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Extending the Influence of Cinema. 9.5mm in Catalonia (1924-1940)

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Abstract

In this chapter, we highlight the singularity of amateur cinema in the collections of the Filmoteca de Catalunya. We focus on how non-professional filmmaking soon surpassed the limits of the domestic space in Catalonia during the 1930s, enabling a creative participation in actuality for a significant number of citizens. We contend that the institutionalization of small gauge filmmaking was favoured by the absence of a strong commercial film industry that reflected the cultural and political idiosyncrasy of the local context. We begin by summarizing the historical importance of amateur cinema in Catalonia and describing its preservation status in the archive of the FdC. Finally, we analyse briefly three 9.5mm films that reflect how amateur cinema became a unique space for grassroots creativity, extending the influence of cinema and prefiguring later forms of community and participatory media.

Introduction

On 15 March 1923 the Baltà i Riba store, specialized in photographic equipment, announced the sale of the Pathé-Baby 9.5mm projector, ‘The latest word in the film industry’ that ‘entertains, instructs and delights’ (*La Vanguardia* 1923). The device cost 225 pesetas, the approximate equivalent of a month's salary for a skilled worker and was accompanied by a catalogue of films that could be bought or rented for as little as 4 pesetas. On June 30 Pathé-Baby announced the arrival of the first model of the 9.5mm camera, available for demonstration—it would not go on sale until February 1924, at a similar price to the projector. These devices had appeared in France a few months earlier, fulfilling Charles Pathé's dream of ‘extending the influence of cinema, broadening its scope and multiplying its applications’ (Kermabon 1994, 198).

In Catalonia, 9.5 mm took root with fortune, probably motivated by the fact that Pathé had a large presence in its capital Barcelona through representatives, branches and concessionaires since the beginning of the century. The official representation of Pathé Baby was established in the centric Rambla de Catalunya and counted with the filmmaker Ramon de Baños as technical director. Its devices were sold in different specialized shops and big department stores throughout the city. For the 1924 Christmas campaign, Pathé reported that the 1500 available projectors had been sold, but that 500 more would arrive soon. In the following years, these numbers would increase exponentially with the sales of new projectors and cameras. By 1935, there were an estimated 2000 amateur filmmakers active in Catalonia.¹

The success of amateur cinema entailed a revolution in the film culture of the country. For the first time, cinema enthusiasts could not only curate their own programs and watch

cinema at home without having to go to the movie theatre, but also film, edit, and project their creations to private and public audiences. In this sense, amateur cinema in Catalonia wasn't only a form of entertainment that brought the world into their homes thanks to film libraries like the Filmatheque Pathé Baby. It also wasn't a medium exclusively used to make home movies and watch them with families and friends. It was a new way of conceiving the production and circulation of moving images and topics that were absent from the commercial screen. In only four years it would develop into one of the most important film movements in the country.

In this chapter, we focus on how small gauge filmmaking enabled a *creative participation in actuality* for a significant number of citizens that realized the cultural potential of non-professional cinema. We begin by summarizing the historical importance of amateur cinema in Catalonia and describing its preservation status in the archive of the FdC. Finally, we analyse briefly three 9.5mm films that reflect how amateur cinema became a unique space for grassroots creativity in national contexts without a strong film industry, extending the influence of cinema well beyond the expectations of Charles Pathé, and prefiguring later 'applications' of cinema such as community and participatory media.

9.5mm at the Filmoteca de Catalunya

In Catalonia, the first 'serious' amateur filmmakers were intimately connected with the realm of excursionist centres and came from well-off backgrounds (architects, doctors, lawyers, industrialists, or owners of photography stores for instance).² Some of these wealthy hikers, like Josep Fontanet, Delmiro de Caralt or Agustí Fabra started editing their recordings into films with intertitles that begun to be shown in organized public screenings at the Centre Excursionista de Catalunya (CEC, a key cultural institution at the time) in 1931, and soon after in other amateur film clubs and non-theatrical venues like the Foment de les Arts Decoratives (FAD), a not-for-profit association that promoted design and architecture within the economic and cultural life of the country. Encouraged by the success of these screenings, the amateurs flooded the streets of big cities and small towns, mountains, and rural areas of Catalunya with their cameras and portable screens.

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Figure 1. Cover of issue 5 of the journal *Cinema Amateur*, published by the Amateur Cinema Section of the Centre Excursionista de Catalunya. Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

This amateur film impulse was favoured by the mobility of the equipment, the context of citizen participation in the public sphere, and the desire to capture a rapidly changing society. In only four years it would develop into what the magazine *Popular Film* described as the 'first film school in the country' (De la Rubia 1935). Amateur filmmakers created clubs—over thirty of them had been founded by the summer of 1936, some even offering rental equipment services such as the Amateur Film Association of the FAD—organized and participated in local and international contests—including the IV

International Amateur Film Contest in Barcelona—published journals, and filmed hundreds of films.³

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Figure 2. Prices for rental of film material at the Amateur Film Association of the Foment de les Arts Decoratives, July 1936. Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

