17 June 1927: Amateur Film League Aids Invention of Film Culture

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The Bund der Film-Amateure (Amateur Film League, B DFA) was founded in Berlin on 17 June 1927, in order to "propagate film sport and stimulate its culturally uplifting development." Among the founding members of the B DFA were representatives of the film industry and the association of movie theaters, journalists, and individual film amateurs. Only a few years earlier, in 1923, Kodak's 16-millimeter safety stock had reached Germany, prompting manufacturers and industry to create a market for the new technology and free it from censorship and safety regulations.

Compared to the United States and Great Britain, the German Amateur Film League was quite small in terms of its membership, having only two hundred members in 1928, six hundred in 1932, and about four thousand in 1944. The cities of Berlin, Halle, and Dresden clearly spearheaded the movement and occupied its center, along with active local film clubs in various other cities, including Munich, Hamburg, Dresden, and Halle. At the outset, the League instituted a monthly competition to stimulate exchange and ambition among its members. The official National Amateur Film Competition was first held in 1935. As in all amateur cultures, these competitions played an important role in shaping the League's cultural identity by defining its relation to both film professionals and hobby filmmakers. Like other leagues that spread worldwide, the German Amateur Film League had a constituency comprised of anything but mere hobbyists. Born mainly out of economic interests, the B DFA evolved into a group of ambitious film practitioners, authors, screenwriters, critics, and cinephiles who made significant contributions to the "invention of film culture" during the Weimar years.

Film für Alle (Film for all), published in Halle from 1927 through 1944, was Germany's first amateur film journal. It was joined by Der Filmamateur (The Film amateur), which was published in Berlin from 1927 through 1943 and became the first official organ of the B DFA (later replaced in 1937 by competitor Film für Alle). Both journals not only...
but also engaged in lively debates about the cultural space of amateur filmmaking within Weimar film culture. A crucial question for amateur cultures in general and for film amateurs in particular was the relationship between amateur filmmaking and professional or semiprofessional filming. Should one allow amateurs to earn money with their “work”? A certain permeability between the professional, semiprofessional, and amateur realms of filmmaking was characteristic for the Weimar amateur film culture — resulting in a productive grey zone that changed profoundly after 1933 with the introduction of the new Reichsfilmgesetz (Reich Film Law), which hindered such crossovers and sought to restrict amateur engagement to the private sphere.

During the 1920s numerous innovations profoundly changed the field of amateur film technology. Pathé’s “Baby,” a complete home movie system for 9.5-millimeter film (1923), and Ica’s “Ica-Kinamo” (1927), the first camera with automatic release, were the most famous examples. Ambitious film amateurs were challenged by these technological developments and joined professionals in exploring the field. In Berlin, BDMA members joined regular meetings at the Osram Lichthaus or the Ufa-Kulturfilmabteilung (Universum Film A.G.’s cultural film division) to test new equipment and to evaluate the new 16-millimeter stock, which, due to its high optical qualities, reached beyond amateur circles, influencing science, education, and the arts.

Eager and ambitious as they were, club filmmakers were careful to keep their distance from family and hobby filming. For these amateurs, filming was understood as something more than a leisure activity for fathers: rather, it represented the proper occupation for the urban, modern, and mobile citizen. In this regard, the discourse on amateur film articulated broader attitudes toward technology and debates on modernism so central to Weimar culture. Film amateurs embraced technological innovations, and with their light, mobile cameras, they saw themselves as flaneurs of the big cities, capturing images on their way.

In their search for a genuine amateur-film aesthetics, these serious amateurs clearly preferred nonfiction to fictional filmmaking, primarily for budgetary reasons. The small 16-millimeter cameras could be carried along on trains and boats, and their light weight and small size allowed filming from extraordinary or even hidden positions. With respect to the documentary qualities of filmmaking, these filmmakers were fully aware that careful staging would eventually aid in the unfolding of reality before the camera (following Winfried Base’s definition of documentary film as an “artistic and concentrated performance [Darstellung] of reality; and the use of reality as performer [Darsteller]”).

Bela Baláz’s Der sichtbare Mensch (The Visible Man, 1924) and Rudolf Arnheim’s Film als Kunst (Film as Art, 1932) further influenced the somewhat fragmentary poetics of amateur filmmaking, propagating new ways of looking at the most familiar things. Alongside the emphasis on documentary, however, members of the BDMA also successfully experimented with other genres. Richard Groschopp’s animated film of a battle on a chessboard, Eine kleine Königstragödie (A little king’s tragedy, 1934), even gained international recognition. Fictional films — from detective stories to comedies — were realized on a local level as forms of group activity and collaborative filmmaking.

