



## Hidden in Plain Sight: Attending to Women's Amateur Filmmaking Histories at the Irish Film Archive

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# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: ATTENDING TO WOMEN'S AMATEUR FILMMAKING HISTORIES AT THE IRISH FILM ARCHIVE

Sarah Arnold  and Carolann Madden 

*This article aims to identify various ways in which women's amateur filmmaking becomes obscured in both film archives and in the academic scholarship on film and filmmaking. Recognising that amateur film is marginalised and undervalued in relation to commercial and professional filmmaking, the article uses the case study of one Irish amateur filmmaker to identify the processes and practices that have resulted in her work being obscured and overlooked. The filmmaker, Sr Maureen MacMahon, was practicing amateur filmmaking from the 1960s to the 1970s and her work is held at the Irish Film Archive. Investigation of Sr Maureen's filmmaking drew from a variety of sources including the films and film materials, film metadata recorded at the archive, newspaper archives, an archive held at Sr Maureen's religious order and an interview with Sr Maureen. Analyses of these materials has resulted in three findings: firstly, the dispersal of materials and information pertaining to Sr Maureen across multiple sites posed challenges for our construction of a coherent narrative about her; secondly, Sr Maureen turned her hand to many creative and pedagogic activities beyond filmmaking, and, in her own estimation, she was an arts educator more than a filmmaker; and, finally, the films are not easily categorised as they are generically and stylistically diverse, making auteurist approaches difficult. Drawing from these findings we discuss the challenges that this creates for foregrounding women's contributions to film.*

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This article is concerned with the multiple, interlocking ways that women's amateur filmmaking has been rendered invisible in the public, in archives and in academic scholarship. It focuses, therefore, on *how* women's amateur filmmaking becomes invisible. Taking the position that amateur filmmaking is already marginalised relative to commercial and professional film and women's filmmaking is marginalised relative to men's, we investigate and draw attention to the ways that one female amateur filmmaker's work has been overlooked and obscured.<sup>1</sup> Sr Maureen MacMahon, the subject of this article, is a Dublin-based Dominican sister, school-teacher, artist, author, audiovisual educator and filmmaker (as of the time of writing, she is resident at the Dominican Sisters nursing home in Dublin). From the 1950s to the 1970s she made 16 mm, 8 mm and Super8 films either independently or as part of the Black Raven Group which included Owen Carton and Sean Brophy. Her work is held at the Irish Film Archive in Dublin and in multiple film and document collections. Using document and audiovisual archival materials, archival metadata, press reports and newspaper articles and an interview with MacMahon, we assess the challenges associated with uncovering her filmmaking practice. We adopt the approach of 'researching around our subjects', following Katz, by commencing with a small number of key artefacts such as films, notes, archival metadata and expanding outwards towards a broader range of material like newspapers and official documentation.<sup>2</sup> Analysis of the data has resulted in three themes that explain these challenges. The first challenge relates to how MacMahon's multimedia artefacts sit across different collections and archives, thus complicating the task of producing a coherent narrative of her filmmaking. The second challenge in uncovering MacMahon's filmmaking practice is that she inhabited multiple professional and creative identities. In her own accounts of her work, she self-marginalises her filmmaking, preferring instead to narrate the history of her educational and artistic practice. The final challenge is that the films themselves defy easy categorisation as a collection of work, given the broad variation in form, style and genre. Collectively, our discussion of these three themes aims to reveal the myriad of ways that women's amateur filmmaking histories are obscured.

### The problems of amateur film

Amateur film has long remained on the periphery of mainstream film studies. In *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, Patricia R. Zimmermann writes, 'Amateur film occupies the unsightly, sprawling underside of more traditional commercial-film histories'.<sup>3</sup> While the study of this 'sprawling underside' of film has garnered more attention of late, until the mid-to-late 1990s it had gained only the sporadic attention of traditional film scholarship. The turn to amateur film is marked by re-examinations of its potential historical and sociological value.<sup>4</sup> This turn also grew out of studies from the 1980s that had just begun to grapple with how to define it, and the necessity of creating frameworks to understand it in its multiple forms.<sup>5</sup> In 1986 Fred Camper offered a preliminary taxonomy of the home movie and urged film historians to undertake an urgent re-examination of the field due to the lack of meaningful scholarship on amateur film and in particular the home movie.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Richard Chalfen argued for the sociological

