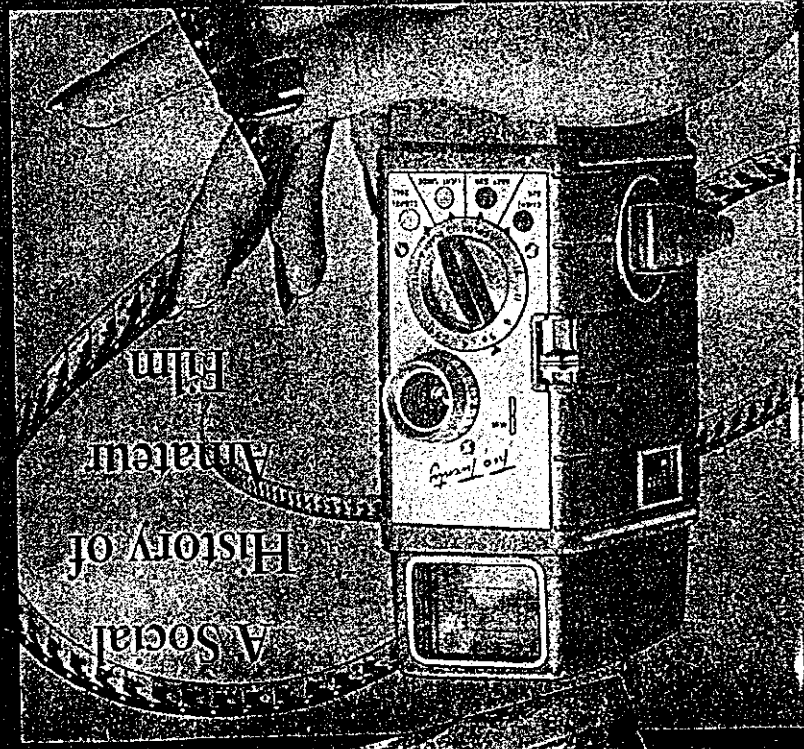


# REEL FAMILIES

*A Social History of Amateur Film*

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## Pleasure or Money

Professionalism and the Economy

**M**OST SIMPLY, PROFESSIONALISM suggests performing a task for financial return, and amateurism indicates doing something for pleasure, for the sheer love of it, as its Latin root—*amare*—denotes. However, these rather value-laden, popular distinctions conceal much more complex social relations: while the professional conducts activities for work, an amateur labors away from work, in free time or leisure time. In amateurism as a social and historical phenomenon, work and free time are not locked into simple binary oppositions; rather, the absence of one defines and imbricates the other.

The theoretical debate surrounding the public sphere (traditionally defined as the realm of economics and politics) and its relationship to the private sphere (positioned by most theorists as the realm of the family and personal life) has recently been reinvigorated by such diverse writers as Jürgen Habermas, Peter Hohendahl, Eli Zaretsky, Oskar Negt, Eberhard Knodler-Bunte, and Arthur Brittan. In its classical phase, active participation in the politics, law, and morality of the state comprised the public sphere, whereas the household defined the private sphere.<sup>1</sup> As nation states and the economy developed, these distinctions became more complex. The public sphere emerged as the site of political and economic power and discussions of law, rationality, and morality; the private sphere became increasingly identified with women, the family, personal sentiment, and feeling.

Jürgen Habermas argues that the public sphere—"the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed"<sup>2</sup>—developed as a distinct social formation from the private sphere after the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century. Before this period, the public sphere was linked directly to the public display of sovereign power symbolized in the body of the prince, king, or ruler. The location of rational discussion within the public sphere paralleled the rise of private property; private individuals could transmit "rational authority" to the state via the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> The public sphere interceded between fragmented individuals and the political power of

<sup>1</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 11. <sup>2</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 11. <sup>3</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 11.

tems (such as print media and newspapers) further mediated between private individuals and the liberal, quasi-participatory public sphere typical of advanced industrialized countries.

