercial screen? This essay poses this question with the hope of initiating a transnational reinterpretation of silent film historiography through noncommercial cinema. I focus on two Catalan amateur filmmakers from the late 1920s and early 1930s, Lluis Gisbert and Llorenc Llobet Gracia, to show how silent film practices continued to develop beyond commercial cinema in the films, writings, and screening venues of amateurs throughout the world for decades after the release of the first talkies. I first analyze how most film historians have ignored amateur cinema and how its status as a displaced film culture can help us reconsider the teleological narratives adhered to the arrival of sound in the late 1920s. I then focus on amateur cinema in Catalonia during the late 1920s and early 1930s as a case study that shows how amateur filmmakers continued to mimic themes, tropes, and techniques of silent cinema in their films, which are primarily housed at the Filmoteca de Catalunya (Catalan Film Archive). Finally, I explore how amateur cinema can be included in transnational and expanded approaches to silent cinema historiography, especially given the tools that digital humanities have at its disposal nowadays

Keywords

Amateur Cinema; Filmoteca de Catalunya; Displaced Cinema; Noncommercial Film; Silent Film History; Digital Humanities

The history of commercial silent cinema is haunted by a tale of loss and destruction. It is estimated, for instance, that more than 75% of every feature film produced from 1912 to 1929 in the United States has been lost due to the lack of an archival conscience during the first decades of the medium's existence (Pierce 2013, 1). Despite the occasional miracle findings of prints, such as those found in Dawson city in 1978,[1] the dire conclusion of a forever lost cultural heritage won't change much. Unless we expand our understanding of what cinema has been, and realize that by including amateur films—which were overwhelmingly silent until the 1970s and carried on many of the characteristics that we usually ascribe to films produced in the silent film era—into the history of cinema, the tale of loss becomes one of reconsideration. Beyond the commercial screen and the temporal timeframe usually attributed to silent film, roughly speaking from the invention of the medium in 1895 to the late 1920s when the arrival of sound cinema changed the industry, thousands of silent amateur films were produced, exhibited, and circulated since the popularization of the 9.5mm Pathé Baby camera in 1923, the Cine Kodak 16mm camera in 1924, and later formats such as 8mm and Super 8mm, released in 1932 and 1965 respectively.

In this essay I focus on two Catalan amateur filmmakers from the late 1920s and early 1930s, Lluís Gisbert and Llorenç Llobet Gràcia, to show how silent film practices continued to develop beyond commercial cinema in the films, writings, and screening venues of amateurs throughout the world for years after the release of the first talkies. I first analyze how film historians have ignored amateur cinema and how its status as a displaced film culture can help us reconsider the teleological narratives adhered to the arrival of sound in the late 1920s. I then focus on amateur cinema in Catalonia during the late 1920s and early 1930s as a case study that shows how amateur filmmakers continued to mimic themes, tropes, and techniques of silent cinema in

their films, which are primarily housed at the Filmoteca de Catalunya (Catalan Film Archive, hereof FC). Finally, I explore how amateur cinema can be included in transnational and expanded approaches to silent cinema historiography, especially given the tools that digital humanities have at its disposal nowadays.

I. Reversible histories: reconsidering the narrative of silent cinema's history

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), amateur filmmaker Lluís Gisbert used a 9.5mm Pathé Baby camera to document the hardships of the war experienced by his wealthy family in Barcelona. The results were edited together with reenacted scenes shot after the war into a film called *Quan la gana apreta!* (*When hunger strikes!*, circa 1943), which includes some of the only unauthorized moving images of daily life during the war that have survived, making it an invaluable audiovisual document (especially given the fact that it was filmed on reversible positive original, as most small gauge films, making it the only existing copy). In a scene of the film, Gisbert himself appears in front of the camera to show the physical effects of the scarcity of food in the family (Figure 1). He first shows how loose his pants are after months of hunger, and then mutters some words and points vehemently to his throat, which we assume was covered in a generous double chin before the beginning of the war.

Beyond the political purpose of the scene, to denounce the suffering of the once dominant classes of Catalonia which desired the arrival of a new dictatorship that would restore their privileges, lies a second, more hidden, layer of meaning that is related to the history of amateur cinema as a displaced part of silent film history. The image of Gisbert pointing to his throat after speaking to someone off camera can be read as an unintended reminder of the diverging paths that professional and amateur cinema took in the late 1920s/early 1930s after the adoption of

sound by the film industry[2] and the inability of nonprofessional camera manufacturers to introduce an affordable and reliable system of synchronous sound recording.

Figure 1. Stills from *Quan la gana apreta!* (Lluís Gisbert, 1946). The intertitle on the left says "And after so many vicissitudes here are the graphic results of unsatisfied hunger". Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

In the early 1930s amateur cinema was only a few years old and, as the character of *Quan la gana apreta!*, still a virtually "wordless" film practice. The words muttered by Gisbert were most likely destined for the person operating the camera, and he was probably asking if he was positioned correctly for the shot. They were not intended to be heard or even understood by the spectator, since the intention of the film was to provide *visual evidence* of the experience of hunger during the war (as the intertitle remarks with its mention to how the film shows "graphic" proof of the effects of the war in the health of the family). Thus, we can also interpret the shot of Gisbert pointing at his throat as a playful acknowledgment of the inability of the camera to record his voice, having to rely instead only on images to convey his message. As with most amateur films from the interwar period, *Quan la gana apreta!* relies exclusively on visual tropes, montage, intertitles, and symbolist figuration to express the aesthetic and political intentions of its author.

