

University of Groningen

Home Mode, Community Mode, Counter Mode

Sloutweg, Tom

Published in:
Materializing Memories: Dispositifs, Generations, Amateurs

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sloutweg, T. (2018). Home Mode, Community Mode, Counter Mode: Three Functional Modalities for Coming to Terms with Amateur Media Practices. In S. Aasman, A. Fickers, & J. Wachelder (Eds.), *Materializing Memories: Dispositifs, Generations, Amateurs* (pp. 203-216). Bloomsbury Academic.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Slootweg, Tom. "Home Mode, Community Mode, Counter Mode: Three Functional Modalities for Coming to Terms with Amateur Media Practices." *Materializing Memories: Dispositifs, Generations, Amateurs*. Ed. Susan Aasman, Andreas Fickers and Joseph Wachelder. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 203–216. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 30 Sep. 2020. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501333262.ch-012>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 30 September 2020, 06:53 UTC.

Access provided by: University of Groningen

Copyright © Susan Aasman, Andreas Fickers, and Joseph Wachelder and the contributors 2018. All rights reserved. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

12

Home Mode, Community Mode, Counter Mode:

Three Functional Modalities for Coming to Terms with Amateur Media Practices

Tom Slootweg

Introduction

With the proliferation of digital media and the purported rise of a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media culture, notions related to the “amateur,” “amateurism,” and “amateur media technologies” have again become relevant to media scholars over the last two decades. Henry Jenkins (2003), for instance, claimed that the convergence of old and new media also led to the emergence of a “double logic,” which shaped a media environment characterized by “both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process” (18). Moreover, he argued, the new media technologies used in this environment—by media institutions, as well as by “grassroots” communities and individuals—have spawned a distinctly new and more democratic “participatory culture” (3–4). Over the last decade and a half, numerous publications have tried to ascertain the status of amateur media practices, asking questions such as: what kind of new amateur media practices have emerged? How do they differ from past or present professional media practices? Do contemporary amateurs have more agency in the new digital

media ecology? The search for a clear concept of the “amateur,” or differently put, the effort to come to terms with an often highly nebulous cluster of notions, concepts, propositions—but also with a utopian celebration or dystopian disapproval of the amateur—has been a priority on many research agendas, as well as a concern in popular discourse (cf. Keen 2007b; Burgess and Green 2009; Flichy 2010; Burgess 2012; Foege 2013).

For many decades, however, and also before the onset of the digital age, the proper understanding of media “amateurs” or “amateurism” has been contested. This chapter will return to the academic debates on historical amateur film and video-making as evolving media practices since the latter part of the twentieth century. I will argue that, initially, a highly pervasive, deterministic, and normative *ideological perspective* on media amateurism came to dominate these debates. This particular perspective often stemmed from a Foucauldian and progressive media theoretical tradition of critical analysis, which strongly favored a political and media participatory understanding of amateurism. The democratic, emancipatory potential of media technologies was assessed in terms of “bottom-up” tools to challenge “top-down” hegemonic power relations in capitalist society and media. Scholarship departing from this premise often downplayed, or neglected to take into consideration fully, the sociocultural and historical importance of other iterations of amateur film and video. Different scholarly analyses challenged the ideological perspective and many of them made compelling arguments to see value in other forms and functions of film and video amateurism—not in the least, perhaps, to redeem those amateur practices and artifacts that failed to fit comfortably in the ideological mold of critical analysis.

My argument in this chapter seeks to strike a balance between the various issues raised in these often contentious debates on the kind of film and video amateurism that deserves more attention, or that is equally “relevant” or “worthwhile.” To do so, I claim that it is more fruitful to depart from a premise in which film and video amateurism are understood as a cluster of several separate, coexistent, yet sometimes slightly overlapping *amateur modes of practice and functioning*.¹ This perspective draws inspiration from the work of media theorist James Moran (2002), who rightfully emphasized that various “functional modalities of amateur practice” need to be distinguished in order to come to terms with multifaceted notions of the amateur and their specific engagement with media technologies (69). When it comes to understanding and defining different kinds of amateurs, or various conceptions of amateurism, it proves fruitful to work within a framework that acknowledges and analyzes “different sets of intentions” (70), thus understanding them on the basis of their own merits and idiosyncrasies. In other words, instead of privileging or ignoring one form and functioning in favor of another, I propose a perspective on media amateurism that will provide the means to bring more descriptive and

analytical clarity to the different intentions among historical film and video amateurs.

