

Making Women Amateur Filmmakers Visible: Reclaiming Women's Work through the Film Archive

Abstract

This article considers the place of women's amateur film within regional and national film archive holdings through a specific case study of the 'Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain' project at the East Anglian Film Archive (EAFA). Reflecting on the process of cataloguing and presenting this collection, the article will explore the challenges of making women's creative filmed work visible, suggesting women's amateur films exist at a crucial overlap of archival oversight and cultural stigma. We argue that prevailing associations of archive film with space, place and location could prevent feminist-led projects from gaining traction in the contested world of exhibition where locality often overshadows other thematic or stylistic approaches. We argue that only by reconsidering the types of films that are prioritised for preservation and presentation can women's films be made fully visible.

Keywords: film archive; amateur film; women filmmakers; access; digitisation; film exhibition

Introduction

Amateur films represent unexplored evidence for film history, a way to create a more complex, richer explanation of how visual culture operates across many levels of practice, from elites to amateurs, as an instance of filmmaking from below.¹

The fact that it is too late for everything to be saved – that the record of women’s filmmaking will remain fragmentary – should stand as an emblematic part of the history of the cinema.²

Existing histories of film archival work, alongside broader film histories, place an understandable emphasis on the fragmentary and fragile nature of surviving film texts, particularly those that stretch back to the nitrate or ‘silent’ eras of film production.³ Existing alongside those broader narratives are individual case studies of films (or collections) miraculously saved from neglect, unexpectedly discovered in vaults, or restored to a more complete form through pain-staking archival work.⁴ It is only in the last few decades, however, that the original stress on the urgency of preserving professional feature film heritage has shifted to a wider desire to capture the broader range of filmmaking that has existed over the last 120 years. Ernest Lindgren, the first curator of the United Kingdom’s National Film Archive, reportedly insisted that ‘non-fiction film, actuality film, documentary film, *even amateur films* - film as a vital record of our life and times - should be accorded equal importance to fiction and feature films’ [Emphasis added].⁵ The addition of ‘even’ here is likely that of writer Clyde Jeavons rather than Lindgren himself, but it points to the prevailing

assumption that amateur film remains an afterthought, the least important form of film to target for that national archive endeavour, particularly when compared to the need to reclaim and restore feature films.

The more recent academic shift towards the exploration of other aspects of film production held within the film archive can be understood as part of a broader shift in critical historiography that challenge ‘dominant power relations... [to] what either lies on the margins or is excluded altogether... recentring marginalized peoples (women, people of colour, working classes)... and practices (popular culture).’⁶ One particular production practice – namely home and amateur filmmaking – has been the focus of growing academic attention in the last two decades, led in part by increased access and cataloguing within national and regional film archives of amateur and home filmmaking materials.⁷ This archive work has made the film archive ‘increasingly visible at the forefront of innovative partnerships that use amateur footage as part of a broadening access to visual culture’ and at the centre of a new historiographical effort to recalibrate amateur film production in relation to other areas within film history.⁸

This article’s contribution to that growing debate around amateur film has two distinct aims. The first is to explore whether the place of women within amateur film archive holdings matches earlier descriptions of excavating or revealing the history of women’s film production in relation to the question of inferiority. Jane Gaines commented in 2007 about ‘long-held film-historical assumptions... even if there had been any work by women, it was inferior; that of such inferior work, no examples survived... we are studying an unfortunate object, misused and left alone, the subject of earlier neglect.’⁹ This case study focuses on the women amateur filmmakers whose work is archived in the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC) collection at the

East Anglian Film Archive (EAFA). The archiving of the IAC collection at EAFA has been regarded as a ‘landmark example’ and ‘a wonderful success story’.¹⁰ Yet the cultural stigma around archival value that Gaines identified with women in the pre-sound film archive not only recurs in the amateur realm, but is exacerbated by the amateur status of these women filmmakers. Amateur film has been described as inferior, ‘perceived as simply an irrelevant pastime... defined by negation: non-commercial, nonprofessional, unnecessary.’¹¹ This article argues that women’s amateur film often exists at a crucial overlap of archival oversight and cultural stigma, doubly negated and invisible.¹² The EAFA case study ‘Women’s Amateur Filmmakers in Britain’ ultimately identified 142 films by women filmmakers within the larger 1500 IAC films. While this research and cataloguing project is clearly an important and necessary step to tackle such archival oversights, raising the profile and visibility of women amateur filmmakers represents other challenges.