Unlike professional cinema, amateur filmmakers were forced to keep relying on the image as the essence of cinema, paradoxically becoming the guarantors of what many early

modernist film theorists, especially those coming from the avant-garde, described as pure cinema (or in its more politicized interpretation, the ability of the medium to provide unique visual documents of social and political reality). René Clair for instance famously stated in 1929 that "cinema must remain visual at all costs" (Abel 1993, 2:39), a prerogative that amateur filmmakers, willingly or unwillingly, maintained for decades. This process was certainly asymmetric and developed at different rhythms depending on the geographical context and the availability of sound film technology. But in most parts of the world noncommercial cinema remained mostly silent until at least the 1950s.

Despite the existence, in Catalonia alone, of hundreds of films like *Quan la gana apreta!*, amateur cinema is virtually absent from silent film historiography in Spain, and constitutes barely a footnote, if at all, in general histories of cinema around the world.[3] While calls for a reexamination of historiography as centered on the social and cultural significance of cinema have become standard, perhaps best expressed in Richard Maltby's call to differentiate between film and cinema history and abandon the medium-specificity of classical historiography,(Maltby 2006; Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers 2011) their scope is still limited to commercially produced or art cinema. Since the early 2000s, film studies scholarship has popularized concepts such as useful cinema, nontheatrical, orphan, industrial, or—more simply—noncommercial to analyze the social, political, and cultural relevance of the medium beyond commercial cinema with theatrical exhibition. These studies include, for instance, the documentation and analysis of the efforts by colonial authorities to subjugate the colonized,(Stein 2006; Grieveson and MacCabe 2011) the circulation of radical political imaginaries through informal networks of exhibition,[4] the intersection of different educational initiatives and cinema,(Wasson 2005; Bonifazio 2014; Grieveson and Wasson 2008; Orgeron, Orgeron, and Streible 2012) and the crossovers between

amateur and professional practices since the first decades of film history.[5]

As Benoit Turquety and Valèrie Vignaux proposed in their edited collection *L'amateur en cinéma. Un autre paradigme. Histoire, esthétique, marges et institutions* (Turquety and Vignaux 2017), it is important to rethink the epistemological paradigm through which scholars have narrowly understood cinema, based exclusively on commercial fiction films, to include an expanded corpus of technologies and experiences, such as amateur cinema, that have informed people's relationship with the medium across the world as active producers of media. In his introduction to the collection, Turquety offers a model of analysis that surpasses classical film theory and its screen-passive spectator apparatus and poses cinema as an everyday cultural device instead (Turquety 2017, 17–26) If cinema was never only commercial cinema, as Turquety provocatively states, then we have to reconsider our entire epistemological and historical approach to the medium. In this essay I want to extend Turquety and Vignaux's call for a change of paradigm in our conception of what cinema is into a reconsideration of silent cinema's history.

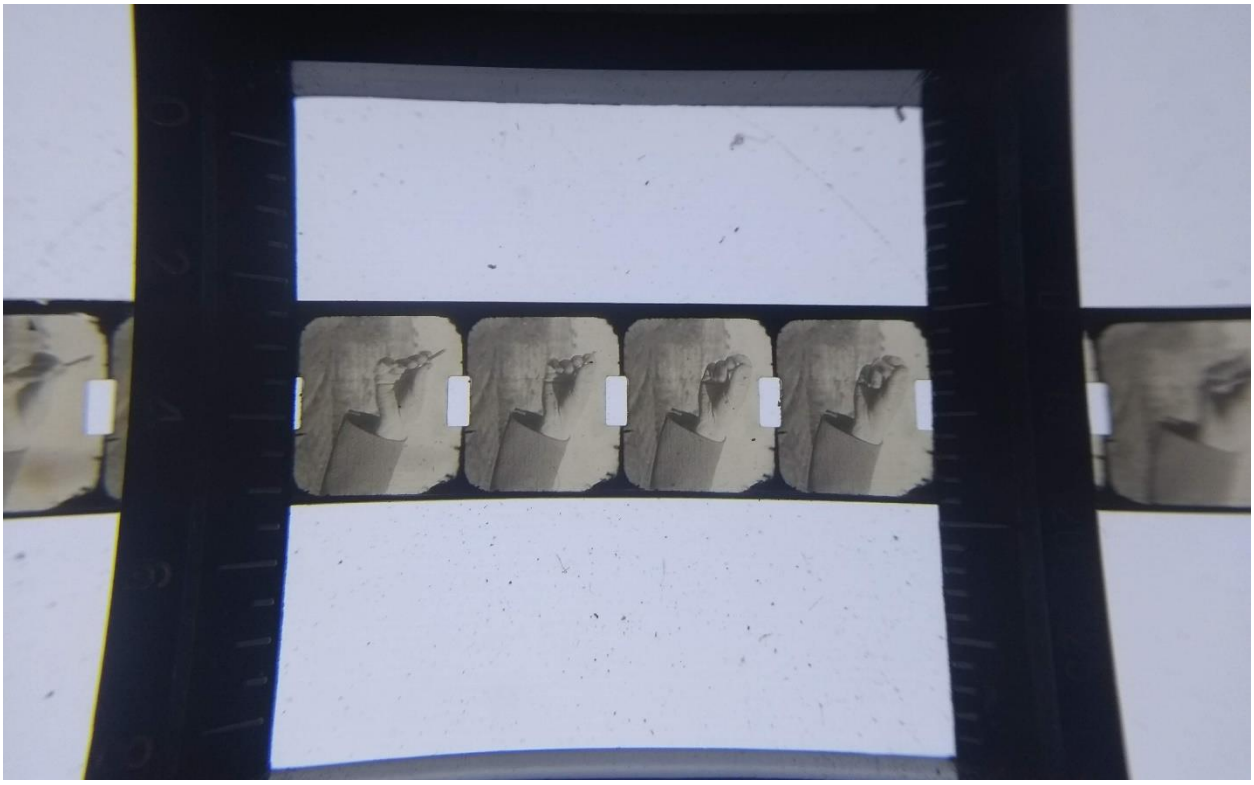


Figure 2. 9.5mm reversible positive original from an untitled film shot in Catalonia the late 1920s. Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