Amateurs learned filming by doing but also by watching films and even copying the work of professionals. Walter Ruttmann’s Berlin, Die Symphonie einer Großstadt (Berlin — Symphony of a City, 1927) was very popular within amateur film circles and by the mid-1930s instructions on how to make a cross-section film (Querschnittsfilm) had made it into books on amateur filmmaking. Some professionals like Guido Seeber and Willy Zischler shared their insights with amateur colleagues, introducing them to the technique of double-exposure and the “uchained camera” and teaching them how to mount a camera on a bicycle. A key role in transferring knowledge from professional filmmaking to amateur circles was surely played by Alex Strasser, a father and author of numerous books on amateur film who was also closely associated with the Internationale Liga des unabhängigen Films (International League of Independent Film).

In 1932 Kodak introduced the first 8-millimeter film, cameras, and projector, which led to a further reduction of costs, but in this case at the expense of cinematographic quality. For many amateurs, subscribing to this format represented a barrier to public or even semipublic distribution venues, even as the format conquered the domestic market for home movies. Marketing strategies for amateur equipment adapted to this situation, redefining film as a home entertainment for the whole family rather than a hobby for the technically versed. Filming is easy, the slogan was, and life should be, too. The literature directed at this new generation of film amateurs clearly aimed at bringing film as Heimkino into living rooms and instructed the whole family on how to act in a varied film program. For the purposes of home entertainment, self-made films could be programmed alongside reduction prints of popular fiction films, uplifting cultural films, or even propaganda films, all of which were available from the early 1930s via 16- and 8-millimeter film libraries.

Hitler’s rise to power and the National Socialist Party takeover prompted a further retreat by many amateurs into the private sphere. In 1934, the Amateur Film League was subsumed by the Reichsfilmkammer (Film Chamber of the Reich) and from then on, all members were required to provide proof of so-called Aryan descent. Any public screening of small-gauge films, whether amateur productions or not, became subject to censorship. Within a year, the boards of the BDMA and Der Film-Amateur were replaced by official representatives of the Nazi
regime. Karl Melzer, at that point secretary of the Reichsfilmkammer, became president of the BDFA in 1935 and announced closer cooperation between the BDFA and the Reichsstelle für Unterrichtsfilm (Reich Office for Educational Film), granting the amateur filmmaker a role in producing films about German customs and traditions.

At this point, not surprisingly, the genre of the family film, disdained by ambitious amateurs in the 1920s and early 1930s for its lack of aesthetic quality, celebrated its rebirth in the form of the Familieuskulturfilm (family cultural film). In 1935, the Film-Amateur defined this genre as the proper remit of the amateur, one of high cultural importance, instilling cultural values such as home, family, and tradition in line with the National Socialist ideology. This shift was confirmed at the 1936 National Amateur Film Competition, which awarded prizes to two such films. Second prize went to Herbert Plessow’s Der Nasenbüchel (The bundt cake), an instructional film on cake baking and a family comedy at the same time. First prize was taken by Richard Groschopp for his Bonnerli, a short family film with the director’s daughter as main actor and character. Groschopp’s talent was widely recognized within and even beyond the German amateur film community. His animated film Eine kleine Königstragödie (A minor kingly tragedy) had been the distinguished winner of the same competition the previous year, prompting Dresden’s Bochner-Film to finance a high-quality remake of the film for theatrical release that later screened publicly together with Veit Harlan’s feature film Der Herrscher (The ruler, 1937).

The success of Bonnerli symbolizes both the peak of German amateur filmmaking and its most problematic turning point. With the rise of the Familieuskulturfilm to the national stage, the German amateur film officially proved itself “worthy” of the new regime. While close analysis of this genre reveals a certain ambiguity and even potential moments of resistance — for example, in moments of mockery with respect to gender roles — the elevation of the family film into the realm of Kulturfilm coincided with a period of extensive cooperation and complicity. In the following years, leading BDFA members more or less openly aligned themselves with NS ideology, in the hopes that amateur film would be assigned a crucial role in Nazi politics. Richard Groschopp entered the professional world of filming with Leni Riefenstahl before he joined Bochner-Film in Dresden and later the DEFA-Studios (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft, East Germany’s state-owned film company), eventually becoming president of the National Center of Amateur Film in the GDR in 1960. For the majority of even the most serious German amateurs, however, filmmaking was more a retreat into the private sphere. In 1943 the headquarters of the BDFA were bombed; the league stopped all activities the same year, and would not reemerge until its postwar rebirth in Braunschweig in 1949.

See also:
- 10 May 1924: Der Berg des Schicksals Inaugurates the Genre of the “Mountain Film”
- 3 May 1925: French and German Avant-Garde Converge at Der absolute Film
- 30 April 1999: Werner Herzog’s “Minnesota Declaration” Performs Critique of Documentary Cinema

Notes
1 Quoted from the statute in Barbara Zimmermann, “Hundert Jahre Film — 75 Jahre BDFA,” in Das BDFA-Handbuch: Nachschlagewerk für alle Film und Video-Fremde, ed. Bund Deutscher Film und Video-Amateure (Göttingen: Flöttemeier, 1997), 12–35; here 13.
5 Alexander Stöker, So wollen wir filme: Anregungen für die inhaltliche Gestaltung der Amateurfilme (Stuttgart: Frank’sche Verlagshandlung, 1932), 9.