This latter point relates to the second aim of the article. Making these filmmakers more visible clearly involves their identification within archive collections and catalogues, but creating access to their films is essential. Following the EAFA case study through its second phase allows the article to identify significant exhibition-specific challenges around engaging an audience. The introduction of digitisation to film archives, and the concurrent shift from analogue screenings to online or digitally curated screenings has had its controversies, particularly around the quality of digitisation, the authenticity of the digital copy, and a concern over increased access. Given that few film archives are set up to cater for large numbers of on-site viewers, opening up aspects of the archive to audience has included releasing material on DVD, via television broadcasters, or – more commonly – by making collections available online through an archive’s own website or a third party such as

the British Film Institute or other heritage organisations. As Rachael Moseley and Helen Wheatley have identified in relation to television, there remains a 'relative absence of texts traditionally coded as feminine from publicly accessible archives.'¹³

While archiving is clearly a feminist issue for scholars and historians, engaging a wider audience with issues of feminism and the archive remains largely uncharted ground. The shift to digitisation and online engagement is understood by archives to have created a shift in what audiences might expect from them as they become active participants who expect to 'have open access to collections.'¹⁴ Increasing access has therefore been linked to overturning 'traditional roles of keepers and protectors of archive materials... [generating] creativity, interest and audiences for working with archive footage'.¹⁵ One of the issues we explore through the second phase of the EAFA case study is the problems of trying to serve two audiences: one via traditional curated digital screenings, the other via online access to digitised versions of the same films. While archivists have been exhorted to 'flaunt our wares... demand the credit for saving... [these films]... [and] arouse public and politico-cultural awareness', the article will discuss the realities of undertaking such awareness-raising, and the problems faced when trying to promote this doubly-negated collection of women and amateur filmmakers.¹⁶

This study explores EAFA's 'Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain' project through a feminist lens. We continue Moseley and Wheatley's call for archiving to be seen as a feminist issue, where specific practices 'affect and produce the kinds of histories that can be written' and expand it to include how that material can be shaped and made available to audiences.¹⁷ When Deborah Parker, chief executive of Cinema For All (the UK organisation supporting community film exhibition), went to national and regional film archives to look for films featuring suffragettes, she was 'appalled'

at the lack of available footage of or by women and launched a scheme to encourage women to add their voices to the archive.¹⁸ Yet the issue is not just about expanding archive content. This article therefore considers the process by which the films were selected, catalogued, digitised, and then curated for broader consumption, enabling us to demonstrate the opportunities and limitations of using a film archive resource for feminist research and public engagement activities. The issues highlighted here include how the digitisation of women filmmakers' work can be harnessed towards new pathways for dissemination and access, and how film archives may need to modify their practices to enable this. Specifically, we argue that current archiving policy needs to reconsider the types of films that are prioritised for preservation, cataloguing and presentation in order to uncover more work by women filmmakers and increase the visibility of women in archives.

Case Study: The Women Amateur Filmmakers Project

The East Anglian Film Archive is one of nine regional film archives in Britain, with the bulk of its collections drawn from material produced by local and regional filmmakers and television programmes from the six counties of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk. One of its key collections is the film library of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC). Since 1932, the IAC has promoted, recorded, and developed the amateur film movement at a national and international level, and its collection of standard 8mm, Super 8mm, 9.5mm and 16mm films is regarded as 'the cream of personal, group, and cine club productions.'¹⁹ Most of these films were retained by the IAC and kept in its film library because they had won awards through either the IAC's own regional or

international competitions or sponsored competitions such as those run by national newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*. The collection is part-catalogued, and only partially digitised, with the bulk of the 1500 IAC films stored in analogue form in the EAFA vaults.

The decision to research, identify and catalogue an initial cache of women filmmakers was led by a combination of intellectual (feminist) and practical (funding) concerns: EAFA's association with feminist scholars at the University of East Anglia (UEA) was crucial in gaining academic support for the bid to the National Archives' National Cataloguing Grants Programme for Archives; more pragmatically, EAFA staff understood that a small, thematically distinct collection would be more likely to meet the requirements of that grant scheme. Working in collaboration with the IAC Archivist Philip Collins, 142 films from the larger IAC collection were identified that (based on paper records) featured a woman filmmaker.²⁰ 'Woman filmmaker' was taken in this instance to mean a woman making a significant creative involvement to the film, likely as director or cameraperson, a definition that covered a range of different options (see below). The 142 films that were eventually catalogued and digitised represented less than 10% of the full IAC collection. While it is impossible to tell if that figure is representative of women's involvement in amateur film more generally, it may suggest a male dominance either within this largely leisure-based pursuit or on the award panel who selected these films. What the catalogued collection does offer is a cross-section of different women filmmakers, from different periods and backgrounds, highlighting the range of creative work being undertaken.

Cataloguing and digitisation began in 2015, revealing 142 films produced by women amateur filmmakers between the 1920s and the late 1980s; this led to an online catalogue, study guide and good digital transfers.²¹ The key issue for funders

and archivists became – and remains – ‘how to make these collections more accessible to a wider range of potential users’.²² Academic work that links archive material with wider public engagement or research impact is thin but growing, not least because film archives have been engaged in public-facing work since their inception.²³ Both ‘Capturing the Nation: Irish Home Movies, 1930-70’ (a collaborative project between University College Cork and the Irish Film Institute) and ‘City in Film’ (a collaboration between the University of Liverpool and the North-West Film Archive) feature similar approaches to disseminating research and utilising archive film.²⁴ In those cases, initial research, cataloguing and digitisation underpinned online databases and catalogues and, in the case of City in Film, a multi-layered digital map of locations and cinema sites over time that offered ‘a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which image cultures are imbricated as place-making activities’.²⁵ Amateur film has often been claimed to help ‘shape people’s sense of themselves and the world around them’, and this focus on space, place and identity formation is clear embedded in the shape of these projects.²⁶