Amateur cinema became popular, first among the wealthy and then progressively in more middle-class contexts as the equipment lowered its price, precisely at the moment of transition between silent and sound cinema at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. With the particularity that this new film practice could not record synchronous sound, and was thus more tied to the expressive tropes of silent cinema, which was being surpassed in commercial contexts by the new era of talkies. Amateur cinema was imbued with an anti-teleological tendency to mimic the "kingdom of shadows" that Maxim Gorky had described in 1895 when first watching a Lumiere film, instead of the radical transformation of "the screen from a silent shadow to a LIVING thing -- vivid and vibrant with the voices and emotions of living people", as Vitaphone advertised itself in 1928 to promote sound films made with their system.[6] In the 9.5

and 16mm reversible positive originals that allowed amateur filmmakers to cut the costs of developing film (Figure 2), another reversal took place: silent cinema remained in a world of small gauge silent shadows instead of being propelled into the era of talking pictures that soon changed commercial cinema.

Amateur cinema has been, then, from its inception a displaced medium with a paradoxical place in film history; appearing in a critical moment for the industry and neither belonging entirely to silent or sound cinema, ignored by historiography but incredibly important for thousands of nonprofessional cinema lovers around the world. It is an archive without a history, or at least one that has not been considered by most historians except for a few local histories and the key work of Charles Tepperman in North America (Tepperman 2015), Andrea Mariani in Italy (Andrea Mariani 2018), Vignaux and Turquety in France, or Heather Norris Nicholson in the UK (Nicholson 2012), among others. I take this idea of a displaced film history from Pablo La Parra-Pérez's dissertation *Displaced Cinema: Militant Film Culture and Political Dissidence in Spain (1966–1982)*, which explores how militant film practices in Spain during the 1960s and 70s have been excluded from the established histories of the long 1968, becoming a displaced cinema both in terms of having been ignored by dominant narratives of the medium's history and in how it created a film culture of its own (La Parra-Pérez 2018a, 24).

This idea of a displaced cinema resonates with what Ian Christie identifies as a series of asynchronies in relation to film history's dominant narratives that have been rarely taking into consideration, as if they "constitute too much of a *disturbance* for narrative theory, or indeed montage theory. It is an example par excellence of the generally ignored intersection between the specificity of cinema and the histories -economic, technological, political, ideological- that determine and are in turn determined by it" (Christie 1982). As we will see in the following

pages, looking at interwar amateur cinema also creates a historical disturbance for canonical accounts of the medium's history in the 1930s, which are overwhelmingly focused on the triumph of talkies and the transformation of the industry, failing to pay attention to what was happening in other key spaces of film culture where silent film practices continued to thrive.

Silent film scholar and archivist Paolo Cherchi Usai says that "in purely empirical terms, it is arbitrary to divide the history of cinema into a "silent" and a "sound" era […] Films with no soundtrack continued to be made throughout the rest of the twentieth century, and they still are to this day, but they are silent only in a heavily mediated sense of the term" (Cherchi Usai 2019, 3). Cherchi Usai prefers to speak of a historical identity of silent films, which include a series of narrative, aesthetic, and industrial conventions (such as the predominance of visuality, special type of acting, use of intertitles, film lecturers, live music, etc.), that are specific to the period that spans from the invention of cinema in the last years of the 19th century to the late 1920s, when sound cinema became the driving force of the industry. Other historians such as Vincent Pinel prefer to identify the "artistic model" associated with cinema until the arrival of synchronous sound recording as the main defining trope of silent cinema (Pinel 2010, 4). Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer, in turn, talk about a radical change in the cinemagoing experience after the arrival of synchronous sound in 1927 to North America, which for them marks the difference between these two eras of film (Grieveson and Krämer 2004, 6). All of these historical conventions regarding silent cinema are certainly true, but only when applied to commercially produced and exhibited films in movie theaters.

But what do we do with the fact that 9.5mm portable film projectors were used extensively since the early 1920s in private homes to screen silent prints distributed by houses like Pathé (Schneider 2007; Vignaux 2009)? And how do we categorize the countless silent films

made by nonprofessional filmmakers from the early 1920s to at least the 1960s, which continued to experiment and evolve the codes of silent film practice? These practices cannot be equated exactly with what we understand as commercial silent films from the early period of the medium, but yet remained closer to the idiosyncrasy of silent cinema than to the talkies that their authors saw in movie theaters. Both film cultures coexisted in time for decades, creating a hybrid space of creativity driven by the need to find aesthetic solutions to certain technological problems. This paradox problematizes teleological histories based on radical ruptures generated by technological advances such as the arrival of sound. Cherchi Usai, for instance, speaks about how silent cinema "is a useful term of reference as the beginning of a trajectory *leading to* from one kind of artificiality to another" (Cherchi Usai 2019, 5). As I show in the following section devoted to the restoration and distribution of Llorenç Llobet Gràcia's amateur films and the reception of synchronous sound technology by amateur filmmakers in Catalonia, this trajectory wasn't exactly lineal, but a back-and-forth journey between old and new moving image technologies.

II. Emerging from the shadows of the archive

In the 2019 edition of the Cinema Ritrovato festival, one of the most prestigious events devoted to film heritage and restoration, a jury composed of Lorenzo Codelli, Philippe Garnier, Pamela Hutchinson, Miguel Marías, Shivendra Singh Dungarpur and Paolo Mereghetti awarded the prize for best single film release to the DVD pack dedicated to Llorenç Llobet Gràcia's film *Vida en sombras* (*Life in shadows*).[7] Although the film has sound and was released in 1948 (five years after Gisbert's film *Quan la gana apreta!*) the DVD box also included 22 silent amateur films that Llobet Gràcia shot in 9.5 and 16mm from 1926 to 1954 (Figure 2). These films are crucial to understand the development of one of the most important, and unknown, Spanish films of the 20th century. They are also, as the catalogue of the DVD itself highlights, "an important

chapter of the still unwritten history of amateur filmmaking in Spain" ("Llorenç Llobet Gràcia. Vida En Sombras. DVD Catalogue." 2019, 30).