In the sections below, I will build on previous research on amateur film and video by discussing three amateur modes, namely *home* mode, *community* mode, and *counter* mode, including their interrelationships. The concept of “home mode” was originally coined by media anthropologist Richard Chalfen (1987) to delineate the use and function of film, photo, and video in and around the home as a particular form of mediated communication for a relatively small social circle of family and friends. Second, film historian Ryan Shand (2007) proposed the term “community mode” (53) to understand the serious, highly organized amateur filmmakers, who were members of the numerous cine-clubs found in many countries throughout the twentieth century. Finally, I discuss the concept of “counter mode.” Although this mode is not coined as such in previous scholarship, the counter mode is closely aligned to the “preferred” understanding of amateurism as conceived within what I identified as the ideological perspective. Discussion of this third mode allows me to address those amateurs who have deployed media technologies to adopt a “radical” or “resistive” stance regarding the prevailing or institutionalized media and socio-political landscape to which they respond.

Before exploring these three modes in more detail, I will first discuss the seminal work that has been done from what I view as the ideological perspective. The main representative of this perspective is media historian and theorist Patricia Zimmermann (1995), who pioneered the study of amateur film as a topic deserving serious scholarly attention. Her work is well-known for its theoretical preference for a more “radical” understanding of film amateurism, which from my perspective in this chapter would be seen as useful to understand the counter mode. At the same time, in her detailed analysis of the history of amateur film Zimmermann also pays attention to some of the *discursive* traits of the home and community modes, even though she does not label these modes as such.

From the ideological perspective to three amateur modes

The history of amateur film, according to Zimmermann (1995), is characterized by several more or less consecutive phases in which different discursive conceptions of amateurism emerged. These conceptions were intricately intertwined with the technological development of amateur film: a trajectory that started out at its emergence as a novelty at the end of the nineteenth century, moving toward its gradual standardization into several commodified consumer media technologies based on 16 mm around the

1930s, and 8 mm film gauge formats in the 1950s and 1960s. As claimed by Zimmermann, the early history of film marked out a period in which notions of amateurism were mostly shaped by popular discourses foregrounding its radical artistic and political potential. However, as further technological innovations resulted in its gradual standardization into semi-professional and amateur formats, two additional conceptions of amateurism became more prolific. The first discursive conception of film amateurism construed it in terms of serious leisure and hobbyism. As a hobby and leisure pursuit, Zimmermann argued, the film amateur was encouraged to “ape” the technical skill and aesthetic related to professional filmmaking, in particular those characteristic of Hollywood (65). The other conception of amateurism gained prominence with the commodification of 8 mm film, for example with the arrival of Super 8 film cassettes and cameras. At this point, amateurism was discursively framed more and more, in advertisements and other popular discourses, from the perspective of what Zimmermann considered to be the “passive” domestic consumption of the film camera, centering on the making of home movies of family life in the private sphere (142).

As suggested by the specific terminology used, Zimmermann criticized these last two discursive understandings of amateurism. Whereas the early discourses on film amateurism explored and encouraged an emancipatory, media-democratic, and autonomous artistic appropriation, she evaluated the other two notions of amateurism as irrevocably falling short to live up to the potential of amateur film. They represented the moments in which the value of “amateurism” was absorbed into either the dominant capitalist ideology of “professionalism” (61) or the “bourgeois” ideal of celebrating the nuclear family’s “togetherness” (113). For this reason, Zimmermann, partly inspired by the work of progressive media theorist Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1970), concluded that these two modes of amateur film (as serious leisure and as home movie-making) were to be listed in the “domination and consumption” category, while the early socio-political and artistic exploration of film amateurism reflected its true potential for “resistance and hope” in relation to the very ideologies of capitalist society that encroached upon all aspects of everyday life (Zimmermann 1995, ix).

This particular critical framework, including its sometimes evaluative tone, was further developed in scholarship on consumer electronic video. For example, in the same year that Zimmermann’s book was published, media scholar Laurie Ouellette (1995) reflected on the potential video embodied for amateurs in the guise of the then fairly new camcorder, which she saw as the electronic successor of the once commercially successful Super 8 film camera. Interestingly, she seemed to be less dismissive than Zimmermann when it came to *home video-making*, because Ouellette argued that using the camcorder to record family and domestic life “should not be devalued as an authentic cultural practice” (34). Still, Ouellette put forward a rather elaborate

analysis in which the camcorder, as an easy to use and widely available electronic consumer media technology, should be valued predominantly in terms of its unprecedented means for amateurs “to reimagine television as a participatory, democratic form of communication” (42).