The gender-based aims of the ‘Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain’ project were notably different from the location-based emphasis of these previous academic-film archive projects. It therefore marks a departure to its forerunners. The challenge was to produce a feminist-driven engagement project that grew out of the cataloguing initiative that could engage with external stakeholders. This includes engaging both the exhibition sector for archive film and a wider audience. The pre-existing dominance of archival screening programmes that link the idea of archive film with ‘the local’ is exemplified by the BFI’s ‘Britain on Film’ initiative which, since 2015, has stressed the importance of local and regional footage in its online and cinema exhibition campaign. In the next section we will reflect on the challenges of

curating and disseminating gender-based amateur film packages by looking at this second phase of the EAFA project. While we are not arguing this case study should be representative of all film archive projects, two points are key: the absence of women from many of the discourses encountered during the planning and running of the engagement project; and a recurring desire for reductive canonisation around archive film and the perception it can only speak to issues of space and place.

Presenting Women Amateur Filmmakers

The initial viewing of the 142 films that made up the ‘Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain’ collection was a reminder that ‘feminist film theory is implicated in turning the “not there” into the there... [a] return to thinking about women as differentiated industrial workers and [a willingness to] accept the legacy of their fight.’²⁷ The collection spans seven decades of the twentieth century and features films from a variety of genres and modes of production, including drama, comedy, animation, documentary and travelogues. The cataloguing research revealed a range of female authorship, including what is believed to be the earliest example of an amateur film produced by an all-female collective – *Sally Sallies Forth* (Frances Lascot, 1928). There are also a number of films that point to the differentiation found within the amateur sector, with many examples produced by students and young women. In the early 1930s, for example, sixteen-year-old Ruth Stuart documented her travels in *Egypt and Back with Imperial Airways* (Ruth Stuart, 1931-33), while *Freak* (Sharon Gadsdon, 1988) documents Gadsdon’s transformation from schoolgirl to punk using time-lapse photography. While there are occasional similarities to the domestic and preoccupation of the ‘home movie’, with its focus on ‘birthdays, weddings, vacations and family feasts’, these amateur films are more akin to mainstream genres, and

designed for public consumption in cine-clubs and other spaces.²⁸ The collection also revealed a blurring of the distinctions between amateur and professional in the work of animators Sheila Graber and Joanna Fryer, whose 1970s and 1980s' solo filmmaking endeavours led them to pursue successful careers in the more commercial sphere. Graber, along with fellow animator Mollie Butler, was also responsible for pioneering the use of animation in the classroom in UK schools and universities. Indeed, the aforementioned Sharon Gadson was a pupil of Butler's and *Freak* was created under her guidance as part of a school project.²⁹

A number of films in the collection were made by husband-and-wife partnerships, such as those produced by Eunice and Eustace Alliot and Laurie and Stuart Day. The Alliotts produced travelogues in 1930s Europe, while the affluent Days documented glamorous post-war foreign holidays. The Days' films are an excellent example of how women's work in amateur film can become historically marginalised. While catalogue research and the films themselves reveal Laurie's contribution on and off-screen, a review of *1938: The Last Year of Peace* (Laurie and Stuart Day, 1948) in *Amateur Cine World* not only assumes that the film is produced by Mr and Mrs L Day, but also that 'L. Day' is the husband, and, by extension, the primary filmmaker. Given the presence of Stuart Day within almost all the scenes of the film, Laurie Day seems the more likely candidate as the lead creator. This is just one of a number of examples of women's roles being written out of cine magazines and records that contributes to their notable absence within critical work on amateur film history. As in parallel creative fields such as architecture and design, and in the mainstream film industry, it provides additional evidence of women being written out of, or marginalised within, husband-wife partnerships, even when the men involved acknowledged and praised the contribution of the woman.³⁰ Similar things happened

within experimental film: women experimental filmmakers who were ‘married to men involved in the American avant-garde almost guaranteed that their work would be dismissed as simple home movie-like play with the camera and treated accordingly.’³¹

Such dismissals highlight the marginalisation of women filmmakers within authorship discourse.³² Moreover, within the EAFA collection the available information (that is, critical discourse and film credits) regularly reduces the influence and creativity of women amateur filmmakers. Additional project research has further complicated the assumptions presented in institutional metadata. *A Bench in the Park* (1958), for example, formally credits Julius Sergay as ‘director’ and Bianca Sergay as ‘camera’, but Sergay’s daughter credited Bianca as the ‘driving force’ behind their films, thus suggesting a greater authorial input than previously thought.³³ What this project reaffirmed through the viewing of all these collaborative films is a renewed challenge to ‘rethink the knotty problem of creative complementarity and attribution’.³⁴ Indeed, the amateur movement features collaborators taking on different roles and responsibilities; these question the privileging of the figure of the director in authorship discourse over more collaborative models of creative engagement and production.

The Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain project clearly reinforces the need to make women’s contribution to amateur film production visible in new ways. The 142 films in the collection represent an expansion, and complication, of existing film histories. This desire to shed light on women’s work and creativity is shared with the Women Writers Project which has sought to make visible women’s writing by digitising texts by women writers working in the period before 1900 in order to bring them out from the archive and make them accessible to a wider audience.³⁵ In their reflections on the project, Jacqueline Wernimont and Julia Flanders consider the

relationship between digital humanities and women's studies, both of which 'began in the same liberationist spirit'³⁶ in the sense that the digitisation of women's work enables 'canon reformation through expanded access to rare materials'.³⁷ However, they pose the questions: 'Is inclusion enough to bring these texts into view?' How does visibility 'translate into an actual perceptual shift in understanding of gender and authorship?'³⁸ Given the experience of the 'Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain' project, we argue that the creation of an archive of women's work is not enough to make this work visible.

Initially, EAFA placed some of the digitised films on its website. Mirroring the Women Writers Project, the films were included in site holdings, but were not available in a particularly visible form. Consequently, the films were unlikely to produce any significant shift in understanding around women and their significance to the collection. Developing a cultural engagement aspect of the project that emphasised the feminist strengths of the collection required the design and implementation of a nationwide cinema exhibition programme. The remainder of this article focuses on the creation of that programme between February 2016 and August 2016.

Women Amateur Filmmakers and Public Engagement

The first challenge we faced in our attempts to expand public engagement with this collection was to create discrete packages of films from the 142 titles available. However, as the films had not been released to the public previously, there was no guarantee a copyright agreement for a public screening (or online dissemination) was in place. This made it imperative that copyright holders (including the filmmakers and composers) were contacted to give permission. The engagement project and the main

team at EAFa had to strike an appropriate balance during this process, acknowledging that the recent emphasis on visibility, outreach and access needs to exist in dialogue with the more traditional ‘keepers and protectors’ model found in archives. While projects such as ours demonstrate that accessibility and outreach are high on the agendas of archivists, we also had to respect that some archives are still making the transition to newer models of access and the increased demands of the public ‘user’.

Identifying what archive footage to make available to the public was similarly a source of tension between traditional archive practice and viable engagement activity: most notably, contestation around issues of space and place, and the use of archive film as a document of social history. The films initially published on the EAFa website privileged the black-and-white travelogues and those featuring ‘home movie’-style family footage. These films illustrate a key debate within the archiving practices of amateur film collections which are included ‘on the grounds of their supposed “evidential” value, usually as visual portrayals of “local” and/or “national culture(s)... [this bias] underlies decisions that are hugely important for determining what is allowed to become part of the archival collection.’³⁹ The films first released online therefore fit an existing idea of a social document that visually reveals something about the period they were produced in, or the place being captured. There is clearly an argument that women’s amateur films contribute to such discussions, expanding existing views on those decades or what locations were important to those filmmakers. We are not attempting to disassociate women filmmakers from their social context or location. Instead, we signal that such dominant ideas around the function and value of archive film run the risk of blocking new initiatives that stress other themes and questions.

As already noted, the Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain project was eager to move beyond a static web platform. We wanted to create ‘an interesting programme... [curated to] attract a large enough... audience.’⁴⁰ While we agreed intellectually with Jane Gaines that the return of women-produced films could indeed ‘refute oversight, neglect and dismissal’, consultation with exhibitors suggested that a cinema audience may not be prepared to watch a thirty minute black-and-white travelogue from the 1930s that lacked any soundtrack, and for which there was no budget to produce a new score.⁴¹ Clearly, some selection process had to inform our curatorial experiments. Feedback from exhibitors and organisations with experience of archive film programming (such as BFI Film Hub and the Independent Cinema Office (ICO)), repeatedly advised that cinema packages must be tailored in line with archive film audiences.⁴² According to the ICO, film packages should be 75-80 minutes in length, and adding a score (or ensuring live accompaniment) was crucial for silent films. The ICO also suggested adding supporting elements to the programmes such as placing films in their original context through an introduction by the filmmaker or relevant expert.⁴³

Based on these recommendations, three cinema exhibition packages were designed and made available on DVD and as Digital Cinema Packages (DCP). Each package was constructed around a different theme related to genre: Package 1: *Secrets and Lies* (films that could be classified as drama), Package 2: *Fun on Film* (comedy and animation) and Package 3, a broader ‘highlights’ package with a selection from the other two packages and two additional travelogues.⁴⁴ Each package was just over an hour in duration and the inclusion of films was (with one exception) limited to those with pre-existing soundtracks. Despite the use of genre as a thematic structure,

the main aim remained the dissemination of a range of films that could help raise awareness of amateur women pioneers.

