



Martina Roepke. *Privat-Vorstellung: Heimkino in Deutschland vor 1945.* Medien und Theater. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag - Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2007. 236 pp. EUR 24.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-487-13190-0.



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Pre-1945 Amateur Film and the Home Movie Enthusiast

While the amateur enthusiast is an important figure for the survival of any medium, in the grand scheme of industry-focused media histories, early adoption and experimentation with technology by hobbyists is often neglected. As innovation with the movie camera created a market for ever smaller and easier-to-use devices for the at-home consumer, and as methods for easy development of film stock and projection of the product also began to grow, the prevalence of rituals of home movie production (staged and unstaged content, living room screenings, and archiving of film) also increased. Martina Roepke's book traces these transitional moves in order to understand the varying medial practices wrapped up in the home movie, and to follow the private nature of these films in their family-focused elaboration of learned modes from the public realm of the cinema. In the arena of film studies, early film histories have tended to overlook or acknowledge only in passing, the role of the amateur in the development and consolidation of the medium. Such studies have preferred instead to couch the medium in terms of technical innovation, eco-

nomically viability, and entertainment culture. While these are extremely vital factors, understanding the practices and approaches of non-specialists complicates the narrative surrounding medial practices within film by opening up discussions about consumer habits, the home movie as genre, and hobbyist group regulations and standards. Martina Roepke's book focuses on these topics and thus expands film studies beyond industry boundaries into areas centered on amateur practice.

Roepke utilizes an ethnographic approach in her media archaeological study to discern and zero in on both production and presentation methods within a disparate community of home movie producers in Germany before 1945. Her source archive of 8mm, 16mm and 35mm home movies was originally collected in the late 1970s by television producers at SÄ½ddeutsche Rundfunk (SDR) for a documentary about daily life in the Third Reich. Hoping to find "authentic" film-based evidence of life under National Socialism, SDR producers put forth a countrywide call for unwanted film materials dating from before 1945. They were sorely disappointed that the films received

contained no evidentiary material of the omnipresence of the state in the form of speeches, military marches, or a numbed mass public, and thus considered the campaign a failure. In contrast, Roepke views the material and its archival cataloging at SDR as highly instructive for an understanding of early cinema production generally, and for a typology of genres of private, small-gauge films, specifically. In fact, her discovery of this material and the ways in which it was handled, cataloged, and processed at SDR plays a central role in the formation of the research questions that appear to guide her book: What distinguishes a meaningful from a less than meaningful film? What filmic elements provide for authenticity? In what ways do traditional systems of classification need to be changed in order to capture elements of private films that distinguish them from entertainment or documentary film? How might analyses of early consumer-produced film change historical and methodological perspectives on contemporary media-theoretical debates? These questions assist Roepke in the elaboration of a theory of private film that is less about the content and form of a finished film than about the media-literate practices involved in the creation of the film—those moments based in decision, contingency, and borrowed convention that make private home movies and family films important and special for their small, but relevant audiences.

To develop her theory, Roepke draws on the visual anthropological work of Richard Chalfen and his concept of “cinéma naïf” and the notion of a home mode of film production, as well as from Roger Odin’s work on processes of signification in the viewer’s classification of film genre and his location of a private mode of semiotic categorization. These two modes assist in teasing out Roepke’s methodological focus on the medial practices involved in private filmmaking on both the production and reception sides. Chalfen’s home mode of visual communication incorporates a sense of artistic naïf. This naïf promotes a communal sense of social structure that reaffirms a common sense of order and worldview. Odin’s private mode of classification rests on the film viewer’s desire to return to his or her own personal realm of experiences to fill in the narrative gaps left by the film, and thereby create a common or collective memory via the viewing process. Where the two approaches deviate is in the value (Odin) or lack thereof (Chalfen) placed on the artistic quality and form that the home movie acquires through production. While both agree that these films remain fragmentary in formation and convey a sense of spontaneous immediacy in outcome, Odin’s focus on processes of the film’s formation

finds resonance with Roepke’s analysis of the corpus of early films collected by SDR.

What Roepke adds to Odin and Chalfen’s discussions, and what makes her study so refreshing and productive, is the role and function of amateur filmmakers’ actual practices in the conceptualization, production, and projection of their films. She incorporates Odin’s ideas about a film “Form, die ihren Funktionen entspringt” (p. 26) to acknowledge the spontaneity of the home movie, but tempers this notion for the specificity of these pre-1945 films by demonstrating the media-literate nature of their production. These amateur filmmakers were very much interested in testing the full range of experimental possibilities of the technologies of film, just as they sought to imitate the tricks and narrative structures they enjoyed so much on the big screen of the cinema itself. In this fashion, Roepke positions her study at the intersection between understanding private film as a process of collective and communal memory building, and understanding it as a ritual of medial practice where the desire for form normalized by handbooks and hobby groups gives way to the contingencies of practice.

Of importance to any theory of media practice are the historical trajectories and examples that help to shape it, and Roepke tracks the contours of early German home movie practice within the range of discursive networks that propelled the devices and techniques of filmmaking into the bourgeois family living room. Here Roepke examines histories of technology, consumer marketing, and amateur clubs, as well as the increase in amateur film magazines and journals, each of which had a hand in stimulating and forming the practices that contributed to a genre of private film production. In the volume’s second chapter she moves her readers from 1903 and the introduction of the first recording and projection device for home use (Heinrich Ernemann’s Kino I camera) through the 1910s and accompanying debates in the public sphere about the viability of the film medium.