Habermas explains that the public sphere functions as both a normative and historically descriptive category. As a normative construct, the public sphere insures individuals equality in access and in freedom to express ideas and opinions. Mass media composes the public sphere in the twentieth century and contains this possibility.

Many theorists have analyzed the intricate relationship between the public sphere and the role of experts. Professionalism and amateurism traverse this dichotomy between the public sphere of the economy and the private sphere of the home and personal life in very specific ways. Several critics have shown, for example, that as communication and economic systems expand into more elaborate structures, social divisions between experts and nonexperts escalate.

Raymond Williams connects this technical specialization with the appearance of more layered, differentiated social constructs than those contained in a traditional Marxist class analysis. He explains that

as a culture becomes richer and more complex, involving many more artistic techniques developed to a high degree of specialization, the social distance of many practices becomes much greater, and there is a virtually inevitable if always complex set of divisions between participants and spectators in various acts.<sup>4</sup>

The difference between professional film and amateur film, then, marks a social distance sustained through the specialization of technique. Habermas argues that these specializations manifest a positivist, scientific mentality that controls the public sphere, redefined almost exclusively by economic and political relations rather than by rationality. These instrumental actions depend on technical rules, skills acquisition, extension of market control, and power.<sup>5</sup>

For Habermas, the rise of "experts" precipitates the gradual destruction of the normative public sphere: technical rules replace equal access to participation in public discussion. Political problems formerly discussed by groups transform into technical dysfunctions repaired by individual experts. Scientific paradigms and epistemologies gradually dominate the public sphere, and in particular, the economy, diminishing access and equality.<sup>6</sup> Observation, codification, and expertise function as deterrents to access to a severely truncated and economically circumscribed public sphere. As an objective and replicable set of rules and standards, science increasingly defines the economy.<sup>7</sup> Expertise—based on appropriating scientific methods of observation, standardization, and regularity—circumscribes the public sphere of political discussion; its

emphasis on the acquisition of technical skills promotes stratification, thus diminishing equal access.

Professionalism, then, can be explicated as a system of technical rules insuring access to the economy for only a qualified and privileged few. Professional film's "codes of expertise"—narrative paradigms, capital-intensive production, division of labor, and market control—determine access to the market economy. Williams observes that "the market is still, by its nature, profoundly reproductive of both known demand . . . and of known priorities."<sup>8</sup> Because professionalism incorporates rational rules and the reproduction of known qualities, to invoke Habermas's formulation, it operates within a more public domain. On the other hand, because amateurism structurally rejects these rational modes, it is marginalized within the private sphere of personal life, outside wage labor and economic relations, and operates almost exclusively as consumption.

Professionalism depends on the standardization and interchangeability of skills. Professionalism eradicates autonomous individual or collective access to the economy; it signifies the smooth coordination of technical rules and procedures within complex, stratified organizations. With their enormous financial resources and professional experts, only bureaucracies have access to the economic and political public sphere. Professionalized categories of technical skill isolate workers, inhibit them from producing independently, and fragment access. Professionalism, then, is congruent with market operations. In addition, capital-intensive productions form a significant barrier to entry. For example, Hollywood film depends on elaborate financial resources, a division of labor, specialized technical expertise, and access to national markets. Professionalism revolves around two separate interlocking constructs. On the one hand, professionalism articulates scientific norms; on the other hand, this incorporation of standards differentiates the professional, insuring a limited amount of control over a small sector of the economy.<sup>9</sup>

#### Amateurism and the Private Sphere

The private sphere—traditionally defined as the realm of family and personal life—developed as the site for the resuscitation of all those needs that instrumental actions cannot satisfy. This contradiction between alienated wage labor and what Adolfo Vazquez has termed the "creative essence"—the need for fulfilling, integrated, meaningful work, assumed to be latent in all individuals<sup>10</sup>—is dispersed into the social categories of professionalism and amateurism.

