CMA 288: Amateur Media and the Art of Impertinence

Professor Jennifer Fay

Class Meetings: Monday/ Wednesday 10:10-11:25
Screening: Monday: 7:00-9:30.
Office Hours: M/W 12:00-1:30 and by appointment.

Course Description: “Amateur” calls to mind the unprofessional, untrained beginner whose art exists outside of respected venues and/or offends refined tastes. This is to say, amateur art is often regarded as having little aesthetic pertinence. The amateur is also the exalted outsider who creates art not for monetary gain, but out of personal need and love, and who energizes the established arts with new forms and unexpected, sometimes shocking techniques. Amateur art may be valued because it is impertinent—that is, irrelevant or brazen. This course considers amateur film and video practices (including the use of amateur grade technologies) as a mode of avant-garde experimentation, home-movie making, personal archiving, and compulsive publicity. We’ll explore the social uses and aesthetics of old technologies and viewing platforms (film, video, underground cinemas, television) as they give way to YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

Among the questions we’ll address: • What is the relationship between amateur technology and avant-garde practice? • What are the different attentional modes as we shift from “old” and “long” media to instant, short, and “new”? • How does the private home movie anticipate the public sharing in our contemporary moment? And what new anxieties emerge in a culture of “over-sharing”? • What are the aesthetics of outsider art, and how might art for personal use find a larger therapeutic purpose? • What are the politics of underground media in relationship to censorship laws and changing norms of privacy and publicity? • How may we theorize a practice of social media as a mode of social responsibility?

Warning: Impertinent Art may be—and is often by design—offensive art. We will be watching films that have been deemed to be legally obscene, made in bad taste, queer, gay, indecent, radiant, beautiful, artful, trashy. I cannot know in advance what will offend your sensibilities. Therefore, please take a moment to read through the syllabus, look up the films, and speak to me if you have any questions or concerns.

Many of the films for this class will be on reserve in the mail library. However, several are rented from film archives and thus you will have only one opportunity to see them during the assigned screening time.

Course Policies:
Participation: This course presupposes an active and participating student body. Our aim is to create an intellectual community. In order to achieve this, you are expected to come to class on time, having done the reading, and ready to jump into discussion with comments, questions, and connections you have made between this reading, the film, and other texts we have discussed in class. I expect everyone to participate in our conversations and be considerate to me and to the other students in the class. You are all accountable to yourselves and to each other. Attendance does not count towards your participation grade.

Please no eating during class. Beverages are fine.

Laptop computers, cell phones, tablets, are banned during class meetings and screenings. Please take notes the old fashioned way. Why? Such electronic distractions are disruptive to other students. Furthermore, as this study demonstrates, we pay a “mental price” for multi-tasking:

**Attendance:** You are expected to attend all class sessions and the Monday evening screening (as it applies). A student who sleeps through class will be marked absent. Attendance does not count towards your participation grade. A student who misses more than two classes should expect a penalty of .1 for every subsequent absence on the final grade. A student who misses six or more classes will fail based on attendance alone.

**Assignments:** The principle assignments for this class are a final exam and three papers. I will distribute four paper assignments and take the best three grades. Thus you may decide to write only three of the four papers, or decide to write all four with the idea of dropping your lowest score. In addition to these formal papers and the final exam, you are required to post responses to readings (and films in relation to the readings) at least five times during the course of the semester. You are welcome and encouraged to post more often. These posting should be submitted to the OAK discussion board on Sundays or Tuesdays before our morning class, no later than 8 p.m. so that we may all read them before Monday/ Wednesday class meetings, respectively. Your posts should be at least two substantial paragraphs and will serve as prompts for our class discussions. They will also help you to formulate your ideas before we meet.

**Students with Disabilities:** I am committed to accommodating students who have special instructional needs. If you need course accommodations due to a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me and/or the EAD (2-4705) as soon as possible.

**Religious Holidays:** Students who expect to miss classes, examinations, or any other assignment as a consequence of their religious observance should provide me with notice (via email) of the dates of religious holidays on which they will be absent no later than Thursday, September 4th.

**Grade distribution:**

- Posts on the discussion board: 10%
- Final Exam: 15%
- Participation: 20%
- Three short papers: 60% (20% each)

Note: All assigned readings are posted on OAK. An * after the screening designates the Monday evening time. Other short films will be screened in class.

**I: Home Movies, Home Archives & Family Fictions**

**Week 1 (Aug. 20th): Intro to course**

**W. Screen in class:** *Fred McLeod’s All Personal Sound Movies* (1962)

**Week 2 (Aug. 25, 27): Amateur Images and the “Home Mode”**

**M. Read:** Forgács, “Wittgenstein’s Tractatus”

Zimmermann, “Pleasure or Money”

**Screen:** Select Home movies*

**W. Read:** Chalfen, “Kodak Culture and Home Mode Communication,”

Chalfen, “Snapshot Communication”

**Week 3 (Sept. 1, 3): Necessary Fictions**
   Screen: Daughter Rite (Citron, 1980, 49 min.)*

W. Read: Citron, “Speaking the Unspeakable”
   Feuer, “Daughter Rite”

Week 4 (Sept. 8, 10): “Acting Naturally”
M. Read: Orgeron & Orgeron, “Familial Pursuits, Editorial Acts: Documentaries after the Age of Home Video”
   Moran, “From Reel Families to the Families We Choose”
   Moran, “Family Resemblances: The Home Mode as Chronotope” (152-162) – the entire chapter is uploaded onto OAK, but you are required to read only these ten pages.
   Screen: Capturing the Friedmans (Jarecki, 107 min.)*