Figure 3. Screen capture from the English menu of DVD 2 of the DVD Box Set *Vida en Sombras* with eight of the 22 amateur films from Llorenç Llobet Gràcia. Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

The restoration, digitalization, and international distribution in a DVD of these 22 films is a significant event for film history in its own right. Although their preservation state was considered average, some of the materials, all of them reversible positive originals which made them the only existing copies, presented serious chemical and physical deterioration due to extensive use. All of them were carefully repaired, telecined at HD or 2K quality and digitally restored at the Conservation and Restoration Centre (2CR) of the FC in Terrassa. But the fact is that the Cinema Ritrovato award was given to the "single film release", that is, to the commercial feature film, and not to the DVD pack as a whole, downplaying the value of Llobet Gràcia's trajectory in the amateur film circuit for almost thirty years and the historical importance of the

small gauge films themselves. Instead, the Best Box Set award was given to Criterion's edition of Ingmar Bergman's filmography, whose bonus tracks were highly praised and singled out by the jury.

Figure 4. Stills from Llobet's film *Encara que sembli una bola* (1929). Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

The same jury failed to even mention that the DVD of *Vida en Sombras* included Llobet's existing filmography in 9.5 and 16mm. This is indicative of how little consideration there is even among specialized film scholars and archivists for amateur cinema. Among the silent amateur films we can find home movies, a newsreel that summarize the year 1932, a short documentary of the 1929 International Exhibition that took place in Barcelona, rare footage of the proclamation of the Spanish Second Republic and the Catalan national day (Diada) of 1932, and fictions films such as an animated adaption of the story "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" from Danish author Hans Christian Andersen made by Llobet in 1935, only a few months before the beginning of the Civil War.

It is not by chance that the archivists in charge of the DVD pack edited by the FC chose to include these films as an essential part of Llobet's short career as a professional filmmaker. The FC holds one of the most important amateur film collections of the interwar period, in great part

due to the fact that an impressive amateur film movement developed in Catalonia during the interwar period (Fibla-Gutierrez 2018). Spearheaded by the Catalan Excursionist Centre (CEC) and the wealthy industrial bourgeoisie, the movement counted with its own film journal *Cinema Amateur,* published in Catalan from 1932 to 1936. It is thanks to these filmmakers that we have many everyday images of the 1930s in Catalonia, including some of the very few non institutional recordings taken during the civil war that erupted in 1936. In the absence of a strong enough film industry, amateur film was also the main locus of production during the interwar period in Catalonia.

Films like *Encara que sembli una bola* (*Strange as it seems*, 1929, Figure 4) made use of classic early cinema tricks such as reversing the direction of the film to make a pun about the apparent social relapse of Catalan society at the end of the 1920s (a climate of discontent that ultimately facilitated the end of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the proclamation of the Spanish Second Republic in 1931 and the Catalan government in 1932). Llobet Gràcia also used classic stop motion techniques to animate the story *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* (1935) and a phantom ride shot in *Suicida* (Suicide,1934). Even in his 1940s 16mm films, Llobet Gràcia avoided synchronous sound and continued to use extensively stop motion, intertitles, and symbolist plays between reality and dream through classic montage techniques in films like *Contrastes* (1944) or *El diablo en el valle* (*The devil in the valley,* 1947), a film about a man haunted by animated objects.

This primacy of the image and montage in the continued absence of sound recording technology was used by many amateur filmmakers to defend their practice as a "pure, poetic vision of the world and things" ("Noves de tot arreu" 1934) that maintained the impressionist ethos of 1920s avantgarde film practice and theory as per René Clair's previously cited quote.

But it also elicited frustration and a sense of expressive inferiority towards professional cinema for other filmmakers. This tension was especially evident in the writings of critics and theorists who, as Gisbert does metaphorically in *Quan la gana apreta!*, also pointed to the pitfalls and benefits of a silent amateur film practice.

The second issue of *Cinema Amateur*, published in 1933, already included an article titled "Sound cinema for amateurs", in which the "expressive inferiority" of a "purely visual" amateur cinema was acknowledged (Lagoma 1933). Since synchronous sound recording was still not a possibility, the author advocated for amateurs to devote their efforts to explore the expressive possibilities of adding live music to screenings with gramophone discs and turntable systems, even if a "perfect synchronicity" was impossible to achieve. On December 22 the CEC organized an exhibition of the Bolex Paillard 16mm sound projector, showing a few animated films and Wilheim Pabst and Arnold Frank's 1929 film *The White Hell of Pitz Palu*. These devices were, though, a very expensive commodity that even wealthy amateur filmmakers were reluctant to invest in, especially given the fact that they still thought of cinema as an eminently visual practice strongly attached to silent cinema's aesthetic tropes and techniques. Despite this, sound equipment was regularly advertised in the journal and commercialized by local stores, and some filmmakers experimented with them in contests and film club screenings.

The rudimentary system of adding sound to projection with turntable discs was, for instance, successfully adopted by Llobet Gràcia in 1933 for a projection of his newsreel film *Reportatge de 1932*. The CEC even organized, on January 1933, a two-day course on professional sound film techniques taught by Guillem Díaz Plaja, one of the most important critics and theorists of cinema in Catalunya. The initiative included a visit to the Orphea film studios in Barcelona so that attendants could familiarize themselves with the latest sound

technologies applied by the film industry in Spain.