The project's goal to place these packages into as many UK cinemas as possible was partly achieved by securing screenings in venues such as Watershed in Bristol, Cambridge Arts Picturehouse, HOME in Manchester, Cinema City Norwich, Sheffield Showroom and The Prince Charles Cinema in London, between April and August 2016. To achieve this, the project relied heavily on developing a bespoke network of individual contacts and issued the packages licence-free. However, further expansion met a recurring problem around placing gender-based collections into an exhibition industry that largely thinks of amateur films in terms of location. Despite the BFI's current commitment to 'unlocking' film heritage, including 'boosting audience choice', the bulk of that commitment was tied up in the digitisation of 10,000 films from the BFI National Archives and other national and regional archives.⁴⁵ The BFI-led 'Britain on Film' initiative included some cinema exhibition packages but the main effort was directed to the prevailing location-based understanding of amateur film. The online and interactive 'Britain on Film' map allowed users to search for locations and view archive footage from that area, to 'see films about the places that mean something to you'.⁴⁶

The association of archive film with space, place and localisation runs through the language of the BFI 'Unlocking Film Heritage' project, with digitised films chosen to illustrate 'the history of their locality and their cultural identity'.⁴⁷ Importantly, that language is also key to the BFI exhibition strategy, channelled through its Film Hub network, which is 'tailored to local audiences and geography'.⁴⁸ As Hallam and Roberts note, the archival moving image has value in that it 'contributes to collective memory, space, place in a time of upheaval and

globalisation.⁴⁹ Again, we are not arguing that the gendered perspective of these films and filmmakers could not be usefully adopted in relation to claims around location, simply that only seeing archive and amateur films in this light limits possible engagement opportunities for films where that context is less central. The regional film archive system that operates in the UK also reinforces a location-specific rationale for collecting, cataloguing and dissemination: they are established, trained and focused on the local and regional. That insistence on intertwining archive and location (with the additional problematic assumption that amateur could also be easily equated with the local) appears to have hampered the wider distribution of feminist-led packages. Indeed, the presence of EAFA as the source of the collection became a source of some contention when dealing with local and regional exhibitors within the EAFA regions, with programmers struggling to position the collections when they could not rely on a traditional strategy of promoting the archive / amateur in relation to the local area. We posit, then, that the experience of this project suggests that any attempt to successfully mobilise collections which are more broadly thematic or ideological than geographical will necessitate a shift within exhibition strategies to (partially) untether the archival from the local.

The packages' stress on reframing historical assumptions around women's amateur filmmaking also generated an unexpected barrier for film programmers. This focused on the question of 'women's cinema', which has been debated by feminist film critics and scholars since the 1970s, has acquired two different meanings: 'films made by women', and Hollywood products designed to appeal to a specifically female audience.⁵⁰ Explorations of 'women's cinema' have questioned what happens when women move beyond the realistic autobiographical mode of filmmaking expected by many critics. Scholars ask whether films made by women share any 'distinctly

feminine' qualities, warning against any generalisations of a 'feminine sensibility'.⁵¹ This discourse is problematic in that it reinforces essentialist gender distinctions and expectations. Further, it suggests films made by women share particular aesthetic or narrative tropes, which further contributes to the marginalisation of women's work. The problems and difficulties of 'women's cinema' are evidently still apparent almost 40 years on, where the feminist insistence on difference 'has been co-opted for a neoliberal notion of identity as an individual project through an emphasis on the woman filmmaker as an auteur, and 'women's stories' have become an area of niche marketing' encouraging women to consume a different set of texts than men.⁵²

The collection of films in the Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain project can be described as 'women's films' insofar as they are films made by women. The breadth of the collection and its wide spectrum of thematic concerns beyond expected autobiographical or narrative approaches led contacts in the BFI's Film Hub network – set up to promote and champion specialist film exhibition – to query how to position and market film packages that did not overtly display the supposed characteristics of 'women's cinema'. The wider implication here was that films included in these packages should only explore typically 'feminine' themes, such as relationships or family life. One contact within the Film Hub network expressed the belief that such themes were easier to market to female audiences.⁵³ While some films in the collection do explore these themes – *A Game for Three* (Mollie Butler, 1976), for example, tells the story of an affair from the wife's perspective – it clearly should not be taken as any indication of what a collection of women filmmakers has to contain. Such views assume that women filmmakers can only produce material that speaks to a female audience and that such an audience would only want to watch films concerned with culturally defined 'feminine' topics. Given our argument that the women

amateur filmmaker is already invisible at different levels – amateur film has only recently been prioritised within archive practice, women’s amateur films are not a preservation priority, catalogues of amateur collections are not designed to highlight women’s contributions and so on – the attitude of the exhibition sector to these feminist packages further ghettoises the already problematic term ‘amateur women filmmaker’ and the notions of inferiority and lack of professionalism that are associated with it. The choice to design three packages that showcased the breadth and range of the collection (rather than reduce it to easily understood cultural assumptions) represents an effort on our behalf to ensure we did not further marginalise these unknown figures of women’s work and creativity.

Although exhibitors were not specifically hostile to the Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain project, our refusal to conform to existing ideas around ‘woman’s cinema’ may have reduced opportunities to screen these packages. Some of the screenings were in slots that cinemas set aside for women’s filmmaking (Cambridge Arts Picturehouse), or where individual project films were shown as part of a season of women filmmakers (the Prince Charles Cinema, London). While the venues could not provide full audience figures, project attendees counted 80 people attending across four sessions, with positive responses including ‘it was great to learn more about women’s contribution to filmmaking’ and noting ‘the variety of topics and genres offered by these films’. The packages received an equally strong reception at other venues (HOME Manchester, Watershed Bristol, Sheffield Showroom, and Bo’Ness Hippodrome) where they were not identified in relation to a specific slot or season. While audience numbers were not provided by these venues, audience feedback again identified that it was ‘cool to see so many different formats, styles and

genres in one screening’ and ‘every female filmmaker needs to see these – how inspiring.’⁵⁴