significance of photography and film produced in what he called, 'home mode'.<sup>7</sup> Chalfen's proposal that artistic output created in home mode both reinforces existing social relationships and exhibits 'a pattern of interpersonal and group communication centered in the home', has proven to be a useful metric for our understanding of the home movie today. Ryan Shand, however, also notes the limitations of Chalfen's anthropological approach to the home movie, arguing that it lacks the kind of diachronic perspective that would help us to better understand the historical context of these films.<sup>8</sup> Shand, writing over twenty years after Fred Camper, also reasserts the idea that 'theoretical consideration of amateur cinema has to be one of the most neglected aspects of film studies'.<sup>9</sup> For Shand, the films made by amateur cine clubs, and those that land more neatly in the category of the amateur ciné movement, occupy a further obfuscated position in the study of amateur film. The films discussed in this article reflect the 'problems of definition' and the consequent marginalisation that amateur film scholars have identified.

While the home movie is often positioned oppositionally to mainstream and commercial film modes, thus garnering a level of attention for what it can tell us about who we are outside of these modes, the filmmakers involved in ciné clubs or amateur filmmaking groups often created work that operated similarly to professional film. It is because of these groups and clubs' closeness to professional film, and the fact that 'these filmmakers are often misinterpreted as those who could not make it into the professional industry,' that these films are further obscured.<sup>10</sup> Judy Hetrick asserts, however, that in general 'people outside the socialization of professional television or documentary filmmaking will not often emulate professional forms, even though they are familiar with them'.<sup>11</sup> That this necessarily means these films will either subvert or resist the conformity of mass moviemaking is scrutinised by scholars who look at the ways in which even home movies can mimic the conventionality and consumption related to professional moviemaking, and also by those who have identified the many ways that home movies and travelogues have imposed and reproduced colonial narratives.<sup>12</sup> While the promise of amateur film as subversive counternarrative is not always fulfilled, Ciara Chambers has identified home movies made in Ireland between 1930–1970 as an instance where it often comes close. Chambers argues that the lack of an indigenous film industry in Ireland until 1970 means that Irish amateur film offers some of our only glimpses into how the people of Ireland chose to portray themselves in that era.<sup>13</sup> Through a large-scale project that involved digitising Irish home movies housed in the Irish Film Archive, Chambers saw the potential to better understand 'how the Irish amateur gaze depicted modern Ireland' and 'the possibility of constructing an alternative narrative to that of mainstream cinema'.<sup>14</sup>

Amateur film, then, and its scholarship evidences many ontological and taxonomic challenges. The myriad practices of making amateur film and the general lack of contextual and textual data related to amateur films, filmmaking practices and filmmakers has made it difficult to categorise and define amateur film. Even in scholarship of perhaps the most recognisable of amateur film types – the home movie – there is little consistency in the practice of making it and little consensus in how to understand it. The home movie includes so many sub-categories and has been conceptualised in so many ways by scholars – as family film, private film,

non-professional film, ephemeral film, as travelogue, as ritualistic, as utilitarian, as pseudo-documentary - that any discussion of it requires constant boundary-setting and redefinition.<sup>15</sup> Equally, Frances Gooding has noted that amateur film is lacking, in contrast to professional and commercial cinema, a body of scholarship that has developed formal analysis of amateur films nor 'historical comprehension' of amateur film techniques.<sup>16</sup> After all, so much of what makes up amateur film heritage has not been widely viewed and circulated nor has it been preserved.<sup>17</sup> Amateur film is often held in private collections or goes through an archival acquisition process which may involve the imposition of value systems, for example, amateur films may be prioritised by archives in terms of the event or location they represent, the era they reflect or their format.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, it is precisely archives that undertaken the work of custodianship even while there has been some neglect of amateur film. Archives, such as the Irish Film Archive discussed in this article, have often been dependent upon additional financial and research supports to catalogue and digitise amateur film collections.<sup>19</sup> Without additional supports for this, the archiving and preservation process may risk rendering the films inaccessible and somewhat invisible. As Hall writes, even when catalogued, non-theatrical films can be particularly vulnerable to digital invisibility. 'How do you write a search query for a home movie with no title and a maker whose name is unknown?'.<sup>20</sup>

