

Private Visions: Home Movies, Amateur Films, and Gay Men's Self-Representation, 1937-69
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Project Description

2022 marked the centenary of the first inexpensive camera and film gauge available to amateur and home markets, the 9.5mm film. This anniversary was followed in 2023 by the centenary of 16mm film, the most successful and well-recognized amateur media format in the history of the moving image. Home movies and amateur films have received increased attention in film and media studies over the past two decades, and the emerging field of amateur film historiography has ascribed significant value to these films. While sometimes catching significant public events on camera—like Zapruder's 8mm film of President Kennedy's assassination—more regularly these home movies capture the ordinary, recording holidays, birthdays, and everyday family life. As such, it is surprising that scholars of LGBT history—and especially scholars of LGBT *film* history—have not paid much attention to queer home movies and amateur filmmaking. My dissertation project aims to remedy this oversight.

My research explores queer amateur film production and home moviemaking between the late 1930s and 1960s as articulating an alternative vision of queer visibility, one that rejects the Hollywood tropes of queer psychopathic villains yet at the same time does not fit neatly into the narrative of the emerging queer avant-garde and underground cinema of the period. While sensual and sexually suggestive, and certainly attuned to the history and politics of queer spaces, desires, and representations, these films do not seek to antagonize or provoke audiences, but rather appeal to a common humanity. As such, I place them instead within the context of the nascent homophile movement. By focusing on home moviemakers Cyrus Pinkham and Harold T. O'Neal, amateur-turned-professional filmmaker François Reichenbach, and the activities of people involved with the Kinsey Institute, I sketch a history of gay men's self-representation that unfurls an alternative historiography of queer filmmaking.

In the canon of underground queer cinema, generally commencing in the early 1960s by the likes of Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, John Waters, Milton Miron, and James Bidgood (with the exception of a few early films by Kenneth Anger and Jean Genet), it was precisely the purported difference that queers inhabit—indecency, penchant for performativity, fluidity, promiscuity, and deviant sexual fantasy—that was celebrated and put on display. Theirs was a political queerness that transcended sexuality and even gender by invoking deviance, drag, and disgust to critique normative values and challenge a wide range of oppressive systems and ideas. Home movies instead carved out an alternative politics of queer visibility, one that veered toward the homophilic. Inspired by a humanistic worldview and political stance that highlighted commonalities rather than differences, that tried to show that gays and lesbians were just like everyone else, these amateur films worked to normalize the appearance of gay couples, queer sociality, and same-sex intimacy on screen.

The corpus of films I examine include about a dozen home movies shot by Pinkham in Maine and New York between 1937 and 1940, several dozen films shot by O'Neal in California and throughout the country between 1939 and the late 1960s, and a handful of amateur films by Reichenbach, shot in New York and France in the early 1950s. In addition to these extant and recently rediscovered films, my research will also examine lost films whose existence is only documented in paper ephemera, such as in a late-fifties screening program for a homophile organization's amateur film club. These materials confirm that, though most of the films are lost

and their histories remain vastly undocumented, there was a vibrant queer amateur film movement that predated the Stonewall riots and the underground cinemas that frequently mark the beginning of queer self-representation in film-historical narratives.

I propose to write an article for *The Gay & Lesbian Review* on Reichenbach's amateur film, *Last Spring*, shot at Glenway Wescott's New Jersey farm in 1954 and starring Wescott's lover at the time. My article will examine Reichenbach's social networks (Reichenbach's uncle, Jacques Guérin, was Wescott's former lover and an early patron of Genet's, and Reichenbach also smuggled gay films to the Kinsey Institute) and situate Reichenbach's filmmaking endeavors in the context of a queer underground art movement in Paris that included clandestine apartment film screenings and predated the New York scene by a decade. As I suggest, reconsidering queer amateur films is not only important for the history of queer cinema—when so much else has been lost, these films also become crucial visual archives of queer life at mid-century.

Biography

I am a filmmaker, archivist, and scholar whose work examines the intersections of queer cinema, experimental and amateur film, and film preservation. I am currently a PhD student in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago, where I am developing a dissertation project focused on gay men's amateur filmmaking between 1937 and 1969, an almost wholly overlooked chapter in the history of queer cinema. My exam fields include the history of home movies and amateur filmmaking (roughly 1921–71) and queer underground cinema (roughly 1947–69). As a film archivist, I have extensive experience examining, preserving, and researching home movies and amateur films. For the past year and a half, I have worked with the South Side Home Movie Project in Chicago, an archive of close to 1,500 films from 1936 to 1982. This work and research have made me intimately familiar with the styles and conventions of home movies and amateur filmmaking techniques. Since 2020, I have also served as co-chair of the Association of Moving Image Archivists' Small Gauge and Amateur Film Committee. In this role, I have advocated not only for the preservation and serious study of amateur films and home movies, but also for expanding our subfield's attention to understudied areas of amateur films, including student films and films by LGBT individuals. I see my dissertation project as a deepening and continuation of these related efforts.