Given the already marginalised nature of these filmmakers, the project made a clear choice to promote the three packages to as wide an audience as possible rather than focusing on pre-existing ‘women’s cinema’ screenings. The choices made throughout the engagement programme – the desire to focus on a theme that was gender-based and not location specific, a refusal to curate content for an assumed and limited ‘women’s film’ focus, and the decision to target a wide range of cinemas – clearly had an impact on the scope of the dissemination exercise in 2016. At every stage, however, our engagement project was driven by feminist principles. We strove to curate, disseminate and do justice to the women responsible for these amazing films, to allow them a limited voice that could speak back to film history and offer their own truths ‘from below’.⁵⁵

Conclusion: Reflections on Feminist Outreach

Framing the selection, development and delivery of the ‘Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain’ project from a feminist perspective has allowed us to explore how regional and national film archives still struggle with the identification, prioritisation and dissemination of women filmmakers and amateur film. While wholeheartedly agreeing that archiving is a feminist issue, we argue that this is not simply at the level of preservation priorities, cataloguing or scholarly access, but rather that it runs through the ability of engagement projects to gain a foothold in the specialist film exhibition sector. The feminist principle that woman’s creative work should be celebrated and more widely known underpinned this project: our reflection on that process cannot be taken as representative of the whole archive sector, but we

would argue that our case study demonstrates potential problems within local and national exhibition practices. Most notably, a feminist-led project celebrating the diversity of women's amateur filmmaking did not easily fit the dominant linking of archive and amateur with documentary-led representations of the local, or ideas of what 'women's cinema' might address.

Given the limitations of time and budget for this project, we are not claiming that the exhibition sector was the only factor limiting the reach of our film packages. Indeed, we estimate that over 300 people in cinemas across the country gained access to previously unseen materials which challenged their assumptions about the involvement of women filmmakers in amateur productions. The project pages on the EAFA website, which includes all the films, have had over four thousand views since March 2016. This demonstrates the greater reach of an online platform while accepting that it is impossible to know what impact such viewing had.⁵⁶ However, as discussed, the engagement project was driven by a desire to present and contextualise the films to cinema audiences, rather than rely simply on online traffic. Although outside the focus of this article, the cinema screenings have to be understood as part of a larger dissemination strategy (including a new standalone website, a proposed television documentary, the involvement of educational bodies such as INTOFilm) to engage a disparate audience across multiple platforms.

Reflecting on both the challenges and success of our work, our main recommendation is that accessions and cataloguing policies at archives should be revised to include metadata and search fields that make the identification of thematic or ideological areas (such as 'women filmmakers') easier. Our intention is not to isolate women's amateur filmmaking from other archival concerns, but to ensure that such cataloguing terms coexist with and enhance the current focus on 'gauge, running

time, subject matter and production locale'.⁵⁷ As a result of this project, EAFa has introduced a new accessions policy that prioritises women filmmakers, and is assessing its current holdings for more examples of women's 'invisible' creativity. Screen Archive Scotland has also introduced the option to search for women filmmakers in its catalogue. We applaud these steps at EAFa and SAS and hope to see that reflected in other regional and national archives.

While changes to collection metadata will not redress all issues problematizing the exhibition of feminist-led projects such as 'Women Amateur Filmmakers in Britain', increased online access to a range of material would be a welcome initial step to challenge reductive canonisations such as 'amateur film' or 'women's film'. We hope that increasing the visibility of women's work within the film archives will become a priority for institutions such as the BFI. There is clear evidence of thematic work around archive film in projects such as the BFI 'Black Britain on Film' but the dominant model remains the location-centred 'Britain on Film'. Encouraging the adoption of exhibition strategies that can look beyond location – or potentially combine location with the kinds of feminist work we have identified through this project – can only enrich the archive film screening landscape.

We end our article with a call for an 'Unlocking Women's Film Heritage' initiative that is similar to the BFI's 'Unlocking Film Heritage' but with a clear acknowledgement that archiving of women's film (and television) is always a feminist issue rather than a theme within a bigger programme. An initiative of this sort could implement the catalogue recommendations we made above, identify and provide research on the many still-invisible women filmmakers (amateur, experimental, professional) that exist in archives, prioritise the accession of more archive women's films, and digitise and make accessible that work. Most

significantly, it would offer the fuller reframing of film history that our modest case study suggests is possible.

¹ Patricia Zimmerman (2008) The Home Movie Movement: Excavations, Artifacts, Minings, in Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia Zimmerman (Eds.) *Mining the Home Movies: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 4.

² Robin Blaestz (2006) Rescuing the Fragmentary Evidence of Women's Experimental Film, *Camera Obscura* 63, 21(3), pp. 155-156.

³ See, for example, Penelope Houston (1994) *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives* (London: British Film Institute); Anthony Slide (1992) *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.); Clyde Jeavons (2007) The Moving Image: Subject or Object? *Journal of Film Preservation*, 73, pp. 19-32; Jane M Gaines (2007) Sad Songs of Nitrate: Women's Work in the Silent Film Archive, *Camera Obscura* 66, 22, 3, pp. 171-178; Krista Jamieson (2015) Ethical Film Restoration and Concepts of "Original", *Journal of Film Preservation*, 93, pp. 11-16.