The vulnerability and marginalisation of amateur film more generally can also intersect and correlate with other instances of marginalisation. In the case of this article, we are concerned with the 'double marginalisation' and subsequent relative invisibility of the work of women, in particular.<sup>21</sup> While there has been much recent effort to recover and render visible women's professional and commercial films and filmmaking, women's amateur filmmaking remains under-attended.<sup>22</sup> And it is not simply the case that women's participation in amateur filmmaking was limited. Research undertaken by Motrescu-Mayes & Norris Nicholson, for example, has evidenced a widespread and varied amateur film practice by women in Britain.<sup>23</sup> They uncover women's roles in cine clubs, their amateur filmmaking practice and, most relevant for our article, women's use of amateur film in educational practice. Their study of educational practice and teachers who created animated films reveals a good deal of creative freedom exercised by women who were freed from the constraints of professional and formalised practice. Kimberley Tarr, likewise, accounts for women's use of amateur film for educational purposes: in her study of the Adelaide Pearson Film Collection she describes how Pearson would exhibit her films to locals for the purposes of educating them offering free screening of her films to her community.<sup>24</sup> However, as documented by Tepperman, Frith and Johnston and O'Connell women's amateur filmmaking remains neglected on many levels including in acquisition, in archive collections, in academic study and in the public.<sup>25</sup> The self-selection process that often produces amateur film collections in archives results in underrepresentation of women.<sup>26</sup> And, as Zoë Burgess has pointed out, donation of amateur film collections are often made through male figures and filmmakers, thus obfuscating the contributions of women to the films in the collections.<sup>27</sup> Dagmar Brunow points to further marginalisation of women such as queer and lesbian women, whose work is less

likely again to make it into archives.<sup>28</sup> Equally, Frith and Johnston and Motrescu-Mayes and Norris Nicholson have pointed to the underrepresentation of women's voice in amateur cine magazines and periodicals where women's work was far less visible than men's, especially during the early years of such publications.<sup>29</sup> These various negations of women's amateur filmmaking have resulted in relative invisibility of women's work, nowhere more obvious than the limited academic scholarship on the topic.

### **'Archival absences'**

In this article we adopt the methodological approach of 'researching around our subjects' proposed first by Sherry J. Katz as a way of overcoming the dearth of archival materials on marginalised women's activism and voices. For Katz, a corrective to this 'archival absence' was possible by starting with the small fragments of information or oral histories available on her subjects and moving 'outwards in concentric circles of related sources' adding additional layers of wider historical data along the way.<sup>30</sup> Acknowledging that such an approach produces a partial history and account of her subjects, Katz nonetheless finds value in such an approach which, in particular, can shed light not only on what is absent from dominant histories but also why there are absences. In her use of this approach in examining women's film union activism, Frances Galt likewise notes how her 'researching around her subjects' - women whose activism was excluded from union records and archives - enabled her to produce an archive of sorts, again, a corrective to the absences within official archives.<sup>31</sup> The urgency of undertaking the task of recuperating women's film histories has been evident in the calls of those such as Melanie Bell and Vicky Ball, Catherine Martin and James Fenwick to look more closely in film archives for the traces of women, particularly in cases when women are not immediately evident.<sup>32</sup>

In our practice of 'researching around our subject', we commenced with a collection of amateur films and a small number of film records that were identified to us by the Irish Film Archive as being made by a female filmmaker, the primary criteria for inclusion in our research project. This was the Sr Maureen MacMahon Collection. We commenced with the MacMahon film records, finding as much information about the filmmaker and her creative practice as possible from the films themselves and their metadata, then worked outwards, towards other collections, other audiovisual records and beyond the IFA to other newspaper archives, workplaces, religious orders and to MacMahon herself who, at the age of 103, happily provided an interview about her experiences of filmmaking and her creative work more generally. This wide range of materials from a variety of sources and archives gives shape to MacMahon as a filmmaker, creative, religious sister and an educator. It is in no way complete, since MacMahon's creative reach was extensive. However, using analytic processes including narrative, thematic and documentary, we both construct a film history of MacMahon and concomitantly identify the ways in which histories such as hers are difficult to trace through the archive. The overall project for us is less to produce a 'compensatory history' of an amateur film auteur and more to identify the challenges in historicising women's amateur

filmmaking and, through our own appropriation of the ‘researching around our subjects’ approach, draw attention to how women’s amateur filmmaking histories can become obscured.<sup>33</sup>