In contrast, James Moran (2002) was highly critical of the recurring tendency to theorize amateur media technologies, whether it be film or video, as possible tools for democratization and to instigate a media revolution from below. Like Zimmermann’s appraisal of early film, Moran detected that the discourses surrounding the possible amateur appropriation of early electronic video in the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by a pervasive “rhetoric of liberation” (7). In these highly emancipatory discourses, video was more often than not seen as a new media technology for amateurs that had the potential to challenge the electronic media landscape in which commercial and institutionalized broadcast television reigned supreme. At the same time, Moran was suspicious of such utopian expectations of the significance of video for the amateur. He concluded that the large majority of video amateurs did not necessarily embrace video as an oppositional alternative media practice, set against media institutions. In other words, Moran pointedly reminded us that many of these media theories, including the work of Zimmermann and Ouellette, were misguided because the ideologically-charged hopes and desires were neither confirmed nor grounded in much empirical evidence of some democratic film or video revolution.

Instead of condemning one form and function of media amateurism of being somehow less “democratic” or “valuable” than another, Moran proposed to take serious media amateurs according to their variety of intentions and how these materialized in specific practices. In his view, the highly determinist *ideological perspective*, or the “dominant ideology thesis” (50), had to be replaced by a framework that does not “denigrate” (54), but instead takes into account the complexity and variety of intent among film and video amateurs. Moran proposed to understand amateurism in terms of a complex form of media “creation through the mutual acts of production and consumption” (57). To understand the characteristics of these “mutual acts,” it is important to analyze them according to the particular “functional modalities,” or modes, in which several forms and functions of amateurism emerged. In other words, to fully appreciate amateur film and video practices, it is necessary to ascertain which specific “cultural functions” (69) came to motivate and shape them.

To redeem those amateurs who from the ideological angle were believed to fall short, Moran elaborated on *one* functional modality only: the home mode. He convincingly defined the amateur home mode as an “active, authentic mode of media production for representing everyday life” (59). His explanation of its “functional taxonomy,” however, is so elaborate and inclusive that also more or less *artistically* and *politically* inspired

amateur film and video practices would fit his understanding of the home mode, if at least these amateur media practices explored and negotiated very broadly defined categories such as “family,” “community,” “identity,” “self,” and “place” (59–61). If not, they would be subsumed under the “avant-garde” or “documentary mode,” or approached as hybrid practices of “pseudoprofessionals” (65).

Strikingly, Moran chose to ignore altogether the existence of the highly organized and serious film and video amateurs in the “community mode.” In other words, his notion of the home mode, rather paradoxically, foregrounded only one dominant conception of amateurism as well, albeit an inclusive and intellectually refined one. To move beyond such one-sided focus and to honor the diversity in *practices and functions* among historical film and video amateurs, I propose two additional modes, aside from the home mode, labeled *community mode* and *counter mode*. But first I will discuss the home mode in more detail.

The home mode

The home mode is well-established in media scholarship. Although Zimmermann and Ouellette did not necessarily see much “radical” or “resistive” potential in this amateur mode of practice and function, for Moran and other media scholars the home mode is the quintessential form of film and video amateurism. Originally coined by Richard Chalfen (1987), the home mode implied a particular form of technologically mediated *social communication*. By terming the social actors involved with film, video, and photography in home mode communication as “Polaroid People” who are part of “Kodak culture” (10), Chalfen maintained that they did not necessarily aim to capture a fictional filmic representation, but rather created “symbolic worlds” of highly valued moments of everyday life. These valued events and activities of everyday life were mediated as unpolished “snapshot representations” (93) of pivotal moments in the “modern human life-cycle” (74), such as married life and parenthood, the birth and growth of the children toward early adulthood, and so on. Moreover, these representations of various life experiences were made with and for a small social group of family and friends, predominately to fulfil a “memory function” (140).²

Since Chalfen introduced the home mode, various media scholars have developed the “memory function” of this domestic and often family-oriented amateur practice. More extensively than Chalfen, media historian Susan Aasman (2004) elaborated on the importance of the ritualistic aspects of the home mode that catered to an “archival desire” to create “visual family memories” (51). Film theorist Roger Odin (2014b), in contrast, sought to refine Chalfen’s communicational understanding of the home mode as

a memory practice, arguing that the home mode enables a complex and reciprocal “communicative space of the family” (16). This space shaped both the family dynamics during production as well as the dynamic that emerged during the film’s eventual reception by the family as a visual memory artifact. Moran (2002) similarly expanded on Chalfen’s notion of the home mode, linking it to video.