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⁵ Jeavons, The Moving Image: Subject or Object? p. 27.

⁶ Jason S. Mittell (1997) Invisible footage: *Industry on Parade* and television historiography, *Film History*, 9, 2, p. 200.

⁷ See, for example, Ishizuka and Zimmerman (Eds.) *Mining the Home Movie*; Heather Norris Nicholson (2002) Telling Travellers' Tales: The World Through Home Movies, in T.M. Cresswell and Deborah Dixon (Eds.) *Engaging Film Geographies of Mobility and Identity* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield); Ian Craven (Ed.) (2009) *Movies on Home Ground: Explorations in Amateur Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing); Heather Norris Nicholson (2012) *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927-77* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); Francis Dyson (2012) *Challenging assumptions about amateur film of the inter-war years: Ace Movies and the first generation of London based cine-clubs* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Norwich: University of East Anglia, 2012); Ian Craven and Ryan Shand (Eds.) (2013) *Small Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

⁸ Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927-77*, p. 240.

⁹ Gaines, *Sad Songs of Nitrate*, p. 176.

¹⁰ Guy Edmonds (2013) Historical, Aesthetic, Cultural: The Problematic Value of Amateur Cine Fiction, in Shand and Craven (Eds.) *Small Gauge Storytelling*, p. 39, 53.

¹¹ Zimmerman, The Home Movie Movement, p. 1.

¹² We would highlight here the work of Heather Norris Nicholson, Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes, and Sarah Neely, who are beginning to open up the academic exploration of this issue. See Norris Nicholson (2002) Telling Travellers' Tales; Norris Nicholson (2012) *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice 1927-77*; Sarah Neely (2015) Objects Found: Locating a tradition of Scottish women filmmakers, in Katie Bruce, Alex Hetherington and Tina Fiske (Eds.) *Ripples in the Pond*, (Glasgow: Thinking Collections); Sarah Neely (2016) *Between Categories: The Films of Margaret Tait: Portraits, Poetry, Sound and Place* (Oxford: Peter Lang); Heather Norris-Nicholson and Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes (2018) *British Women Amateur Filmmakers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

¹³ Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley (2008) Is Archiving a Feminist Issue? Historical Research and the Past, Present, and Future of Television Studies' *Cinema Journal*, 47, 3, p. 156.

¹⁴ Giovanna Fossati (2009) *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), p. 17.

¹⁵ Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927-77*, p. 248.

¹⁶ Jeavons, The Moving Image: Subject or Object? p. 32.

¹⁷ Moseley and Wheatley, Is Archiving a Feminist Issue? p. 154.

¹⁸ Deborah Parker, quoted in Hannah Clugston (2018) Adding the voices of rebellious women back into the British film archives, <https://lwlies.com/articles/vote-100-born-a-rebel-deborah-parker-womens-suffrage/> (accessed 15 February 2019)

¹⁹ David Cleveland (2011) *Films Were Made, Volume 2: Local History* (Manningtree: The Lavenham Press Ltd.), p. 228.

²⁰ While 159 films were initially identified, the reduction to 142 was due to the IAC inventory listing part-reels of longer projects. For example, *To Oberammergau and the Alps in an Austin Sixteen* (Eunice and Eustace Alliot, 1930) was initially listed as eight separate reels, but research showed it was intended to be exhibited as one piece. East Anglian Film Archive (2015) Cataloguing of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers Women Film-Maker's Films', Available at http://www.eafa.org.uk/documents/TNA-Project_Women-Filmmakers_Research-Guide_pm-31-7.pdf (accessed 23 September 2016)

²¹ The digitisation was funded through the IAC and the John and Joy Chittock Trust. The cataloguing was undertaken by Dr Francis Dyson.

²² Julia Hallam and Les Roberts (2011) Mapping, Memory and the City: Archives, databases and film historiography, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14, 3, pp. 357.

²³ 'Impact' is defined here in relation to the UK government's Research Excellence Framework. Impact case studies returned to Main Panel D in REF 2014 (which covered Arts and Humanities subjects) were assessed in relation to the changes academic research had made to areas such as civil society, cultural life, economic prosperity, education, policy making, public discourse, and public services. REF (2012) Panel criteria and working methods, pp. 143-144. Available at <http://www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/2012-01/> (accessed 5 April 2017).

²⁴ Gwenda Young (2014) Glimpses of a Hidden History: Exploring Irish Amateur Collections, 1930-1970, in Laura Rascorolli and Gwenda Young, with Barry

Monahan (Eds.) *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, The Archive and The Web* (London: Bloomsbury), pp. 81-94.

²⁵ Julia Hallam (2010) Film, Space and Place: Researching a City on Film, *New Review of Film & Television Studies*, 8(3), p. 278.

²⁶ Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927-77*, p. 200.

²⁷ Gaines, 'Sad Songs of Nitrate', pp. 176-177.