### **Sr Maureen MacMahon and the Black Raven Group**

While our overall project revolves around making the work of women who were amateur filmmakers more visible, it also seeks to understand both how this work came to be obscured through the inherited structures of archival metadata, and how this might be remedied through the metadata itself. In the case of Sr Maureen MacMahon, we began with a small selection of her films and our research led to further information on her life and creative identity, particular through the Dominican Order Archive in Cabra, Dublin, which holds personal written diaries and notes from MacMahon. MacMahon was born in Dublin in 1918 and entered the Dominican Order at Cabra in 1936. She attended the National College of Art, Dublin, received an ATC Certificate and Diploma in Art Education in 1970, and taught art in local primary schools from 1947 to 1971. From 1971–1974 she worked as the Head of the Audiovisual Department at the Catholic Communication Centre in Booterstown, Dublin, after which she became a part-time lecturer in Education at Trinity College, Dublin, and worked for eight years as a part-time lecturer in Art at St. Patrick’s Training College.<sup>34</sup> She was a painter and founding member of The High Loft amateur painting group in Dublin and has written numerous articles on art and art history, as well as a book entitled, *Sister Maureen’s Selection of Irish Art: With Reflections*.<sup>35</sup> MacMahon worked as part of the Black Raven Film Group, along with Owen Carton and Sean Brophy, which produced several films, including in particular documentaries and educational films. Their film, *Puppet Project*, written by MacMahon, won the National Film Institute of Ireland’s Gevaert Perpetual Challenge 1st Place Trophy in 1968 and *Kay*, written, conceived of and produced by MacMahon, won the NFI’s Amateur Cine Competition in 1968.<sup>36</sup> She was active with the Black Raven Group throughout the 1960s and 1970s, working as a filmmaker, producer, director, and script-writer, and her background and interest in art and art education is often present in her filmmaking.

In 2012, at the age of 94, MacMahon deposited a selection of films, an 8 mm manual winder and an 8 mm film editor with the Irish Film Archive.<sup>37</sup> The films that make up the IFA’s ‘MacMahon Collection,’ along with three more of MacMahon’s films housed in the IFA, are the audiovisual material central to this case study. She also deposited a paper collection with the Archives of the Dominican Sisters, Cabra, and was interviewed for this project as recently as 2022. Though you would not call MacMahon’s overall archive extensive, the amount of information available to us about her is far greater than that available about other women working as amateur filmmakers in Ireland at the time. We have a paper archive, an audiovisual archive, and we have access to MacMahon herself, as well as having access to her family. And yet, MacMahon’s work as a filmmaker has been largely obscured.

### Archival obfuscation: mixed materials and multiple collections

An initial challenge in tracing MacMahon's work relates to the fact that, since she produced work in multiple forms and formats it, consequently, sits across multiple private archives. The difficulties that adhere to gaining a cohesive understanding of MacMahon's filmmaking are, therefore, many and also fairly common for mixed-media collections in particular. In the first instance, the films were separated from most of the related paper and ephemera by MacMahon at the time of donation. While two scripts were deposited with the Irish Film Archive, all other paper materials were given to the Archive of the Dominican Sisters, Cabra. As such, the IFA holds MacMahon's films and related audio assets, while the Archive of the Dominican Sisters holds the bulk of MacMahon's paper collection, which includes information on her films, photographs, her CV, various correspondence, and her own written accounts of her life, her work as a painter and founder of the High Loft Paint Group, and her time as part of the Black Raven Group. A member of MacMahon's family has also confirmed that she made home movies, some of which have been digitised, though they were never deposited with an archive. Additionally, the films MacMahon worked on were not necessarily donated to the IFA together, or by MacMahon herself, and are not compiled under a single collection title. This means that the 'Sr Maureen MacMahon Collection' does not include all of the films on which she worked, nor does it contain the scripts she donated, but rather, contains only the films that she herself donated. Like many mixed-media archives, audiovisual archives often face the dilemma that processing manuscripts and audiovisual assets requires different approaches. In discussing the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, audiovisual archivist Megan McShea identifies trying to 'find a sustainable way of integrating the approach to manuscript collection with best practices for audiovisual materials' as a major challenge facing collections of this nature.<sup>38</sup> In the case of the 'Sr Maureen MacMahon Collection,' the donated scripts are housed in a separate part of the IFA and would have been processed and catalogued using a metadata schema that is not necessarily compatible with that of the audiovisual assets in the collection. Cross-referencing offers one potential workaround for an issue like this, however, as we will see this becomes complicated for someone like MacMahon.