But soon enough the first voices in defense of a purely visual cinema were raised against a potentially hurried adoption of sound by the amateurs. Delmir de Caralt, one of the most important amateur filmmakers of the time, published an article dramatically titled "Is cinema dying?", in which he distinguished between cinema before the arrival of sound, which he calls "authentic cinema", and after the definitive adoption of the technology as the industry standard, which for him was an entirely different expressive art:

> "Can cinema die? Of course, it can! The noise it makes now, when it had always remained silent, makes cinema look like a patient with an uncertain outlook…
>
> It may very well be that these sounds are the screams of childbirth and that this anguished period of today's cinema is the beginning of a new expressive art, daughter of cinema but different from cinema, as the latter is different from the arts that preceded it […] This is not pessimism. It's a warning scream. A scream that says 'The newborn art is welcome…but we must save the mother!!' We must save cinema!!
>
> This salvation cannot be expected to come from an industrial cinema that depends on the novelty […] No, the salvation will come from amateurs, that is, from the lovers of cinema […] The amateur, as an artist and as a creator, is vaccinated against a series of germs that affect industrial film production. And sound is one of them […]" (Caralt 1933).

These were harsh words pronounced by the most successful Catalan amateur filmmaker, whose films *Montserrat* (1932) and *Memmortigo?* (1934) won international awards and were acquired by foreign film clubs such as the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC) from

London.[8] But if we read them as a thoughtful warning against the tendency of amateurs to mimic professional cinema, we can see how Caralt was only using the adoption of synchronous sound technology to differentiate the paths and objectives of what he called in the same article the "two cinemas"; commercial and noncommercial. If amateur cinema attempted to do the same as the industry but with evidently less means, then it was bound to fail and to ultimately die as an artistic practice.

For him, the purpose of amateur cinema was another; to create a space of creative freedom where one could film and share that which could not be found on the commercial screen; from local realities to artistic experimentation; from domestic scenes and existentialist fictions to political rallies and everyday life during the Civil War. This space remained intimately attached to silent cinema expressive practices for decades, becoming a site of encounter between different film cultures, old and new, that had grown increasingly apart in the commercial screen. This doesn't mean that amateur filmmakers renounced completely to use sound in their films and incorporate the new techniques that they could see at the movie palaces, which by 1935 had already incorporated sound projectors in most of the country. But they did so in their writings more than in their films, given the technical impossibility to film with synchronous sound.

In issue 8 of *Cinema Amateur*, Josep Palau published an article titled "Fonogènica elemental" in which he adapted Jean Epstein's concept of *photogenie* ("fotogènia" in Catalan) to propose a theory of sound, the first to be published in the country, as an aesthetic element (Palau 1935): "In the total eclipse suffered by silent cinema, amateur cinema can become the safekeeper of the art of silent shadow's pure essence […] However, our amateurs may soon be tempted by sound and driven towards a new independent and adventurous path". Palau reminded the

amateurs that the purpose of their creative practice was to "serve the function previously assigned to the avant-garde, which consisted on experimenting rather hazardously with all kinds of innovations that were later swept by commercial cinema […] what a lovely poetry will be born out of the collision between sound and images" (Palau 1935).

Figure 5. Still from *Ritmes d'un dia* (Domènec Giménez Botey, 1934), in which a hand slowly moves its fingers in a very powerful haptic image of cinema's ability to "touch" reality through the eyes.

Palau explicitly mentions that amateur cinema was the natural heir of the avant-garde's attempt to counter commercial cinema. The displaced timeline and autonomous nature of amateur cinema in relation to the commercial circuit allowed for previously marginal practices such as avant-garde and documentary cinema to continue to flourish in 9.5 and 16mm formats (and later 8 and S8mm) in unexpected ways.[9] In 1932 the II Catalan Amateur Film Contest delivered a prize to the best avant-garde film, which was won by *Ritmes d'un dia. Sinfonia d'imatges* from Domènec Giménez Botey, an experimental film that showed the passing of time

during a day through a series of abstract forms and shadows affected by the rise and fall of the sun (Figure 5). That same year Joan Salvan's film *Aigua*, a creative documentary on water in its different forms clearly influenced by Robert Steiner's 1929 film *H20*, won the Cine-Nizo cup for best artistic film.

In issue 9 of *Cinema Amateur*, which was almost entirely dedicated to the IV International Amateur Film Contest and the I International Amateur Film Congress that took place in Barcelona in May, it was announced that for the following year's contest, which were to take place in Berlin, a new competitive category for sound films with "rigorously mechanically synchronization such as optic sound over film, discs synchronized by cable or other similar systems" would be accepted ("Modificacions a Introduir En Les Bases Del Concurs Internacional Del Millor Film d'Amateur" 34-35). The eruption of the Civil War prevented the amateurs from participating in the event and sending any sound films they may have done. They wouldn't participate in any further contests, national or international, until the late 1940s.

In its last issue of the journal, published on January of 1936, *Cinema Amateur* included a two-page advertisement of the brand-new amateur film store Cinemtografia Amateur, which had significantly expanded its retail space and now counted with developing laboratories, small film sets, a repair shop, the latest small gauge equipment, a screening room, and a specially dedicated section of "sound film for the amateur". Services included renting and selling sound projectors and cameras, dubbing of silent films, and optical printing of sound into 16mm film. For Cinematografia Amateur, sound was an "open field open to ample horizons and unlimited possibilities" that the store was finally able to offer to amateur filmmakers.

Unfortunately, these encouraging plans for the future were interrupted by the war efforts and the constant bombings of Italian plains, which cause the death of thousands of civilians.

There is no evidence that amateur filmmakers used the sound film studio during the war, although further research into amateur cinema during the Civil War will surely shed more light into what exactly happened during those years with the equipment that was available. What we do know for sure is that some filmmakers like Lluís Gisbert continued to film during the conflict. Others made use of home projectors and 9.5mm films to entertain children during the difficult years of the war.