Thankfully, a significant part of this history can be retraced in the archives of the Filmoteca de Catalunya (FdC). Unlike most national film archives, amateur cinema has always had a prominent role in the collections of the FdC. Its archive currently holds 53,699 small gauge materials filmed between 1924 and the late nineties (in 9.5, 16, 8 and 8mm), which corresponds to roughly 21% of the whole collection. This singularity is the result of a confluence of factors, including the historical importance of amateur cinema in the country and the special attention paid to this film culture by archivists, researchers, heritage institutions and the first directors and archive heads of the FdC, who valued amateur cinema as a vital element of Catalan audiovisual heritage since its foundation in 1981.⁴

The materials housed at the archive are very diverse and include home movies, amateur films, and copies of commercially released features and shorts intended for home-viewing. The FdC library, founded by amateur film enthusiasts and patrons Delmiro de Caralt and Pilar de Quadras in 1924, also holds a significant number of books, magazines, photographs, and hundreds of documents (letters, receipts, leaflets, memorandums) pertaining to the incredibly dynamic film culture that emerged around nonprofessional film technologies in Catalonia in the interwar years.

These documents come mostly from deposits and donations that family members and other institutions have entrusted to the FdC since the beginning of the nineties. They have survived, and made their way into the archive, thanks to the dedication of institutions like Cinema-Rescat and researchers, among many others, like Encarnació Soler, who recovered over 5000 reels of film in her twenty-five years of career and was recognized with the National Cinema Award of Catalunya and the Gold Medal of the International Union of Amateur Cinema (UNICA) for these efforts. Titles from all over Catalonia are preserved; those filmed in Barcelona predominate, but there are also many filmed in Terrassa, Sabadell, Igualada, Mataró, Tarragona, Reus, Terres de l'Ebre and Cervera. The materials from Girona are preserved at the CRDI (Centre de Recerca de la Imatge), an organization dedicated to the preservation of the audiovisual heritage of this region.

In 2024, the FdC celebrated this important audiovisual heritage with the organization of the Centenary of Amateur Cinema in Catalonia. The program included the restoration and digitization of films, the creation of a website, an ambitious public program with screenings and educational workshops, the organization of an international congress, and an exhibition titled *Out of the House. Amateur Cinema in Catalonia 1924-1940*. The Centre for Conservation and Restauration of the FdC selected 107 out of the 1000 amateur films preserved from the interwar period for restoration and digitalization. They can be watched online on the website of the centenary, where the curatorial team of the Centenary decided to group them in three general categories: fiction (35), documentary (62) and avantgarde (10).⁵ Seventy-three are shot in 9.5mm and thirty-five in 16mm.

As was customary at the time, these titles were shot in original reversible positive film, which makes each of them the only existing copy. Many others have been lost, sometimes after being sent to participate in local and international contests, other times due to irreparable damage after a projection and a large amount simply to the effects of neglect and oblivion that characterize the history of cinema at large. It should also be noted that in most of the preserved films we have lost a fundamental element: the music. As with commercial silent films, amateur movies were projected with musical accompaniments using gramophone records, live music or, in some cases, the participation of live narrators as is the case of *Leit Motiv* (Francesc Gibert, 1934). Many films were conceived and edited with specific musical pieces in mind, and some even credited composers, such as Master Semper in *La isla dorada* (Delmiro de Caralt, 1933).⁶

Conceived as a transversal project, the Centenary of Amateur Cinema in Catalunya enlisted the efforts of all departments of the FdC (archive, library, programming, and education) to celebrate this audiovisual heritage. The main objective was to explain how the films emerged from a dynamic context of interaction and exchange through weekly meetings in film clubs, lecture series, questions and answers sections in journals or screenings and receptions in film contests. Since it is impossible to explain in detail this history in a few pages, we have opted to highlight the films *Nevada Parque Montjuïc Febrero 1924* (José Errando Ylario, 1924), *Blat* (Salvador Rifa Anglada, 1933), and *L'any 1932 a la pantalla* (Llorenç Llobet-Gràcia, 1933) as examples of the evolution of 9.5mm from a visual technology designed to capture the happy moments of families to an instrument of creative participation in society.

From snowballs to newsreels

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Figure 3. Still from *Nevada Parque Montjuïc Febrero 1924* (José Errando Ylario, 1924). Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

The night of the 27 of February 1924 a massive, and rare, snowstorm fell on Barcelona. The following day, the Errando family, which had likely purchased one of the first Pathé Baby cameras sold in Barcelona, went to the Montjuïc mountain and filmed themselves playing with the snow. *Nevada Parque Montjuïc Febrero 1924* is the oldest 9.5mm film with a known date, conveyed in an intertitle, preserved at the Filmoteca de Catalunya's archive. Despite being one hundred years old, its images feel incredibly contemporary, since they depict actions and gestures (throwing snowballs, chasing one another, smiling at the camera or blinking an eye to the filmmaker) that we can imagine repeated in countless home movies recorded today with a smartphone. The film is exemplary of the home mode of communication (Chalfen 1987; Moran 2002; Aasman, Fickers, and Wachelder 2018) that many scholars have analysed in the past years. But in the following years the use of 9.5mm would evolve exponentially as amateur cinema became institutionalized through film clubs that promoted a new space of cultural and political communication, which Ryan Shand describes as a 'community mode' (Shand 2008), that inserted local contexts into the global archive of cinema.