W. Read: Rosenbaum, “Witness to the Persecution”
   Arthur, “True Confessions, sort of.”

II New American Cinema and the Aesthetics of Refuse

Week 5 (Sept. 15, 17): In Defense of Amateurism
M. Read:
   Brakhage, “In Defense of the Amateur”
   James, “Amateurs in the Industry Town”
   Screen: In class Brakhage films

W. Read: Miller, “Brakhage’s Occasions”

Paper #1 due, Friday, Sept. 19th by 5 p.m.

Week 6 (Sept. 22, 24): In Defense of the Obscene
M. Read: Sontag, “Flaming Creatures”
   Fry, “The Dialectic of Obscenity”
   Screen: Flaming Creatures (Smith, 1963, 45 min) 16mm newly restored print!
   Screening during class.

W. Read: Moon, “Flaming Closets”

Week 7 (Sept. 29, Oct. 1): Warhol’s Obscene Boredom
M. Read: Grundmann, “Andy Warhol’s Blow Job” Intro and chapter 1.
   Screen: Blow Job (Warhol, 1963, 35 min.)

W. Read: Angell “Introduction” to Andy Warhol’s Screen Tests
   Foster, “Test Subjects”
   Screen: Screen Tests (Warhol, 1963-66)

Week 8 (Oct. 6, 8): Trash Culture and Glamour Fits”
M. Read: Sontag, “Notes on Camp”
   Waters, “The Filthiest People Alive” and “Female Trouble” from Shock Value.
Screen: *Female Trouble* (Waters, 1974, 89 min).

W. Read: Schoonover, “Divine: Towards an Imperfect Stardom”

III: Lost and Found

Week 9 (Oct. 13, 15): Toy Media
M. Read: Smith, “Toy Stories:
       Carter, “The Politics of Pleasure”
Screen: *Flat is Beautiful* (Benning, 1999, 50 min).

W. Read: Hilderbrand, “Grainy Days and Monday: Superstar and Bootleg Aesthetics”
Screen: *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (Haynes, 1988, 43 min.)

Paper #2 Due Friday, Oct. 17th, 12:00 p.m.

Week 10 (Oct. 20, 22): African America, Found Footage, and a Lost Middle Class
M. Read: Hatler, “The Practice of Everyday Life”
Screen: Select films of Kevin Jerome Everson

W. Visiting lecture by Prof. Jonathan Rattner.

Week 11 (Oct. 27, 29): Amateurs as Outsiders
M. Read: Moon “Introduction” and “Darger’s Book of Martyrs”

W. Read: Moon, “Abduction, Adoption, Appropriation: Darger and the Early Newspaper Comic Strip; or, Reading around the Ruins of a Proletarian Public Sphere”

IV Consumers, Prosumers, and those who (Over)Share

Week 12 (Nov. 3, 5) Amateur to Prosumers
M. Read: Jenkins, two interviews “Sites of Convergence: An interview”
       Scroll down to read both part I and Part II.
       Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?”

W. Read: Berliner, “Shooting for Profit: The Monetary Logic of the YouTube Home Movies”
        Howard, “The Homo Depot” and other Works: Critiquing Vernacular Video”

Paper #3 Due Friday, Nov. 7th by 5:00 p.m.

Week 13 (Nov. 10, 12) Facebook Immortals: Friends and Enemies
M. Read: Vallor, “Flourishing on Facebook”
        Mehdiazeadeh, “Self-Presentation 2.0: Narcissism and Self-Esteem on Facebook”

W. Read: O’Gorman, “Angels in Digital Armor: Technoculture and Terror Management”
        Landfair, “Facebook of the Dead”
**Week 14 (Nov. 17, 19): Amateur Pathologies: Paranoiac Narcissism in the Digital Age**

**M.** Read: Levy, “Trial by Twitter”  
*Screen: The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998, 103 min.)  
*Punk’d* season 1, episode 1.

**W.** Read: Marantz, “Unreality Star”  
Rockwell & Giles, “Being a Celebrity: A Phenomenology of Fame.”  
Gold & Gold, “The Truman Show Delusion”

Thanksgiving break: Nov. 22 - 30

**Week 15 (Dec. 1, 3): Ferguson and Citizen Journalism**

**M.** Read: Murthy, “Twitter and Journalism” and “Twitter and Activism”  
Gillmore, “Ferguson’s Citizen Journalists…”  
Ingram, “Crowd-powered Journalism…”  
[https://gigaom.com/2014/08/14/crowd-powered-journalism-becomes-crucial-when-traditional-media-is-unwilling-or-unable/](https://gigaom.com/2014/08/14/crowd-powered-journalism-becomes-crucial-when-traditional-media-is-unwilling-or-unable/)  
Bilton, “Ferguson Reveals a Twitter Loop”  

**W.** Read: Additional essays on Ferguson, Copwatch and Twitter as provided by you!

**Paper #4 due Friday, Dec. 5th by 5:00 p.m.**

Final Exam: 3:00 p.m., Friday Dec. 12