The home movie market was affected by the structural crisis spurred on by the transition in the distribution and performance of film in the public market (from the migrating cinema of early fairs, to the small theatres of the local cinema, and on to the large cinema palaces). This structural transition in performance space was also fueled by technical innovations influencing the movie camera and film stock that allowed for production of longer films and required different types of space to accommodate longer performances. These changes influenced entrepreneurs like Ernemann, as well, by chang-

ing expectations on the part of the home consumer about what could be accomplished with home movie production. Fairly quick developments in size and portability of the movie camera and gauge and processing of film stock, as Roepke points out, also meant an increase in amateur usage following World War I and the initial years of the Weimar Republic with the appearance and marketing of the 16mm film camera by Kodak in 1923.

The subsequent growth of organizations, hobbyist groups, and periodicals focused on amateur film production facilitated the eventual forays of manufacturers into the home consumer market. Yet, in this transition from amateur film to home movies, Roepke uncovers a second debate about the exact definition of amateur film, and elaborates on three figures and positions within this debate (the serious amateur, the idealist, and the semi-professional) who wanted to assure a professional distance from dabblers at home, whose playing with the medium did not advance artistic or technical developments in filmmaking. As the author explains, debates that sketched the contours of the amateur film world were translated into handbooks containing practical tips, illustrations, and how-to narratives for the at-home producer.

Close connections between the practices and innovations of amateurs and their translation into practice for home movie enthusiasts ended with the rise to power of the National Socialists, who sought to regulate and control the transitional points that had grown between the private, semi-public, and public film showings. This development prompted the move of many filmmakers into the private sphere, but also built a more solid framework for the support of family-focused filmmaking practice. The impact of National Socialist regulation on amateur organizations and the seepage of National Socialist ideology into production practices, competitions, and handbook publication expanded the possibilities for a recovery of the family-based filmmaker that had foundered since the disappearance of the Ernemann Kino in the early 1910s and the diversification of film production and praxis in the Weimar years.

In the third chapter of her study, Roepke moves away from the media-historical context to flesh out a fairly systematic typological analysis of the range of actions at play within private or home-movie filming and viewing. The taxonomy of participant roles that Roepke develops to account for the varying combinations of activity possible within the praxis of home moviemaking is based on her premise that all such filmmaking takes place as

group activity and involves multiple modes of interaction dependent both on the social role of each family member and the filming role that each one assumes (father as camera operator, children as actors, and so on). Coordinating these sets of roles during filming involves both an acknowledgement of specific behaviors innate to each social role and activities associated with each filming role—and because none of this could be scripted to exact detail, certain levels of modulation needed to be expected to accommodate changes that arose in any particular situation. For this reason, Roepke also accounts for the praxis of private filming residing along a continuum between two idealized operative modes (the ambitious and the situational), each with their own overarching systems of functionality—the first governed by a set of formal rules and aesthetic norms, and the second by a range of spontaneous behaviors arising from within the group. And Roepke sees the dynamic of private filming as grounded in the tensions and coordination between each of these idealized modes.

Layered upon these levels of coordination and interaction in private film praxis, Roepke also locates a variety of figures. Through their various actions these agents modulate, respond to, or otherwise negotiate moments within filmmaking when the balance between spontaneity and structure tips too far in one or the other direction. With names like “the artist,” “the boycotter,” “the coquette,” “the assistant,” “the accomplice,” and “the show stealer” (among others), Roepke attempts to choreograph the actual moments and praxis of private filmmaking in order to distill any number of possible points where interaction within the group falters, thrives, or becomes repetitive, and where these typological figures create momentum to maintain or salvage those moments. While Roepke develops an impressive sociological analysis of private film praxis, what gets lost in her overly detailed taxonomy are those elements of spontaneity that should resist definition, and should be seen as unique points that arise out of the filmmaking situation.

Building on critical readings of early films that the author utilizes to get at the heart of home film praxis, the volume’s fourth chapter looks to family film examples from the Third Reich era that resulted from practices developed in the initial decades of the twentieth century for the cultural form of *Heimkino*. These examples bring into play some of the reasons why families turned to private filmmaking as a source of constancy and collaboration during years of turmoil and incredible regulation; and also highlight some of the bleeding of *völkisch* National Socialist rhetoric into the themes of these films.

The 1930s films examined range in scope from depictions of the work and sacrifices involved with the arrival of a newborn into the small-family household, to the use of dream and montage sequences to position a father at a point where he needs to choose between his family and his desire for a female film star (he chooses his family). Roepke tempers close readings of films meant to toughen moral fiber and add to the ideological foundation of the regime with the expanded discussion of viewing and projecting strategies begun in the third chapter, and by focusing here on a fascinating, yet sobering film about the daily preparations for an air raid, while also exploring the importation of film into the air raid cellar. For Roepke, all these films foreground their role in documenting a particular type of film practice within the frame of the small-family home under incredibly chaotic conditions.

The strengths of the work lie in Roepke's compelling range of archival research and knowledge about early film practices in Germany. The volume would have benefited from stronger editing to reduce redundancies and moments of tedium that burden the narrative and flow of the argument. What shines through, and what will make this such a valuable volume for scholars in German studies, are the intricate connections that Roepke draws between the technical, social, cultural, economic, and artistic elements that brought the possibility of home filmmaking to the consumer market and into the German consciousness. Roepke's close readings of these little-known yet fascinating films, and her control over the media-historical strands of her argument and narrative, provide revealing and compelling moments for a new and deeper understanding of the early German media landscape and the role of home movie practice within it.

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