

## **“Amateur Cinema and the 1939 NY World’s Fair”** **Charles Tepperman, University of Calgary**

During the 1930s movie making spread far beyond Hollywood’s production studios, as amateurs took up 16mm and 8mm equipment to make their own movies: films that presented their own stories, work, or artistic visions. While “home movies” might be the first kind of amateur movie that comes to mind, in the 1930s the hobby of movie making became a more serious matter for many people. Movie clubs proliferated across the United States, and indeed around the world, and annual competitions – like “the Oscars” for amateurs – were held to reward the very best films made by amateurs. Amateur movie making in the 1930s represented a shift in motion picture production and consumption, a shift that laid the groundwork for today’s production and circulation of user-generated media. The New York World’s Fair played a special role in this development because it was fashioned as a spectacle not only for human visitors, but also for their cameras, and amateur moviemakers flocked there.

Amateur movies had been around in small numbers for as long as there had been motion pictures, but it wasn’t until Kodak’s introduction of the 16mm film format in 1923 that it became a more widespread activity. The 16mm format was introduced both for home viewing of films, as well as amateur production, because it was less expensive and dangerous than the larger and highly flammable 35mm professional format. In the wake of the introduction of 16mm film, a group of ambitious amateurs formed the Amateur Cinema League in 1926. This group was the brainchild of Hiram Percy Maxim, inventor of the gun silencer and an avid radio and film amateur. Like the Amateur Radio Relay League, which Maxim had earlier founded, the Amateur Cinema League (or ACL, as it was widely known), was established to put like-minded amateurs in touch with each other in hopes of expanding the new amateur medium. At the heart of this effort was a set of utopian ideals that saw amateur cinema as a new mode of communication, and a new artform, that could connect people around the world, providing them with opportunities for self-expression not permitted by the commercial media industry. Amateur cinema was the modern medium best suited to the task of re-introducing creativity, inter-communication, and self-expression into lives that were increasingly geared towards mass consumption.

The Amateur Cinema League put these objectives into practice by publishing a monthly magazine (*Movie Makers*) that was rich in instructional content and encouragement. And starting in 1930, the ACL held an annual competition of the “Ten Best” amateur movies of the year. The Ten Best competitions grew rapidly in scope and prestige, drawing film submissions from around the world. Eventually, the ACL established a library of award-winning films that they circulated to movie clubs around North America. Many filmmakers who wanted to improve their skills joined the Amateur Cinema League. Others subscribed to *American Cinematographer*, a magazine based in Hollywood that was geared towards

professional cinematographers but also had a regular amateur section, and conducted annual amateur movie contests in the 1930s.

What were these prize-winning amateur movies like? In many cases, the films amateur moviemakers produced were simply more carefully crafted versions of home movies. Subjects included the familiar family events and vacation activities. But some amateurs also chronicled activities in their community, or trips further afield, creating amateur versions of newsreels or travelogues. Another favored area of amateur filmmaking was the production of “practical films” which often concerned some area of education, business, or social work that the movie maker was involved in. Beyond these non-fiction films, many amateurs made short fiction films, often burlesquing familiar Hollywood themes and conventions. And for some, amateur moviemaking was a serious artistic activity, involving the production of avant-garde films.

In terms of their technique, there were some clear differences from home movies: where home movies are often rough, “point-and-shoot” motion pictures, the films that received prizes in ACL contests were planned and edited. In some cases their technique mimicked Hollywood, using establishing shots of a locale, and then cutting in to closer views of the action and characters. Amateur films also incorporated more narrative elements, and because these films generally lacked synchronized sound, this meant using title cards to illustrate the action or dialogue. Award-winning amateur movies displayed very polished technique, and employed the medium in ways that were original, and not just low-budget imitations of commercial film.