Unlike Aasman and Odin, Moran put no special emphasis on the home mode’s “memory function,” but instead developed a highly advanced “functional taxonomy of the home mode,” which provides a theoretical basis for its most valuable everyday cultural functions. As well as emphasizing the home mode as an “authentic, active form of media production” (59), it also enables a “liminal space” in which its practitioners can negotiate their “public, communal, and private, personal identities” (60). The home mode not only left room for a complex identity negotiation; it also provided the means to articulate through media use and consumption a “material articulation of generational continuity over time” (60). Moran also expanded the notion of “home” within the home mode beyond a strict understanding of the “domestic,” arguing that in this mode one can “construct an image of home as a cognitive and affective foundation situating our place in the world” (61). Despite the merits of Moran’s taxonomy, his inclusive perspective on the home mode may go at the expense of the level of detail and precision when it comes to analyzing home video artifacts and practices. Put differently, the model essentially allows for the inclusion of all kinds of amateur film and video dealing very broadly with what Moran called “the families we choose” (39). While he rightly criticized the lack of solid empirical evidence in Zimmermann and Ouellette’s analyses, he did not test his model on actual home mode videos.

In a case study of a Dutch expatriate family using video in the second half of the 1980s, I found that the historical appropriation of a VHS camcorder within the home mode was driven by a desire to use video as a *technology of memory and belonging* (Slootweg 2018). The home mode was thoroughly integrated in the everyday “homemaking” and “memory practices” of family life on the move. The family explicitly used video to capture their lived experience and making their home abroad, in order subsequently to communicate via television these mediations to family and friends left behind in the Netherlands. Drawing from insights by Odin (2014b) and film historian Liz Czach (2012), the video home mode’s communicative capabilities implied an intimate and presentational form of “home mode performativity” (cf. Czach 2012, 164; Schneider 2004; Roepke 2006). This performative dynamic allowed for a complex and layered *audiovisual*, rather than a strictly *visual*, interplay of performing or acting out the family as whole and individually, both in front and behind the video camera.

The community mode

The community mode is characterized by a different amateur mode of practice and functioning. As such, it also embodies an alternative set of intentions compared to those amateurs who engage with film and video technologies in the home mode. The first scholar to point at this alternative mode was film historian Ryan Shand (2008; 2007). Explicitly condemning Zimmermann's condescending tone with regard to her conception of serious film amateurism in terms of "aping" professional standards of film-making, Shand introduced the "community mode" (2008, 53) to understand serious amateurism in a cine-club context (cf. Stebbins 1992). As such this mode allows film scholars thoroughly to assess the merits and idiosyncrasies of "cine-club culture" in which "highly *organized* artistic regimes" played an important and valuable role (Shand 2008, 54). A further theoretical discussion on the aesthetic and stylistic regimes of serious amateurism is provided in Shand's 2007 dissertation, in which he argued for a more thorough exploration and analysis of the notions of *authorship* and *genre* to get a better grip on how these artistic regimes operate within the community mode. At the time, film scholars had linked up these notions with professional and artistic practice, but not with serious amateurism. This oversight, as Shand pointed out, created a blind spot with regard to "generic practice" and the "aspirational models" within the community mode directed toward internalizing *proper* professional discourses on the pre-production, production, and post-production of film (16). A similar argument for serious attention for this mode of film amateurism was made by film historian Charles Tepperman (2015). Although he acknowledged in a footnote the theoretical existence of the community mode, he did not explore it any further. Instead, he defined serious amateurs as those "who participated in a film culture outside of the commercial mainstream and developed 'advanced' skills in film production" and who therefore should be seen as "independent media experimenters and producers" (9).