²⁸ Janna Houwen (2017) *Film and Video Intermediality: The Question of Medium Specificity in Contemporary Moving Images* (London: Bloomsbury), p. 191.

²⁹ Mollie Butler, in conversation with Dr Sarah Hill, 31 March 2016.

³⁰ See, for example, Shelley Stamp (2015) *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

³¹ Blaestz, Rescuing the Fragmentary Evidence of Women's Experimental Film, p. 154.

³² Yvonne Tasker (2010) Vision and Visibility: Women Filmmakers, Contemporary Authorship and Feminist Film Studies, in Vicki Callahan (Ed.) *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), p. 214.

³³ E-mail correspondence between Dr Sarah Hill and Leora Murray, daughter of Bianca and Julius Sergay, 8 August 2016, as part of the project's copyright clearance.

³⁴ Gaines, 'Sad Songs of Nitrate', p. 175.

³⁵ For more information, see <https://wwp.northeastern.edu/>

³⁶ Jacqueline Wernimont and Julia Flanders (2010) Feminism in the Age of Digital Archives: The Women Writers Project, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 29(2), p. 425.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 425. Patricia Zimmerman similarly highlights the feminist potential of digitisation as it creates potential for file sharing that "marks an end to the focus on the fixity and sanctity of the archival image", which is primarily a 'white, male, patriarchal institutionalized phenomenon'. Patricia Zimmermann quoted in Hallam Film, Space and Place, p. 292.

³⁸ Wernimont and Flanders, *Feminism in the Age of Digital Archives*, pp. 426-427.

³⁹ Ryan Shand, Introduction: Ambitions and Arguments – Exploring Amateur Cinema Through Fiction, in Shand and Craven (Eds.), *Small Gauge Storytelling*, p. 14.

⁴⁰ Peter Bosma (2015) *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives* (New York: Wallflower Press), p. 91.

⁴¹ Gaines, 'Sad Songs of Nitrate', p. 176.

⁴² The Independent Cinema Office is a 'national organization for the development and support of independent film exhibition in the UK'. Its mission is to 'bring a wider range of films to a wider range of audiences', particularly films that would not otherwise find an audience. "About," ICO (n.d.),

<http://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/about/> . (accessed 10 September 2016)

⁴³ David Sin (2016) 'Programming Archive Film for Beginners', Archive Screening Day, 28 July 2016.

⁴⁴ Package 1 (Secrets and Lies): *A Game for Three, The Stray* (Marjorie Martin, 1965), *A Bench in the Park, Only For a Moment* (Kate Hall & Bonnie Winer, 1986), *Face to Face* (Sheila Graber, 1976), *Freak*. Package 2 (Fun on Film): *Sally Sallies Forth, Further Outlook Unsettled* (Laurie & Stuart Day, 1938), *Make-up* (Joanna Fryers, 1978), *The Cat and the Tune* (Sheila Graber, 1977), *Magnum Opus* (Mollie Butler, 1981). Package 3 (Highlights): *Dance Little Lady* (Laurie & Stuart Day, 1954), *England May Be Home* (Margaret and Richard Hodkin, 1957), *A Game for Three, Make-up, Freak*.

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- ⁴⁵ BFI (2012), Film Forever: Supporting UK Film, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-film-forever-2012-17.pdf> (accessed 10 September 2016)
- ⁴⁶ BFI (n.d.) Britain on Film, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/britain-on-film> (accessed 11 September 2016)
- ⁴⁷ BFI, Film Forever: Supporting UK Film.
- ⁴⁸ BFI (2014), BFI Film Audience Network lead partners announced, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/announcements/bfi-film-audience-network-lead-partners-announced> (accessed 10 September 2016)
- ⁴⁹ Hallam and Roberts, Mapping, Memory and the City, p. 357.
- ⁵⁰ The term ‘women’s film’ was typically used to describe popular Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s that were pejoratively termed “weepies” due to their emotional, melodramatic tone. Judith Mayne (1981), The Woman at the Keyhole: Women’s Cinema and Feminist Criticism, *New German Critique*, 23, p. 27.
- ⁵¹ Molly Haskell (1977) Are Women Directors Different? in Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (Eds.), *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), p. 430.
- ⁵² Sue Thornham (2012) *What if I had Been the Hero? Investigating Women’s Cinema* (London: BFI), p. 188. Thornham provides a useful overview of the debates around women’s cinema.
- ⁵³ This individual (anonymised for reasons of confidentiality) expressed these opinions during March 2016 e-mail and telephone exchanges. We would regard this as an expert opinion due to the seniority and experience of the individual.
- ⁵⁴ All audience quotations are taken from postcards handed out at screenings and returned to the project team. All comments were provided anonymously.
- ⁵⁵ Zimmerman, The Home Movie Movement, p. 4.
- ⁵⁶ Website viewing statistics provided in e-mail discussion with EAFA manager Angela Graham and EAFA Technician Sean Kelly. The 4162 figure covers all views of the project pages and individual films between March 2016 and June 2017.
- ⁵⁷ Ian Craven (2013) Sewell, Rose and the Aesthetics of Amateur Cine Fiction, in Shand and Craven (Eds.) *Small Gauge Storytelling*, p. 56.