Sixteen millimeter cameras and film were still costly in the late twenties, so many of the first amateurs tended to be affluent or at least well-to-do. Over the course of the 1930s, however, the equipment dropped in price, and the 8mm film format was introduced in 1932, cutting the cost of filmmaking by almost two thirds. These technological developments helped increase the number of amateur filmmakers considerably. The introduction of Kodachrome color film in 1935 was a further enticement, as the new film stock made it possible to produce color films in a widespread way even while the commercial cinema lagged behind in this area. Conversely, while commercial cinema converted quickly to synchronized sound in the late 1920s, amateur equipment followed much more slowly. Generally, amateur films in the 1930s were produced without a sound track, and were accompanied by spoken narration and recorded music (some amateurs even experimented with dual turntable systems that allowed them to use multiple recordings for a single film).

Many amateurs also belonged to small local clubs that formed for moviemakers to exchange ideas, criticism, and leisure time. Movie clubs in the 1930s had a variety of different roles and compositions. Large urban movie clubs, like New York’s Metropolitan Motion Picture Club appealed to a broad constituency of moviemakers. At their regular meetings the group presented instructional lectures and screenings of their members’ films. Movie clubs also often published their own newsletter to

keep members up to date on their activities. And they held film contests and challenges of their own. Some movie clubs also produced films together as a unit, while others used the club as a venue for sharing their own individually-made movies.

Movie clubs were often organized according to locale (city, and later, neighborhood), but they could also be formed around particular kinds of memberships (college students, factory workers, or members of the Jewish community centre, for example). Later in the 1930s, separate “eights” clubs were formed, which catered specifically to 8mm filmmakers and the particular equipment and technical challenges they faced. Both men and women belonged to movie clubs, and while most clubs were clearly as male-dominated as the society of the time, many women were active and award-winning moviemakers. Within movie clubs one could find a range of different levels of accomplishment, from novices to semi-professional filmmakers, as well as a range of different interests: while some members were more interested in improving their family or vacation films, others made short fictional films, and even sometimes avant-garde works. Binding all of these activities together was the social dimension of belonging to a club. Beyond their discussions of the latest movie gadgets, or their critiques of each other’s most recent opus, members also saw clubs as a social venue. Meetings often incorporated time for socializing and many clubs also organized annual social outings like dances or picnics. Movie clubs were also the most common venue for screening amateur films – outside the moviemakers’ own living rooms, of course – but many clubs also held annual screenings for the public. In the late 1930s, the New York 8mm Club held annual “guest nights,” the second of which was attended by over 150 people.

Working independently from any particular club, active New York amateur Duncan MacD. Little organized annual amateur film screenings throughout the decade. Eventually collaborating with institutions like Columbia University and the Museum of Modern Art, Little’s amateur movie nights attracted audiences in the hundreds. As these screenings demonstrate, amateur films could appeal to audiences beyond amateurs, and during the 1930s often included those who saw the cinema as a burgeoning art form in its own right. Little’s screenings were also notable for the international scope of their films, drawing amateur movies from America, Europe, and beyond in a gesture of the amateur medium’s capacity for spreading international understanding in the face of looming war.

The New York World’s Fair was a natural fit for amateur filmmaking, and arrived just as the hobby was reaching its prewar peak in popularity. World’s fairs had been a popular amateur movie subject for years; the 1933 Chicago Fair was the subject of at least two award-winning amateur films, one of them a group production by the Chicago Movie Club. Exhibitions at the New York World’s Fair were in some cases specifically geared towards the movie amateur, such as Kodak’s popular Great Hall of Color, which showcased their Kodachrome film. But there was an even closer link between amateur moviemaking and the World’s Fair. When ACL founder Hiram Percy Maxim died in 1936, he was succeeded by Stephen Voorhees, a well-known

architect who would shortly be appointed chairman of Board of Design for the upcoming New York World's Fair. In this capacity, Voorhees oversaw the Fair's design and layout, elements that were later highlighted in a special June 1939 World's Fair issue of *Movie Makers* magazine. Among other elements, the issue includes a map with the best camera vistas at the fair. It is tantalizing when looking at these materials to consider just how much the Fair was designed to be seen through amateur cinematographer's lens.