The American filmmaker and scholar Melinda Stone (2003) has provided more elaborate insight into a broader understanding of the "culture" of the community mode. She analyzed cine-club culture as a creative "structured community" shaped by six "ingredients" (223): (1) the monthly club meeting; (2) the club magazine; (3) business meetings concerning the internal operation of the club; (4) filmmaking contests; (5) the production of collaborative club movies; and (6) the organization of regular outings and banquets. Stone came to the conclusion that this club culture consisted of an amalgamation of components that provided a particular shape to the social, communicative, and creative identity of the club and its members. The club provided both a formal and informal setting in which a particular hierarchy, continuity, cohesion, knowledge dissemination, and also sociality could be

built around a shared interest in the media technologies associated with serious amateur filmmaking.

Media sociologist Daniel Cuzner (2009) explored club culture in terms of a “community of practice” (196; cf. Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). He theorized the setting of the club as a participatory *learning environment* in which its individual members embodied various degrees of craftsmanship, knowledge, and commitment. Rather than having homogeneous clubs, Cuzner identified “six types of club members” (2009, 203): (1) the beginner; (2) the lone operator; (3) the club mover; (4) the celebrity; (5) the professional; and (6) the social member. Given this typology, there was also a “significant diversity in the motivations, interests and expertise that members bring to the club setting” (206). Despite these various individual motivations, according to Cuzner, club life was quite institutionalized through “the club committee and the roles of the various ‘officers’ (president, secretary, and so on),” which inevitably gave rise to “hierarchies and power relations” (206). These institutional and formal aspects of the community mode were confined not only to local organizations, but also extended to national and even international organizations and networks of amateur filmmaking, as also pointed out by film historian Heather Norris Nicholson (2012).

In the case of the Netherlands, as I argue elsewhere, the arrival of electronic video spurred a fierce debate among community mode amateurs between the 1970s and the early 1990s (Slootweg 2018). Various prominent figures within Dutch organized amateur filmmaking were convinced that the advent of video technologies would pose a threat to the practice and function of community mode amateurism. This dismissive attitude toward video partly followed from the “spirit of community” favored within serious organized amateur filmmaking. Analysis of the dynamics of a Dutch club in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s as a community of practice revealed the highly valued nature of such spirit, with its “auratic” and “mythological” understanding of amateur film, while it was carefully constructed when new members entered the club.

As a rite of passage, the beginner had to prove his commitment to amateur filmmaking and willingness to adopt the reigning “spirit of community.” During the period of one year, the novice embarked on an apprenticeship with a senior club member, so as to be trained and supervised in the various technical aspects of filmmaking. The successful appropriation of these skills by the novice was eventually evaluated by a committee on the basis of a written exam and a short admission film. After a positive evaluation the novice would then become a full member of the club. Monthly workshops and lectures foregrounded the craftsmanship of various filmmaking practices, but also communicated a particular view on the history of amateur filmmaking and of film in general as a creative and artistic cultural form. These lectures fostered the *myth* of film amateurism as an edifying hobby, as a serious and freely-adopted pursuit that preferably drew from, but was not

dependent on, professional or avant-garde practices of filmmaking (cf. Van der Heijden and Aasman 2014). As technologies and cultural forms, video and television were considered to be incompatible with this ubiquitous understanding of the practice and function of the community mode, and these other media were accepted, albeit hesitantly, not until the 1990s, after both the film club and small-gauge film were on the decline.

The counter mode

Accounting for the intellectual genesis of “counter mode” film and video amateurism is a far less straightforward task, because it has not been strictly coined as such in scholarship. This is why it is fruitful first to discuss several major examples that inspired the conception of film and video amateurism as an *oppositional practice*.

Two prominent artists who inspired the theoretical formation of this particular “oppositional” understanding of amateur filmmaking were Maya Deren and Jonas Mekas. They celebrated amateur filmmaking on the basis of different views on amateurism, however. Mekas, on the one hand, embraced the aesthetic and practice of home mode film and photography as examples of authentic media practices for exploring intimacy, belonging, and memory in everyday life. He sought to incorporate and experiment with the unpolished aesthetic of the home mode in his own artistic expression to challenge the norms and values embodied by modern abstract art in the postwar art world in the United States. As media scholar Jeffrey Ruoff (1991) argued, Mekas’s artistic motivations to adopt the home mode stemmed from a desire to use film “to participate symbolically in the avant-garde film community, to become a member, to share the struggles, to pay homage to the pioneers of film art” (15). Besides aiming to introduce small-gauge film technologies as new tools to explore a more personal artistic practice, Mekas also used them to mediate the journey he and others undertook in their daily lives to form an intimate, small artistic film community within the New York avant-garde. Furthermore, by embracing an aesthetic connected to memory and belonging, as well as the intimate and the personal, Mekas *resisted* the dominant “aesthetic of abstraction and formal experimentation” in the New York avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s (19).³

