

Amateur Media and Participatory Cultures: Film, Video and Digital Media

ed. by Susan Aasman and Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes

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In the past few decades, amateur cinema studies have overseen a significant, growing interest and a flourishing of publications devoted to various aspects of analogue amateur film practices. More recently, several scholarly contributions have also addressed the digital turn and the contemporary ‘amateurized media universe’ — as per Patricia Zimmermann’s definition — although the study of digital amateur media raises some new and delicate issues. The already conventional and fragile distinction between ‘amateurs’ and ‘professionals’ (and indeed between amateur and professional devices, or consumption modes, and so on) have been redefined by the ubiquitousness of user-generated content; to address their somehow anarchic proliferation, their pervasiveness, the way in which they seem to elude any attempt to contain, define or classify them requires the scholar to immerse herself in the contradictions of the present.

Confronted with the difficult task of dealing with a set of ephemeral practices that present significant differences, but also unexpected commonalities, Susan Aasman and Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes — the two authors of the book *Amateur Media and Participatory Cultures: Film, Video and Digital Media* — adopt a very effective strategy. They declare at the outset that their volume does not attempt to offer a systematic study that aims to investigate amateur production exhaustively, in all its aspects, but it should rather be considered a ‘work in progress, one that often combines perplexing theoretical perspectives and several open-ended analyses’ (p. xii). As such, it proposes heterogeneous paths in which the forms of the past dialogue seamlessly with those of the present, bringing out some crucial and urgent aspects that concern our relationship with those amateur media that are part of our reality, that inform our imagination, that contribute to define our view of the world.

The heterogeneity of the analyses and of the approaches offered in this book is also the result of the different backgrounds and methodologies adopted by the two authors: Aasman is a media historian, while Motrescu-Mayes is a visual anthropologist. Rather than being a weakness, though, the methodological and even stylistic specificities of each of the two authors is undoubtedly one of the strengths of the book, which offers therefore two unique but effectively intermingled perspectives.

The first and second chapters, written by Aasman, consider amateur practices as the result of a complex combination of technological, social, economic, cultural and also political factors. Chapter one offers a diachronic examinations of amateur media, thus addressing at length their change of status from a marginal and somehow elitist hobby to a mass diffused practice, from a form of memory-building fostered by the temporal distance between shooting and projection to an everyday means of communication marked by immediateness and pervasiveness. In the second chapter, Aasman focuses specifically on the home movie *dispositif*, addressing in particular the shifting boundaries between its private and public dimension and the consequent complex, contradictory impulses 'since the amateur filmmaker/media maker's identity and political economies have now entered a highly public and commercialised space' (p. 7). Chapters 3, 4 and 5, instead, are written by Motrescu-Mayes as an almost continuous discourse on the ethical and political aspects of amateur images, especially those that deal with violence and trauma.

Motrescu-Mayes's analysis begins with a discussion on the concept of ephemerality as both something intrinsic to amateur images — more subject to be discarded, not preserved because of their low commercial value — but also something that is presented as a feature of many digital platforms, that therefore are mistakenly perceived by users as free environments within which they can perform their own or new identities. The very concept of ephemerality in relation to amateur media is addressed through an analysis of the practices of recycling, re-use and resemantization of private images. In chapter 4, Motrescu-Mayes investigates what happens when the right to narrate and interpret suffering, trauma and violence passes from (political, economic, cultural) institutions to individual citizens, those netizens that challenge the dominant ideological narratives and frameworks, thus 'acting as *memory agent*' (p. 99) and helping to construct not only a 'visual memory of trauma', but also those counter-histories analysed in chapter 5. In it, she argues how 'what appears at first to be brief and possibly inconsequential, ephemeral images (visual constructions) of other people's trauma, become in time an ongoing exercise in shaping and challenging visual identities of the global 'I' — an 'I' unified by the power of shared anonymity' (p. 128). The last chapter, by Aasman, addresses a crucial issue, once again related to memory: the practices of archiving and preservation of digital amateur media. Aasman acknowledges that 'the complexities and contradictions that characterize present-day amateur media cultures are mirrored by, and reproduced in, the complexities and contradictions of archiving digital memories' (p. 148). As such, it is not possible to conceive easy solutions in order to face the fragile, ephemeral nature of digital media, affected by the paradox of being sharable and easy to circulate — so as to appear eternal — but instead subject to obsolescence or, worse, erasure — for example, the removal of contents considered offensive or that infringe copyright laws implemented by YouTube. However, by listing a series of individual or collaborative archival practices, Aasman's analysis suggests

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some possible virtuous strategies, while pleading for both the need to preserve the memory of our digital present and our right to oblivion.

The non-systematic nature of the volume does not coincide, therefore, with the lack of a coherent general perspective. Its cohesion as a whole is guaranteed by a common purpose shared by the work of Aasman and Motrescu-Mayes: they both approach amateur media from a fresh, open, multidisciplinary angle, which combines a wide range of theoretical contributions — not only from anthropology and history, but also from sociology or psychology, to name just a few — in order to address the relationship between amateur media and memory, identity and social structures from a profoundly ethical and political perspective. This book is indeed a work in progress, in the more positive sense: through the questions it raises, it is a compelling invitation for the whole scholarly community to take a closer look at amateur practices with a renewed perspective. Although ephemeral and often mundane, they can enable, after all, an authentic dialogue with our past, and they represent the living, beating heart of our present.

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