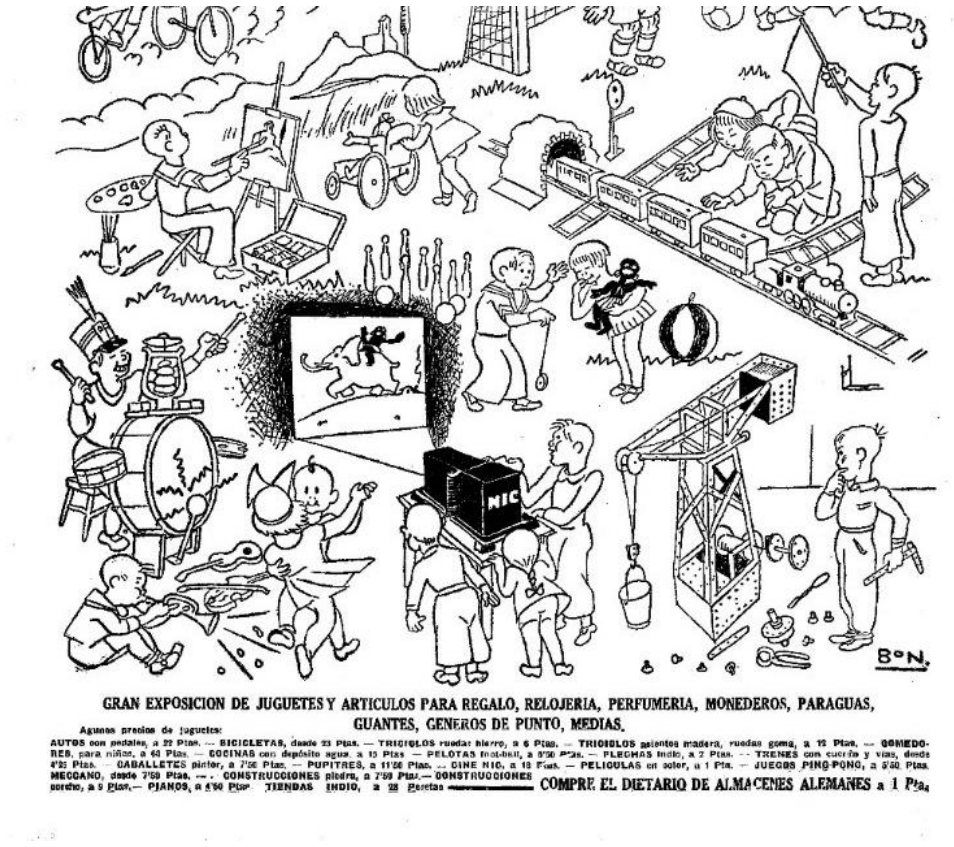


Figure 6. Advertisement of the Cine Nic 9.5 mm projector in the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, January 1, 1933.

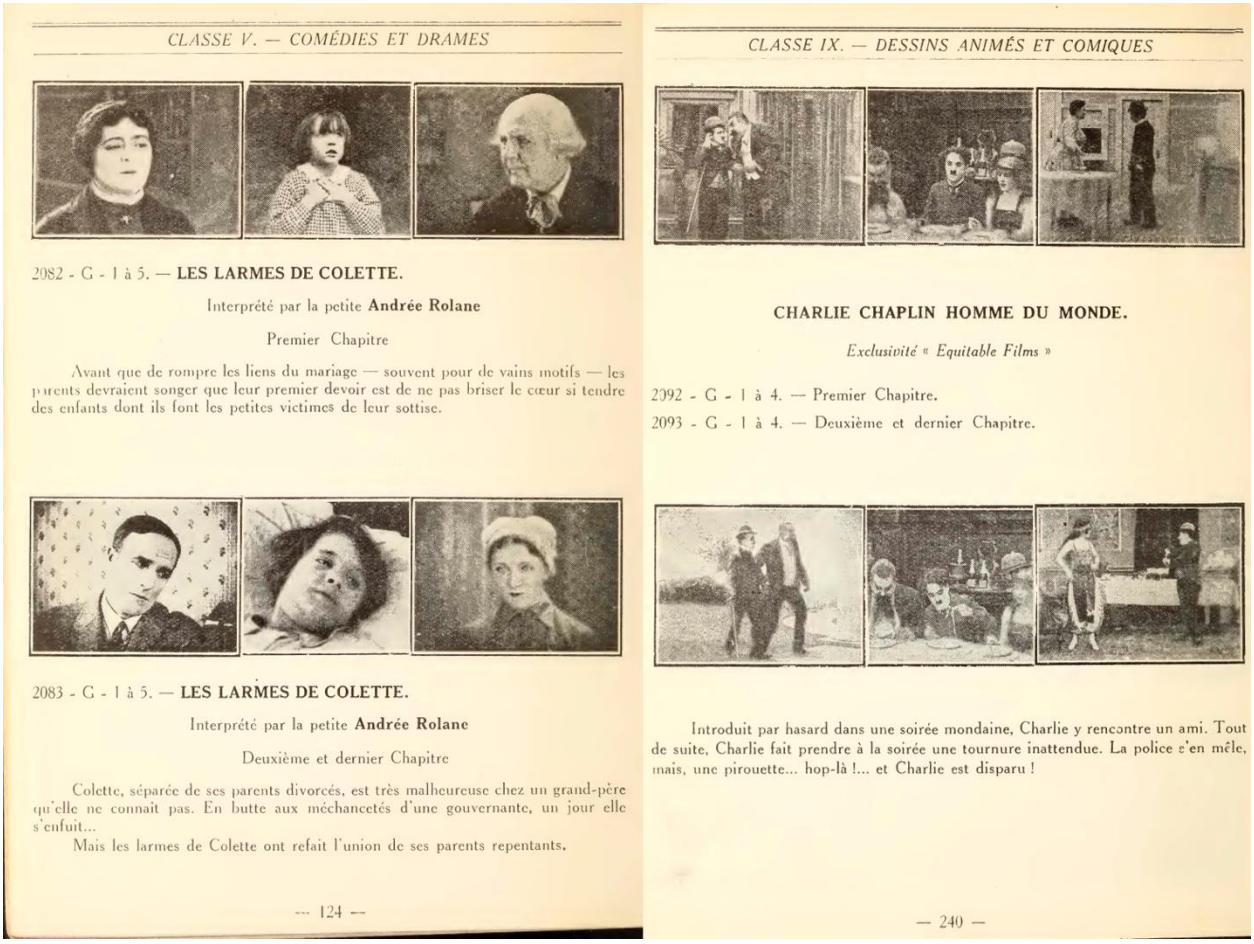
Journalist Santiago Vila-Puig explains how after moving with his family to Bellatera, a small town outside of Barcelona, on September 1936 to avoid the deadly Italian air raids there were only a few distractions available. The most important of them was a 9.5mm Cine Nic portable projector, a toy marketed for children (Figure 7), for which their mother rented Chaplin,