Eli Zaretsky's *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* charts the historical development of the split between the private and public spheres.<sup>11</sup> The rise of in-

4 *Reel Families*

dustrial commodity production severed the family from economic and social production. Because capitalism depended on rationality and control, the family, in contrast, acquired greater significance as the site of happiness, love, freedom, creativity, personal relations, feeling, and the subjectivity denied in productive labor. Subjectivity simultaneously reinforces and threatens capitalist relations: the ideology of individualism put forth by liberalism supports the needs of production for skilled, creative workers, while the freedom for self-expression may exceed, and perhaps undermine, productive modes. The private sphere sustains an important category of analysis for investigating leisure-time goods, such as amateur-film equipment. Amateur film simultaneously reinforces the market as a consumer commodity and presents the possibility for creativity to middle-class consumers. Habermas has elaborated on the private sphere as the location for the more fully integrated needs and activities excised from the rationalized structure of the economy.<sup>12</sup>

Artistic endeavors, including amateur film, evolve into depositories for all these more subjective needs not satisfied in public wage-labor situations. In a similar vein, Vazquez argues that while wage labor conforms to the demands of the market, artistic labor depends upon freedom, creativity, and spontaneity—values challenging standardized rules.<sup>13</sup> Amateurism safeguards these ideals of artistic labor while simultaneously functioning outside economic relations. The division between professionalism and amateurism hierarchically balances the contradiction between rationalized wage labor and more integrated creative labor. The public discourse on amateur film functions as a form of social control, because it harnesses subjectivity, imagination, and spontaneity within the more privatized contexts of leisure and family life.

Professionalism and amateurism operate together in multiple articulations: dependency, dominance, subordination, and/or resistance. Labor parallels divisions between the public and private sphere: wage labor and professionalism are defined by rational control, while artistic labor and amateurism are inscribed by freedom.

In *The Rise of Professionalism*, Magali Sarfatti Larson proposes that professionalism exemplifies a tendency toward monopolization of status and work in order to maintain social hierarchies.<sup>14</sup> Formalized paradigms protect this monopoly. They standardize not only procedures but also producers. They depend on codifying knowledge to depersonalize producers and to offer reliable, predictable control of services.<sup>15</sup> This unequal access to specialized knowledge increases the power of professionals.

Within these theoretical contours, more historically specific questions loom. How did Hollywood become linked with the epitome of professional film production? How did this ideology of Hollywood infiltrate writing on amateur

film? The popular discursive construct of Hollywood exhibits the structures of professionalism through its division of labor in production, its development of formalized paradigms of narrative construction and composition, and its control and dominance of the motion picture market through distribution and exhibition. Hollywood professionalism consolidates three trajectories: division of labor, formal paradigms of aesthetic standards and conventions, and market control and monopolization through access to national distribution because of technological standardization. The division of production labor into camera, director, and other technical skills, as well as the division of aesthetic material into reproducible narrative parts (e.g., the close-up and cutaway), made film production more efficient.<sup>16</sup> Professional filmmaking, then, mirrors rationalized, scientific management. As early as 1908 the Motion Picture Patents Company, a consortium of producers and camera manufacturers who controlled not only technology but also distribution, monopolized markets and patents to diminish competition.<sup>17</sup> Further, professional 35mm film equipment not only produces more elaborate and larger images but also standardizes production, distribution, and exhibition, erecting a powerful barrier of entry as it bolsters the dominant ideologies of consumption, nuclear familialism, and liberal pluralism.<sup>18</sup> Discursively, professional film and amateur film diffuse a potentially explosive contradiction: professional film signifies rationalized, specialized wage-labor and economic control, whereas amateur film represents marginalized, yet integrated, production wedged within the private sphere.

Public discourse constructs amateur film as a safeguard to the economic stultification of professional film; it functions simultaneously as an illusory ideal of democratic freedom and as a potential market for disseminating inferior consumer versions of professional tools. Amateurism materializes as a cultural reservoir for the liberal pluralist ideals of freedom, competition, fluidity among classes, upward mobility, and inalienable and creative labor—social relations dislodged from the economic by scientism, the division of labor, and the cult of expertise.