The concept of the 'collection' itself can pose a particular metadata challenge when processing amateur film. It stands to reason that, if a collection is so called because a decision has been taken to classify it as the body of material deposited by a donor, then you would not necessarily classify items deposited by another donor as part of that collection, even where related. This is the case with the 'Sr Maureen MacMahon Collection' which contains the four films she donated but not any other films on which she worked that are housed in the archive. Like MacMahon and the Black Raven Group, however, many amateur filmmakers work in groups or artistic collectives. Artistic output that is spread between collections is common when dealing with groups, especially as donating individuals might not retain copies of all the work created by the group. This manifests for MacMahon in the fact that the four films that comprise the 'Sr Maureen MacMahon Collection', *FISEC* (1970), *From Cliff to Kiln* (1969), *Look Again* (c. 1969) and *No Straight Lines* (1970), were deposited as a single collection by her, while the films

*Physical Education in Ireland (1968)* and *Kay* are housed in the archive as part of the Black Raven Group's films, and the film *Puppet Project (1968)* is part of the 'Sean Brophy Collection'. MacMahon was involved in the making of each of these films, but three of them are not characterised as part of her collection.

Related items existing outside of a single collection is not an insurmountable obstacle, but in the case of amateur film it can become more problematic. In lieu of cross-referencing, which is time consuming and not always possible, one way to locate a filmmaker's works would be to search the collections management system for the filmmaker's name. Unfortunately, amateur film does not fit neatly within typical metadata standards for cataloguing film, partially because amateur filmmakers do not always embody traditional roles of filmmaking. This often leads to fields like director, producer, or cast being left blank. Because of this, names may not appear in the records at all. This is a reflection of the films themselves, as amateur films also may not utilise credit lists, making it difficult without external information or research to know who took on what role. Again, this becomes even more complicated for amateur film groups wherein the roles and contributions may be more loosely defined. For example, in her written account of working with the Black Raven Group, MacMahon talks about working 'in a three-way contribution' and writes:

We worked together whenever possible, each of us contributing in a different way. Sean was the technical man, with a keen eye for design. He had, also, a larger range of equipment. Owen was imaginative, with a faultless eye behind the lens. I was the ideas person and usually supplied the scripts.<sup>39</sup>

Here we have a sense of how each person generally contributed, but there is no clear assignment of roles. This translates to the records for several Black Raven Group films. Though she somewhat downplays it here, we know that MacMahon provided all the scripts for the films she worked on, and occasionally this is acknowledged in the films and likewise the records, but there are also instances where no mention of it is made. From MacMahon's donation, we also know she had editing equipment, and elsewhere in her papers she discusses how she learned to, and did, operate a camera.<sup>40</sup> Did she do any editing? Did she ever get behind the camera on any Black Raven Films? We can't be sure. Some of the Black Raven Group films do have credits, though they do not necessarily map neatly onto the fields in the metadata. Onscreen credits for *No Straight Lines* read 'Script by Sr. Maureen MacMahon, Photographed by Owen Carton', but again, this correlates to a blank Director field in the records. These roles have, however, been recorded in the Production Credits field.<sup>41</sup> Similar information for the film *Puppet Project* has not been recorded in any of the authorship fields, but rather listed as part of the Shot List since it appears as an intertitle.<sup>42</sup> Neither metadata choice is incorrect, but both highlight the fact that amateur film lives differently in the archive than commercial film. In another example of this, the opening credits for *Kay* read, 'Camera Owen Carton' and 'Production Sister Maureen', whereas what she recorded in the deposit record for the film reads, 'Script: Sister Grignon (now Maureen)' and 'Camera: Mr Owen Carton, Technical Expert: Mr Sean Brophy'.<sup>43</sup> In an effort to capture this information, it has again been provided in Production

Credits, but rather than being listed as the scriptwriter, the choice has been made to list her as 'Production'. which is the role assigned in the onscreen credits.<sup>44</sup> It should also be mentioned here that MacMahon poses an additional challenge in that she works under different names. As evidenced by the donation record for *Kay*, she sometimes went by Sr. Grignon. So, while the credits for *Kay* list her as 'Sister Maureen', the donation record for the film lists her as Sr. Grignon, as do the credits for *Puppet Project*.<sup>45</sup> While all of this points to the difficulties that attend MacMahon's collection and works, they are not necessarily unique to her. In these examples, we can see that there are multiple choices to be made in the cataloguing of amateur film that would typically be more straightforward when working with commercial or professional film.