Harold Lloyd or Laurent and Hardy films, as well as others silent films made by local companies, in the Cinematografia Amateur store every weekend during the war (Vila-Puig 2019).[10] The image of a displaced and terrified family gathered together with neighbors and friends during the war around a small 9.5mm projector to watch silent films and forget the terrible conflict for a few moments is a perfect illustration of how amateur film culture had a very relevant social function during the interwar period, and of how silent film practices continued to flourish in unexpected spaces after the adoption of sound by the industry.

In fact, the 9.5mm rental and purchase of films market provided one of the most important spaces for the survival of silent film culture. In the 1931 Pathe Filmathèque 9.5mm catalogue, for instance, one could choose between hundreds of films including classics such as *Le droite a la vie* from Abel Gance (1917) or *The Dragon Painter* (1919), starring Sessue Hayakawa, as well as animated films, documentaries, and educational films. As Alexandra Schneider has shown, the creation of private film collections had become common-place by the mid to late 1920s, influencing the development of home movies, amateur cinema, and the wide-spread consolidation of cinephilia and the archival impulse to safeguard the history of the medium (Schneider 2007, 354). Together with the 16mm and 9.5 mm educational film market, which was especially strong in France during the 1930s (Laborderie 2011; Borde and Perrin 1992), these initiatives were enormously influential in safeguarding both the aesthetic and material heritage of silent film.

A quick glance at some of the films included in the Pathe catalogue (Figure 7), many of them silent films that had been first screened years ago and were now recycled into the small gauge media ecology, poses the question of the influence of home viewing practices in the later production of amateur films. We can trace some of the tropes of silent cinema highlighted in the

catalogue itself, such as the hyper theatricality of acting, visual gags, animating objects using simple editing techniques, the predominance of close ups, or the use of intertitles, into a film like *Quan la gana apreta!* (Figure 8). Of course, I am not implying that Lluis Gisbert had seen these exact films and was consciously mirroring their style. But I do think that the film tradition that informed his filmmaking techniques, as well as those of most Catalan amateur filmmakers, was more attuned to the tropes of classic silent cinema than to sound cinema and its reliance on the spoken word to convey narrative meaning. And this process was enabled by the existence of a consumer market of 9.5, 8 and 16mm films that could be screened anywhere with the help of a small portable projector and that become commonplace in the following decades.



CLASSE V. — COMÉDIES ET DRAMES

2082 - G - 1 à 5. — **LES LARMES DE COLETTE.**

Interprété par la petite **Andrée Rolane**

Premier Chapitre

Avant que de rompre les liens du mariage — souvent pour de vains motifs — les parents devraient songer que leur premier devoir est de ne pas briser le cœur si tendre des enfants dont ils font les petites victimes de leur sottise.

2083 - G - 1 à 5. — **LES LARMES DE COLETTE.**

Interprété par la petite **Andrée Rolane**

Deuxième et dernier Chapitre

Colette, séparée de ses parents divorcés, est très malheureuse chez un grand-père qu'elle ne connaît pas. En butte aux méchancetés d'une gouvernante, un jour elle s'enfuit...

Mais les larmes de Colette ont refait l'union de ses parents repentants.

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CLASSE IX. — DESSINS ANIMÉS ET COMIQUES

CHARLIE CHAPLIN HOMME DU MONDE.

Exclusivité « Equitable Films »

2092 - G - 1 à 4. — Premier Chapitre.

2093 - G - 1 à 4. — Deuxième et dernier Chapitre.

Introduit par hasard dans une soirée mondaine, Charlie y rencontre un ami. Tout de suite, Charlie fait prendre à la soirée une tournure inattendue. La police s'en mêle, mais, une pirouette... hop-là !... et Charlie est disparu !

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Figure 7. Pages from the 1931 Pathe Filmathèque catalogue.

Figure 8. Stills from *Quan la gana apreta!* Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

Conclusion

We have paid very little attention to this other history of the medium, or of amateur cinema as a distinct film culture with its own modes of production, distribution, and exhibition, which points to the crucial importance of nonprofessional film culture, especially in relation to more established cinematic modes like silent commercial films, avant-garde or documentary.[11] Far from being a mere hobby performed by lone individuals that filmed their families and vacation trips, amateur filmmaking occupied a wide variety of social and cultural spaces and functions**.** As George Toles comments in regards to the need to incorporate forgotten pieces of unfinished or

surviving film reels in the larger narrative of film history:

> "[…] these fragments link up with kindred episodes in other more fully realized films, which seem to conjure up alternative homes for them, more spacious and attuned to their bewitching qualities. The stubbornly alive particles and remnants of a forgotten movie have elective affinities with the larger, always unfolding utopian narrative of cinema at large" (George Toles 2010, 161).