Maya Deren (1965), on the other hand, has argued for a different approach of film amateurism. Although, as she claimed, the term “amateur” has an “apologetic ring” to it in everyday parlance, it should be valued and embraced according to its Latin etymology: as meaning “lover” (45). By not being tied to filmmaking as a commercial profession, but as a freely chosen creative and artistic pursuit, the full potential of amateur filmmaking implied a “physical” and “artistic” liberation (45). Deren argued that amateurs, as

“lovers” of highly portable small-gauge film technologies, could develop an economically disinterested attitude in which they would enjoy a high degree of artistic and creative freedom driven by an individual passion to seek poetic beauty in everyday life through the lens of a film camera. Thus, the *resistive* stance to be taken by amateurs related explicitly to commercial professional film practice, rather than the art world itself, as was the case with Mekas.

Regardless of these differences, both of these artistic explorations of amateur filmmaking have come to obscure the conceptual understanding of the amateur, by wrongly confusing amateurism with avant-garde artistic practices, functions, and intentions. Arguably, Patricia Zimmermann (1995) has been instrumental in perpetuating this confusion, as she regarded the various avant-garde appropriations of and experimentations with small-gauge film as superior examples of small-gauge film’s potential for amateurs. In this respect, it is important to point out that her analysis of amateur film seems indebted to the work of more politically minded media critics such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger and, his intellectual predecessor, Walter Benjamin.

In the 1930s, Benjamin (2007 [1968]) prophesized that the arrival of the then relatively new reproductive technologies of photography and film could be put to use as emancipatory tools for the masses to challenge the repressive capitalist society in which they lived. He furthermore maintained that film and photography could play an important role in democratizing “practice-politics” (226), which would allow for a bottom-up resistance to the institutional use of then existing media technologies, and by extension, to the ideology of capitalism in which their institutional use was embedded. A similar discursive pattern and intellectual appraisal can be found in criticism in relation to the arrival of video technologies in the 1960s and 1970s. Discourses on its potential appropriation by amateurs were also characterized by a strong conviction that video allowed for new possibilities to instigate a revolution from below to challenge the status quo in capitalist society, politics, and media. Elsewhere, I argued that those who belonged to the video avant-garde of Canada and the United States endowed consumer video technologies with the possibility for amateurs to be aesthetically as well as socio-politically radical (Slootweg, 2016). As evidenced by their writings in the journal *Radical Software*, the video avant-garde’s discursive imagination of amateur use of portable video much resembled Maya Deren’s notions of the amateur filmmaker (185–6).

If Moran would disapprove of these utopian discourses, some video amateurs did aim to appropriate video politically as a resistive tool to *counter* television, or to counter the electronic media landscape at the time. Regardless of the fact that an oppositional appropriation was often spearheaded by a relatively marginal group of avant-garde artists, as described by video art historian Chris Meigh-Andrews elsewhere in this volume, some amateurs

deployed it to be socio-politically resistive and as an alternative to institutionalized media. Video was sometimes appropriated in “oppositional” amateur practices, despite the often misguided utopian impulses underpinning them. As media historian Deidre Boyle (1997) has showed, the arrival of video technologies gave rise to the emergence of video collectives that sought to explore the artistic and democratic use of video technologies in the United States. In contrast, media sociologist Jo Henderson (2009) analyzed experimentations on British public television in which video was explored as a democratic medium used by “ordinary people” in the “Video Nations” project (157). Tom Slootweg and Susan Aasman (2015) have similarly pointed at experimentations on Dutch public television in the late 1970s and early 1980s in which media democratization via portable video and small-gauge film was explored and given a platform.