### First educator, then artist, then filmmaker

Further challenges are posed in extrapolating MacMahon's filmmaking from her wider artistic practice and, indeed, her films have been overshadowed somewhat by her large body of artistic practice. A particular challenge, then, in identifying MacMahon's film authorship results, somewhat paradoxically, from her extensive creative and professional identities. MacMahon's filmmaking cannot be separated from her practice as an educator and her role as an artist and art appreciator. Insofar as MacMahon made films, her practice and her films extended from her educator/artist identities and, while the present researchers may foreground MacMahon's filmmaking as an important part of Irish amateur filmmaking heritage, this is not necessarily how MacMahon herself in interview represented her filmmaking, nor does the Dominican Sisters archival collection of MacMahon's materials and personal documents prioritise her filmmaking. Instead, MacMahon appears in interview and in her written archive as a religious sister and an art educator. In undertaking a feminist intervention into women's amateur filmmaking history, we therefore identify how film authorship disappears in the historical narrative and in this process draw attention to how this might be corrected.

A key challenge in identifying MacMahon's film authorship was found in the accounts MacMahon provided of her own professional and artistic identities in which she focused largely on her educational practice and her interest in art mainly and her filmmaking less so. This hierarchy of identities is especially evident in an interview with MacMahon where she described her own professional history to the researchers. When asked about her films and filmmaking, MacMahon said 'but they're not very much, you know, they're very... like I was only a couple of years there doing a... working at them'.<sup>46</sup> In other words, MacMahon herself downplayed both the quality of the films and underrepresented the years she was active in filmmaking. When speaking of how she became involved in filmmaking in the first place, she recounted a story about how she wanted to record one of her art classes, commenting to students that 'it's a pity... I couldn't photograph that' after which a student said that her father, Sean Brophy, could assist, ultimately resulting in her participation in the Black Raven Group. However, as she remembers it, film was a means to an end and something that could facilitate art education. In addition, when discussing her filmmaking and her role in the amateur

filmmaking group the Black Raven Group, MacMahon used terms that indicated the 'amateurness' of her work, referring to the 'little group' that she joined and her own role as a 'dog's body' in comparison to her co-members who were the technical and artistic experts, according to her. Her accounts of the films she made often imply an ad hoc, ramshackle practice where the group would work within the limits of the technology available to them and make mistakes along the way. For example, when describing how she donated her films to the archive, MacMahon compared her collection of films to her Black Raven Group co-members as follows:

And ... when they [the IFA] accepted the [films] I had, I didn't think that they'd be bothered. But when they accepted those, I said ... Owen Carton would be ... his [films] would be a much better standard.

Throughout the interview MacMahon stressed the abilities and expertise of Black Raven Group members Seán Brophy and Owen Carton while providing a comparatively more conservative assessment of her own contributions to the group, even though many of the films related to and emerged from her own art education.

Instead, MacMahon was much more expressive about her role in art education. MacMahon's professional confidence was clearly tied to her knowledge of art education and her own professional motivation was provided for in her personal biography in the Dominican Sisters archive where she wrote that her 'ministeries [sic] as a Dominican' were 'to help others to appreciate truth and beauty through art'.<sup>47</sup> In interview, she spoke about her early interest in art, her attainment of a certificate in art education and her status as one of the first Froebel students in Ireland.<sup>48</sup> When speaking about some of her films like *Kay* and *From Cliff to Kiln*, MacMahon referred primarily to the pedagogic value of them and how they related to art and art education rather than the films as amateur film craft. For example, in speaking about the Black Raven Group film of a puppet show, *Puppet Project*, MacMahon was enthusiastic in recounting how the filmmaking process itself engaged the students. Equally, this disappearing of the filmmaking strand of her artistic practice is evident in her written accounts of her work and career. In her four-page CV produced sometime after the year 2015 and where major milestones from her birth in 1918 to 2015 are detailed, there is no reference to either her filmmaking, her membership of the Black Raven Group, her personal filmmaking (home movies) nor to the awards her films won. In comparison, detailed attention is paid to her various roles as an art educator, her establishment of the High Loft painting group, her book and article publications in recent decades.<sup>49</sup>