The social formations and ideologies of professionalism and amateurism emerged in tandem in early nineteenth-century America. The period between 1840 and 1887 marked the most rapid growth of the modern professions—clerical, medical, and law—in the United States. Reflecting tremendous alterations in the American economy, this early period witnessed a qualitative leap in communications with the development of railroads, the telegraph, newspapers and periodicals, a population shift from rural areas to the cities, and the rise of manufacturing.<sup>19</sup>

During this increasing nationalization of the American economy in the 1880s, the significance of professionalism and amateurism escalated. In *The In-*

corporation of America, Alan Trachtenberg observes that the rise of American corporations during the latter half of the nineteenth century encouraged both science and professionalism to increase productivity and efficiency.<sup>20</sup> However, during the 1880s and 1890s, disputes between labor and management as well as the perpetuation of a popular entrepreneurial mythology about captains of industry like Thomas Edison, obscured the migration of these new social processes into corporate bureaucracies.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the social concept of amateurism developed at this time, probably as a result of urbanization and the rise of leisure time.<sup>22</sup>

The symbiotic relationship between professionalism and amateurism mitigates this split between work and freedom. The economy controls and fragments wage labor. On the other side, amateur labor retains transmuted vestiges of total individual control and freedom within private life. Outside of market relations, it is immunized, so to speak, from class and expertise constraints. The imaginary fluidity between professionals and amateurs thus supports the myth of personal fulfillment.

#### Historical Origins of the Dynamic between Professionalism and Amateurism

Magali Sarfatti Larson argues that professionalization reflected the rise of the middle class, resulting from the corporate concentration of industries and their monopolization of technical knowledge.<sup>23</sup> Older occupations such as medicine and law professionalized in the early nineteenth century to insure monopoly market control and occupational status. Modern professionalization monolithically controlled the late nineteenth century however functioned differently; it became dependent on scientific control by experts. This structural shift of professionalization corresponds with the gradual transformation in the American economy from the competitive capitalism of small entrepreneurs into the corporate capitalism of large bureaucratic production units.<sup>24</sup> This more modern professionalization and its "new middle class" reacted to bureaucratic subordination: the ethics of individual advancement disguised class interests within an aura of objective professional standards and access to higher class status.<sup>25</sup>

The promulgation of experts and professionals solidifies Taylorism, which first emerged in the teens of the twentieth century. Developed by engineer Frederick Taylor, this system promoted scientific management of labor through time and motion studies as the most efficient way to control production costs and profit margins. Utilizing scientific principles of observation and quantification, Taylorism signified the further incorporation of rationality in order to

control workplace relations. Taylorism legitimated the social importance of the professional and expert, who implemented its discourse.<sup>26</sup> Large bureaucratic organizations and professional occupations insulated themselves against class interests. For example, as a result of national markets after 1870, the numbers of production workers decreased, while the number of service and distribution workers increased.<sup>27</sup> Jobs shifted from production and manual labor to the more abstract, cognitive skills of professionals.

With industrial expansion and the nationalization of culture, engineers, teachers, doctors, and social workers increasingly relinquished their individual, heterogeneous, disconnected, autonomous, community-oriented character and transformed themselves into bourgeois professionals with standards, national organizations, and educational credentials.<sup>28</sup>

Professionalism epitomized the organizational logic of industrial capitalism that worked to control labor through the institution of work standards, the white collar corollary to standardized parts and Taylorized assembly line work. The professional—drilled, disciplined, methodical, dependable, and knowledgeable—embodied capitalist production methods. In *America by Design*, David Noble has interpreted the professionalization of engineers during this period as a reaction against the loss of labor control resulting from management attempts to proletarianize craft workers with Taylorized middle management.<sup>29</sup> On the cultural level, retrieval of control and autonomy dispersed into amateurism. A writer in a 1901 *Atlantic* magazine piece titled "The Amateur Spirit" invoked the amateur spirit to temper, expand, and invigorate the professional "to keep him from hardening into a machine."<sup>30</sup> The writer professed that professionalism even extended into imperialism:

Ours must be not a "nation of amateurs," but a nation of professionals, if it is to hold its own in the coming struggles—struggles not merely for commercial dominance, but for supremacy of political and moral ideas.<sup>31</sup>

Amateurism, then, emerged between 1880 and 1920 as the cultural inversion to the development of economic professionalization. With labor increasingly rationalized and craftsmen and inventors subsumed into corporate organizations, professionalism reproduced highly trained individuals as efficient as mass production standardized interchangeable machine gun parts. In contrast, amateurism was not perceived as being standardized or interchangeable, yet it was clearly identified with upper- and middle-class leisure. Amateurism posited as the aesthetic antidote to the total stagnation of the professional.

From approximately 1880 to 1915, the discursive structure of amateurism synthesized two contradictory movements. On the one hand, popular maga-

zines equated the amateur with depth, breadth, and freedom, signifying the survival of heterogeneity and the more humane virtues of a rural America. For example, amateur photography was aligned with women in advertisements for the Kodak hand camera. The image of the woman naturalized and humanized the technology. On the other hand, initiative, enthusiasm, and adventurousness—attributes of the entrepreneur and self-made “man,” the new pioneer of economic and technological frontiers—were identified with amateurism. Amateurism functioned as a residual site for nineteenth-century American male economic prowess:

Never has this restless, inventive, querying, accomplishing type of American manhood lost its prominence in our political and social structure. The self-made man is still, perhaps, our most representative man. Native shrewdness and energy and practical capacity—qualities such as the amateur may possess in a high degree—continue to carry a man very far.<sup>32</sup>

Not confined to a profession, to one track of operations, the amateur’s versatility functioned to enforce an idea of class mobility, mental agility, personal freedom, and daring.

Amateurism mediated two different historical articulations of the self-made man. John Cawelti has noted that the ideology of the self-made man stressing individualism, achievement, success, economic enterprise, and self-education was most prevalent between approximately 1820 and 1850, when the United States experienced a surge of economic and geographic expansion.<sup>33</sup> By the 1880s, Cawelti argues these earlier notions of self-improvement transformed into an almost exclusive emphasis on the acquisition of wealth.<sup>34</sup> In popular middle-class magazines, amateurism connected nostalgia for the self-made man with a resistance to corporate and professional domination.<sup>35</sup> Not enervated by routine nor stagnated by standardized methods, amateurs, as delineated by popular-magazine essay writers at the turn of the century, epitomized the consummate inventor whose fresh vision and unfettered spontaneity fueled the best capitalist competitive edge. Symbolically and culturally, this scientized corporate system recognized its own trajectory toward embolism and deflected innovation into an individualized, stochastic sector—amateurism. For example, an anonymous writer in a 1911 edition of *Living Age* remarked:

Generally speaking, the work of the latter [the professionals] is outstanding, but that of the former [the amateurs] is brilliant. It is as if those inside the ring possessed, like the interior of a circle, no independent capacity of motion, but inertia. Only the application of outside forces can produce any velocity in the system.<sup>36</sup>

In leisure time, undisciplined personal passion replaced the rationalized rigors of work. The same writer heralds Charles Darwin as the penultimate amateur: a self-taught intellectual marginal to traditional academia, who rattled the scientific establishment with his theory of evolution and changed the course of science.<sup>37</sup> However, the rupture posed by amateurism was effectively rerouted into ideological support for the further expansion of the capitalist economic system.

In this early period professionalism and amateurism complemented each other: the professional embodied the logic of scientized work, while the amateur constituted spontaneity. Amateurism was simultaneously marginalized to contain its potential disruptions and invoked as a vehicle of upward mobility, success, and the freewheeling, boundless freedom unavailable in industry.