This is the challenge that remains ahead for scholars, archivists, and curators: to incorporate the countless film fragments of amateur cinema into the general narrative of film history and move from a tale of loss to one of reconsideration. This task proves especially difficult when much of the material evidence of noncommercial film culture has disappeared due to its ephemeral nature and weak institutional backing. But examples such as the amateur film archive at the Filmoteca de Catalunya, which includes films, journals, periodicals, and other graphic and text-based materials are an encouraging example that is only waiting to be connected with similar histories worldwide.

A project such as the Amateur Movie Database,[12] created and directed by Dr. Charles Tepperman from the University of Calgary to make visible amateur film heritage through digital humanities tools (Tepperman 2017), is an excellent example of how to create a transnational database of amateur films were anyone can consult information, and in some case even films uploaded to digital video repositories, from all over the world (there are currently films from Turkey and the Basque Country for instance).[13] The project also includes articles on specific films or local histories written by international experts and online programs of films. It has developed partnerships with different archives and research institutions around the world to internationalize its database in the near future, and hopes to become a useful tool for anyone looking for

information on amateur film culture. Amateur cinema is slowly becoming, then, a largely untapped and overlooked archive that allows scholars to move from a narrative of loss to one that reconsiders what cinema was during the silent era and beyond.

The silent film fragments of amateur cinema are certainly a *disturbance* for a film history built almost exclusively around the idea that cinema equaled commercial films made by the industry, and that thus silent cinema history is essentially that of 35mm nitrate film. The growing internationalization of the discipline of film studies, transnational collaboration between scholars, and the increasing digital access to archival research that we are witnessing has triggered a necessary interruption of teleological film historiography. It is now our duty to start building homes for the displaced histories of peripheric, noncommercial, and fragmentary film practices that have emerged in the process. This won't mitigate the disaster of knowing that a huge amount of cinema's history is gone forever, but it does open new avenues for research, curation, and archival practices that reconsider the history of the medium in this new small gauge light.

Word count (with notes): 6806

NOTES

[1] See the wonderful film *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (Bill Morrison, 2016)

[2] With the notable exception of Charlie Chaplin and other late adopters of the technology like YasujiroOzu, Sergei Eisenstein or René Clair among others.

[3] A search in the silent and early film history section of the Filmoteca de Catalunya's library, which has 45,000 books and 1500 historical journals, and includes books like (Grieveson and Krämer 2004; Bean, Kapse, and Horak 2014; Altman 2007; Gaudreault, Dulac, and Hidalgo 2012), rendered exactly zero references to amateur film practices during the first half of the 20th century. The results will surely be the same in most film libraries, with the exception of occasional books devoted to amateur cinema as a category in itself, separated from commercial film.

[4] See for instance Charles Musser, "Introduction: Documentary before Verité," *Film History* 18, no. 4 (2006): 355–60; Bert Hogenkamp, "Léon Moussinac and The Spectators' Criticism in France (1931-34)," *Film International* 1, no. 2 (February 2003): 4–13, https://doi.org/10.1386/fiin.1.2.4; Trevor Stark, "'Cinema in the Hands of the People': Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film.," *October*, no. 139 (2012): 117–50; Mariano Mestman and David Oubiña, eds., *Las rupturas del 68 en el cine de América Latina: contracultura, experimentación y política* (CABA, Argentina: Akal, 2016); Sébastien Layerle, *Caméras En Lutte En Mai 68: Par*

Ailleurs Le Cinéma Est Une Arme (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2008); Pablo La Parra-Pérez, "Workers Interrupting the Factory. Helena Lumbreras's Militant Factory Films between Italy and Spain (1968-78)," in *1968 and Global Cinema* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2018), 363–84.

[5] Heather Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927-77*, Studies in Popular Culture (Manchester; New York: New York: Manchester University Press ;Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Movie Making, 1923-1960* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

[6] These words are from an advertisement for the film *Noah's Ark* (Michael Curtiz, 1928) that appeared in *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol 36, No 5 (December 1928). See http://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/motionpicturemag36moti_0502, accessed December 21, 2019.

[7] https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/en/il-cinema-ritrovato-dvd-awards-i-vincitori/, accessed 17/12/2019

[8] See https://www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/4ce2b742f3ba1 accessed December 21, 2019.

[9] This phenomena happened elsewhere in the world and was perhaps more evident in avant-garde and militant cinema. See for example the beginning of Normal Mclaren's career in the Scottish amateur film movement with his films *Camera Makes Whoopee* (1935), *Polychrome Fantasy* (1935) and the better known *Hell Unltd* (1936), or the case of Maya Deren in the United States with *Meshes of the afternoon.* (1943)https://www.amateurcinema.org/index.php/article/amateur-cinema-and-experimentation-1935-1972. In terms of militant cinema 16mm worker film cooperatives already existed in the 1930s in France, Germany, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the United States (Fibla-Gutiérrez 2017; Hogenkamp 1978; Sexton 2008)

[10] For an example of films produced specifically for the Cine NIC projector during the war see http://www.museudelcinema.cat/esp/colleccio_recursos.php?idreg=1386, accessed December 21, 2019.

[11]For more on the topic see Fibla-Gutiérrez, Enrique and Masha Salazkina, eds. Special Issue "Towards a global history of amateur film practices and institutions." *Film History: An International Journal*. Vol 30, No. 1 (Spring 2018). 195 pages.

[12] https://www.amateurcinema.org/index.php/amdb, accessed December 21, 2019.

[13] See https://www.amateurcinema.org/index.php/basquefilms, accessed March 4, 2021.

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