### Generic variation and the challenges of authorship

A further challenge in foregrounding and illuminating the films of MacMahon is the way that the films' subjects also sit across a number of genres, making it difficult to develop a coherent sense of authorship and style. Some of the films are highly artistic and abstract, and quite experimental. Others are pedagogical and concerned with using art for education, and others still are centred on educational institutions or events. Some of the latter films, including *FISEC*, are classified in

archival metadata as professional in comparison to the non-professional status of most of her films. In the archival film records, most of MacMahon's films are labelled as non-professional and have a number of associated subjects and keywords including education, art and sports/recreation. In addition, MacMahon made home movies which have not been deposited at the archive and which feature her extended family. While this oeuvre of filmmaking demonstrates her creativity and technical skill, it also makes it harder to classifier her as a filmmaker and to contextualise her body of work. If, as O'Connell argues, amateur films are mainly valued from a preservation standpoint for their location, then the films of MacMahon deviate by not being associated with a particular location.<sup>50</sup> Equally, Shand has suggested that amateur film scholarship has struggled to move beyond conceptualising amateur film production and films in terms of 'home movies' and he suggests that approaching such a wide range of practices and films in such a narrow way has inhibited the advancement of amateur film scholarship.<sup>51</sup> And, indeed, it would be convenient to read MacMahon's films as engaged with what could be her 'domestic milieu', and to read her concern with her students in her films as a correlate to 'home movies' which concern the family and the domestic space. *No Straight Lines*, for example, features children engaged in painting pictures and making prints with potato cuttings. This focus on the activities of children and their play situates the film within the broader field of home movies, often equally concerned with the world of children.

However, there is much in her films, including *No Straight Lines*, that suggest a crafted, planned and educational approach to filmmaking. Given her extensive knowledge of and interest in art and artistic practice, it is possible to consider MacMahon's films as art and/or experimental films. For example, *Look Again* has a formal logic that is concerned more with suggesting a correlation between the type of textures and shapes found in nature and those found in art. It has a less obvious or classical narrative structure, with numerous matches on action between natural shapes and artistic ones guiding the film story. *No Straight Lines*, likewise, has an introductory sequence that is non-narrative and juxtaposes shots of a tree branch against a black backdrop and sequences of paintings in various stages of completion. Alongside this artistic bent, both *No Straight Lines* and *Look Again* have a pedagogic focus, with the intention being to provide art education and to provide examples of how art can be used in education. In a note from MacMahon accompanying *No Straight Lines* in the archive, she says that 'The idea behind this 15-minute film was to show the way children love to paint and to make things. Their creativity is spontaneous given the right environment and encouragement. We tried to capture their enthusiasm and concentration'.<sup>52</sup> For MacMahon, then, these films were made with audiences in mind. In stating that she wanted 'to show', she implies that, even if the films were never exhibited, they were imagined and created with an intent to address educators and students.

If we follow Shand's conceptualisation of amateur filmmaking, MacMahon's films may have traces of the home mode and of the experimental traditions of amateur film, but more so what Shand calls the 'community mode', a phrase he uses to account for the diversity of film production and exhibition contexts of amateur films made outside of domestic/home or avant-garde settings.<sup>53</sup> For Shand,

the community mode reaches beyond home movie settings and audiences and is supra any particular gauge. The community mode 'is defined rather by the ambivalent exhibition space it occupies between the home and mass modes. Filmmakers working within the community mode include those who belonged to film societies and entered their group-made films into the annual film festivals that were held all around the world, as well as travel filmmakers who toured with their films, and also more locally based civic filmmakers who rented town halls and other available exhibition spaces'.<sup>54</sup> MacMahon's films, given their diversity in topic and genre, their concern with audience and wider community appeal and their crafted nature, could align with this 'community mode' of amateur filmmaking.

For example, that MacMahon's 8 mm sound film *Kay* (1969) was entered into a number of amateur film festivals is a testament to her and the Black Raven Group's awareness of the landscape of amateur film practice in Ireland and beyond as well as their interest in securing an audience and recognition for the film. The film features a student of MacMahon's, the Kay of the title, at work on a painting intended to represent the impact of industrialisation on the human spirit. This is perhaps the film that gained the widest recognition for the Black Raven Group, with accounts of their award and photographs of the National film Institute's prize to the group featured in national newspapers.<sup>55</sup> The film itself has a clear documentary format and a narrative that follows Kay as she makes preliminary sketches on a pier, moves to a studio to work on the painting and then closes with Kay returning to a beach to continue sketching. *Kay* is the most narratively conventional and the most widely exhibited of MacMahon's films. Its most recent screening, as part of an Irish Research Council-funded project aimed at illuminating the history of women's amateur filmmaking in Ireland, saw it top-bill on a programme of her films. MacMahon's films, then, extend from fairly classically told narratives to experimental films to home movies, evidencing a rich and varied filmmaking practice that problematises neat categorisation. Further, at the time of writing, there are numerous missing films that MacMahon has made including a film made about the Dominican Order at Kerdiffstown called *Kerdiffstown, a memory* (1973) and a film made with and about the artist Kenneth Webb.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, any auteurist approach to MacMahon's filmmaking and style must be cognisant of these important omissions and any attempt at generic profiling must recognise its inevitable partiality.