The *counter mode* is complementary to the *community* and the *home* mode in terms of its practice and functioning. By coining this mode, it will be possible to acknowledge that certain amateur engagements with media technologies, regardless of their marginal and, perhaps, ideologically misguided nature, were shaped in terms of an *oppositional practice*, similar to Benjamin’s amateur “practice-politics.” This alternative mode foregrounds a particular function not necessarily found in the other modes, one embodying a strong conviction that consumer media technologies may enhance media participation by explicitly challenging the institutionalized media landscape existing at a particular moment in time (cf. Slootweg 2017). In the counter mode, the exploration and experimentation of consumer media technologies’ democratizing potential from below took precedence over memory, belonging, or an edifying form of creative craftsmanship.

In a case study of a Dutch video collective, I found that video technologies were explicitly attributed with a countercultural agency and used in various projects and experiments to explore video’s democratic and emancipatory potential for the individual and local community (Slootweg 2018; cf. Slootweg 2017). Regardless of whether the collective—and the “ordinary” people it collaborated with—was successful or not, it operated within a different mode. To account for this alternative dynamic, the counter mode can serve as an additional analytic and descriptive tool that allows media historians, sociologists, and ethnographers to address the *practice and functioning* of those social formations in which media technologies were appropriated in an oppositional practice in order to take control over the media environment from “below.”

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented an argument aimed at acknowledging the importance of functional modalities, rather than an ideological or normative

perspective, when trying to understand amateur engagements with film and video technologies. It is helpful to grasp such past or present engagements in the context of the three modes identified. This approach elucidates in particular the different “sets of intentions” underpinning amateurs’ investment in media technologies and the manner in which their “participation” takes shape.

Notions regarding the relationship between amateurs and consumer film and video technologies have often produced confusion, which resulted from a pervasive tendency within scholarly, artistic, and popular discourses to understand film and video amateurism normatively. By investigating three modes of media amateurism as such, taking them seriously according to their own merits and idiosyncrasies, evaluations and theorizations that pit them against each other—in terms of one form of amateurism being significantly more “real,” “proper,” or “false” than the other—become superfluous. This should be welcomed because such attributions are unfruitful, I believe, and they obscure the various “sets of intentions” and cultural functions implied in various forms of media amateurism.

The following step should be to ascertain whether these functional modalities of historical film and video amateurism still bear relevance for contemporary scholarship into media amateurism in the digital age. In addition, a more comprehensive and long-term historical investigation into the practice and functioning of amateur modes might reveal several complex moments of transition in which social, technological, cultural, and other dimensions play a significant role. To some degree, this seems apparent in the transition from film to video and its implications for media amateurism in the latter part of the twentieth century. Although only touched upon in passing in this contribution, there are strong indications that the understanding and dynamics of a mode’s practice and functioning can be subject to moderate or sometimes more radical changes. The latter was certainly the case for the community mode in which for many decades the “spirit of community” effectively tried to negate the creative or craftsman-like potential of media technologies other than small-gauge film.

More important, however, are the kind of questions to be asked when delving into the digital age. Are there any new iterations of the serious amateur’s “spirit of community” and “community of practice” to be found on contemporary and past digital media platforms? Moreover, when moving away from the community mode, the emergence of a networked digital media environment since the 1990s has rekindled desires for “radical” and “oppositional” amateur media practices from “below.” Can concrete materializations of these desires into digital amateur media practices also be understood and analyzed in terms of the counter mode? And what about the digital home mode? Some of these questions were tackled over the past decades or are being investigated today. It is nevertheless important to keep in mind that discerning between several functional modalities will contribute

to acknowledging the diversity of intent among the various amateurs who operate within the historical or contemporary media environment in which they are embedded.

Notes

- 1 The notion of “mode” bears some resemblance with theorist Bill Nichols’ (1991) documentary “modes of representation” (32) of reality. However, in this chapter the notion of “mode” will be used to isolate and identify the different manners in which amateurs appropriated media technologies for a particular purpose and within a particular practice: *modes of practice and functioning*.
- 2 In the tradition of Chalfen’s media sociological and ethnographical investigation, a more contemporary re-evaluation of the home mode in the digital age can be found in the work of Buckingham, Pini, and Willet (2007); Pini (2009); Buckingham, Willett, and Pini (2011).
- 3 Another notable filmmaker to emerge out of the New York avant-garde, Stan Brakhage, in fact explored small-gauge film technologies (mostly 16 mm) as a medium for abstraction and formal experimentation. For several scholarly reflections on Brakhage as an experimental and abstract artist and filmmaker, see the edited volume by David James (2006).