At this time a variety of magazines published fictional pieces about amateur entrepreneurs, musicians, and actors.<sup>38</sup> Most of these short pieces described the adventures of a male amateur who tries to cross into professionalism, fails, and happily resigns himself to the joys of amateurism. As lessons on the futility of upward mobility, these stories ironically employed the myth of upward mobility as a narrative. For example, an 1893 *Scribner's Magazine* story, entitled “An Amateur Gamble,” described the adventures of a young amateur musician from the “east” who travels “west” to fulfill his lifelong dream—investing in the sponsorship of the performance of a symphony orchestra.<sup>39</sup> He ends up in a western town where he speculates for gold and communicates with cowboys in saloons. Finally, he earns enough money panning for gold to finance a symphonic performance, but he realizes he cannot continue and returns east, content once more in his meager clerking job.

This short story synthesizes entrepreneurial effort and artistic, personal fulfillment. The young man certainly does go west to find his fortune, but he uses his newfound fortune to experience the vestiges of ruling-class patronage of the arts. His quick, lucky success panning for gold does not require disciplined work. As an amateur the young man operates outside the rationale of work and therefore can pursue his fantasies to join the ruling class. This story signals how amateurism merged entrepreneurial capitalism with illusions of upward mobility.

This ethos of personal fulfillment through amateurism had a much larger social and historical context. In an essay titled “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930,” T. J. Jackson Lears observes that the massive social and economic changes of the late nineteenth century shifted the general population’s “sense of self.” With the development of a mass culture, leisure, corporate organizations,

and the dissolution of communities, Lears argues that a "therapeutic ethos" emerged that stressed "bodily vigor, emotional intensity, and a revitalized sense of selfhood." Lears points out that ministers, self-help writers, and mass-market therapists encouraged personal growth through leisure time to energize nerves worn out by industry.<sup>40</sup> In the 1880s and 1890s, amateurism became the social and cultural site where one could revive one's true self, which was invariably vivacious, ambitious, and imaginative. Amateurism infiltrated sports, art, and engineering in particular during this period, where sports emphasized the body, artistic production suggested the untapped potential of individual vision, and engineering proffered mechanical and entrepreneurial ingenuity.

However, despite the propagation of an idea that amateurism protected equality through artistic, economic, or inventive opportunity, on a less-abstract level there remained a hierarchy of those who performed a task for a living and those who engaged in it for the self. Patronage erected class distinctions between the amateur and the professional. As the aristocracy displayed their power over culture through patronage,<sup>41</sup> the term *amateur* may have served as a way to diminish the significance of competitors and thereby maintain status. While upper-class women financed artists, they themselves also practiced art as amateurs, more frequently than not receiving lessons from the artists they sponsored. Although some of these upper-class women had gallery showings, critics who believed true artists lived on the fringes of society without money reviled them.<sup>42</sup> A 1904 editorial published in the *Photo-Miniature* expresses the class distinctions between amateurs and professionals:

And in photography, we had the old idea of two classes, distinct and separate: the professional who made photographs of men and things for money as a business; and the amateur who photographed for the love of it—*con amore* as the phrase went—and who was supposed to lose caste if he accepted cash for his work with the camera.<sup>43</sup>

In the period from 1880 to approximately 1910, the cultural construct of professionals as disciplined and amateurs as spontaneous conveyed the logic of rationalized industrial culture. Professional, remunerated artistic production required the discipline and organization of a good corporate manager. In contrast, amateurs were chaotic and unorganized, as expressed in the *Atlantic*:

As a general rule, the amateur betrays amateurish qualities. He is unskilled because untrained; desultory because incessant devotion to his hobby is both unnecessary and wearisome; ineffective because, after all, it is not a vital matter whether he succeed or fail.<sup>44</sup>

The amateur's lack of fixity, regularity, and coherence disrupted, challenged, and in the end supported the capitalist system of efficiency, repetition, and prediction. The amateur's spontaneity and lack of purpose momentarily interrupted the control of social and labor relations. Amateurism deflected the chaotic, the incoherent, and the spontaneous into leisure and private life so that public time could persist as methodical, controllable, and regulated.