## Conclusion

Even when considering the gaps in MacMahon's overall archive, we still have access to far more information about her life and her craft than we do for many other women who were making amateur films during this time. This is owed in large part to MacMahon's own impulses to not only record this information and preserve her films, but also to deposit her materials with two archives. In spite of the difficulties that attend to locating information about amateur filmmakers, we know that there are audiovisual and mixed-media archives collecting and preserving materials such as these, even where to do so would be complicated and sometimes beyond their remit. As we have shown, processing and cataloguing amateur film is

often a complex endeavour, and the same can be said of researching the filmmakers, especially those who experience additional layers of obscurity related to identity. And yet, through processes like ‘researching around the subject’ and uniting that research with amateur films held in archives and personal collections, we can begin to better understand these filmmakers as craftspeople themselves. This deeper understanding, while challenging, is dependent upon and facilitated by the collaboration and cooperation of different professional fields and different academic disciplines. One of the values of this study has been the opportunity to bring together different partners including archives, researchers and creative professionals through one thematic focus: women’s amateur filmmaking. Each partner has contributed knowledge and gained understanding of what practices and processes best serve and preserve the inclusion of women in media histories. Equally, the study drew together the disciplines of archive studies and practice, digital humanities, feminist theory, production studies and media history to develop a framework for researching marginalised figures and marginalised media. We believe that this framework can also be further applied to the research of other marginalised figures in media studies and in other disciplines, as well. ‘Researching around the subject’ can, in this sense, also be broadened to ‘researching around the disciplines’ since any ‘monodisciplinary’ approach risks missing the larger picture. A primary goal of this research was to elevate the value of the ‘women’ and ‘amateur’ of filmmaking, which necessitated an interdisciplinary approach. As a consequence, a key outcome of the research is the digital preservation and exhibition of Sr Maureen’s work.

This exhibition took the form of the screening of a selection of her restored and digitised films in December 2022. Held in the Irish Film Institute, the screening celebrated MacMahon’s craft and recognised her contribution to amateur filmmaking in Ireland. This screening was part of an effort to address the relative invisibility of MacMahon in Irish filmmaking history and amateur filmmaking and to draw attention to the existence of her work in the archives. The screening itself was also accompanied by the donation of identified documents and materials to the Irish Film Archive and the production of filmmaking biographies to accompany the archive’s existing collection. In identifying the various challenges as we have done in this article, we have aimed to meet these challenges through a number of solutions and with the support of two research grants. The first, The Irish Research Council New Foundations grant titled ‘Locating and Narrating Women’s Amateur Filmmaking in the IFI Irish Film Archive’ allowed for the detailed biographical study of MacMahon’s life and craft and enabled digitisation, study and public exhibition of her films. The Irish Research Council/Arts and Humanities Research Council Digital Humanities Research Grant award for the project ‘Women in Focus: Developing a Feminist Approach to Film Archive Metadata and Cataloguing’ has enabled us to develop digital humanities tools to identify how and where invisibility and omission occurs in archival metadata and to address this through the production of an audiovisual archive toolkit that facilitates better representation of women in archival metadata such as film records. Regarding representation of MacMahon’s filmmaking practice, form and style, we have worked with the Amateur Movie Database to produce a filmmaker biography and individual film database entries that can bring to the public an awareness of her films.

Taken together, this work is, in fact, something that has been quite meaningful not only for the researchers, the archivists who have worked to protect her film-making legacy and the public who have sought out her films, but it has been especially meaningful to MacMahon herself. In the preparations for the public screening of her films in December 2022, against all expectations after having to decline to attend due to illness, the 104 year old MacMahon appeared in the cinema, eager to see the films made decades before and that she had not viewed since. MacMahon's eagerness to attend was, according to her family, prompted by her pride in the films and the recognition that she was now receiving for her work, which further suggests the importance in uncovering such histories.

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## Notes

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