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Figure 4. Still from *Blat* (Salvador Rifa Anglada, 1933). Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

Blat and *L'any 1932 a la pantalla*, for instance, are two of the many examples of how amateur filmmakers in Catalonia pointed their cameras beyond the realm of domestic life, experimenting with formats such as the process film, newsreels, and documentaries about local topics. Salvador Rifa's film, awarded a first prize in the second Catalan Amateur Film Contest and screened in international contests, uses intertitles in Catalan and shows the production of wheat, from the moment when the seeds are planted to the harvest months later. Rifa's film speaks to the close relationship between amateur cinema and the emergence of a vernacular national cinema in Catalonia. Other films of the period also documented the production of wood—*Fusta de Pi* (Ramón Biadiu, 1932)—honey *Abelles* (Joan Prats, 1934), or wine—*El Vi* (Eusebi Ferré, 1934). There were also films made about key traditions and places of the Catalan geography such as the Montserrat mountain—*Montserrat* (Delmiro de Caralt, 1932)—the Pyrenees—*Pirineu Català* (Joan Prats, 1932)—or Romanic heritage—*Rosselló* (Joan Roig, 1933)—as well as the Sardana dance—*La dansa més bella* (Delmiro de Caralt, 1932)—and Castellers—*Xiquets de Valls* (Claudi Gómez Grau, 1934).

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Figure 5. Still from *L'any 1932 a la pantalla* (Llorenç Llobet-Gràcia, 1933). Courtesy of the Filmoteca de Catalunya.

Amateur filmmakers also produced numerous newsreels and reportages about decisive political and cultural moments in Catalonia. Such is the case of *L'any 1932 a la pantalla*, where Llorenç Llobet Gràcia summarizes the year 1932 through a selection of key moments captured by his 9.5mm camera. Family scenes and vacations have been replaced in this visual recount of the year by a montage of actuality that edits together local realities—such as the arrival of snow to different areas of Catalonia, the Aplec (popular mountain gathering) of Sant Valerià, or the local festivity of Sabadell—with more well-known media events that had made their way into official newsreels—like the inauguration of the Catalan Parliament or the burial of musician Amadeu Vives (but filmed from different, less institutional, perspectives). Other filmmakers and clubs, such as the Amateur Cinema Association of the FAD, repeated this gesture every month, creating the visual account of everyday life in Catalonia that that commercial media failed to provide.

Conclusion

By promoting the creative participation in actuality through different institutionalized practices and spaces, amateur cinema fulfilled a social and cultural role as community, and national, media that would take decades to be developed in a commercial scale by local televisions and film producers in Catalonia—in fact, well into the 1980s. It is only one of the many ways in which small gauge film formats spearheaded the development of nonprofessional media practices that extended the influence of cinema during the 20th century well beyond Charles Pathé's original intentions, especially in local contexts. Altogether, the amateur film collections of the FdC, which we encourage readers to

discover in the previously quoted website, constitute an invaluable visual archive of everyday life in Catalonia. They are also a testament to the small gauge creative impulse that revolutionized the film culture of the country in the interwar period in the absence of a strong commercial film industry. Fictions, documentaries, avantgarde experiments, and home movies captured the social, political, and cultural life of the country from a different, often surprising, perspective.

When analysed as a whole, they speak to a parallel history of cinema in the hands of people that, not unlike the millions of amateur filmmakers of today, decided to participate creatively in the actuality that surrounded them.

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[End]Notes

¹ Although there are no official records of how many devices were sold, filmmaker Eusebi Ferré estimated this number of amateur filmmakers in his capacity as board director of the Amateur Film Association of the Foment de les Arts Decoratives and the Federation of Amateur Film Clubs in Catalonia (Somacarrega 1934).

² I borrow this term from Núria F. Rius's conceptualization of the term for professionalized amateur photographers in (Rius 2023) and Charles Tepperman's conception of the 'serious' or 'advanced' amateur. (Tepperman 2015, 222–27)

³ For more detailed information on the emergence of this amateur film movement see (Fibla-Gutierrez 2018; Navarro 2024; Beorlegui i Tous and Tomàs i Freixa 2024)

⁴ For a detailed account of the singularity of the FdC's amateur film collection see (Bruzzo 2024)

⁵ You can watch them all here:

<https://cultura.gencat.cat/ca/temes/commemoracions/2024/anycinemaamateur/filmografia/>

⁶ For a more detailed account of the preservation, restoration, and digitalization process of the films at the FdC's archive see (Cardona 2024).