

Amateurism and Localism: Notes Toward a De-Centred History of Scottish Cinema

By Ryan Shand

In the last few years the 'local' has become a cultural and political buzzword of choice. Politicians and cultural policy makers, opposing advocates of centralisation, are embracing policies on local issues. In these debates the very value of the term 'local' is being re-defined. No longer need it be synonymous with the insular and the parochial. The local has now become the means to assert ones own identity and history within an increasing global culture.

In the final episode of Carl MacDougall's recent BBC2 documentary, *Scots*, the verb 'glocalise' was used to suggest how local issues could interact with international forces in a positive fashion. This describes the process of 'taking the global and making it local', where mass culture is moulded to local needs and concerns. This activity has much relevance for contemporary debates, as political power has been de-centred away from London, with the so-called 'regions' reasserting themselves. These contemporary debates will surely influence re-assessments of the national past.



Histories of national cinemas tend to be written on films either well known to their contemporary audience or easily assessable to researchers at a later date. However, this approach tends to erase the past of less mainstream cinema, as we saw with the films of the Orkney filmmaker Margaret Tait. Films that are not seen in metropolitan cultural centres are written out of accounts of the national past and are ignored by historians. This has been the case for numerous filmmakers, as on-going consultations of national archives and private collections testifies. Therefore, this article asks the following question: what would a *localised* (as opposed to a centralised) history of Scottish Cinema look like?

To answer this, we can turn to two documentary films, *Seawards the Great Ships* and *Fit O'The Toon*. The former is the famous sponsored documentary associated with Grierson while the latter is a relatively unknown amateur documentary. This contrast attempts to demonstrate that the amateur filmmaker had a privileged relationship with the local that was important and unique.

The Sponsored Film and the External Perspective

Scotland had an especially active documentary film movement from 1954 to 1982 as a result of the initiatives taken by Forsyth Hardy and the second Films of Scotland committee. As director of Films of Scotland, he oversaw projects on various aspects of Scottish life including fishing, new industries and the rich artistic culture of the nation. These films would then be distributed both in Scotland and abroad. Films such as *Seawards the Great Ships* (1960) were designed to show Scotland as a self-confident nation contributing to the industrial and cultural progress of Britain and the world. This can be seen in the voiceover to an opening sequence describing the geographical location of the shipyards:

Britain is an island nation, a nation of islanders and ship builders. On its shores generations of craftsmen have made great ships for the world, but nowhere in such profusion as on the River Clyde in Scotland. The estuary of the Clyde is a place for pleasure, people write songs about its green hills and lochs and islands, and they come to find peace and enjoy the scenery.

Greenock is a town on the Clyde, down these waters Clyde-built clippers like the *Cutty Sark* once sailed to the China seas. It was then too that James Watt of Greenock was working on a steam engine that would change the face of the world. Up river, the ancient landmark of Dumbarton Rock has looked down on long-ago battles. Today a voyage up this river is a voyage into the industrial age. There



are still green fields on Clydeside but they have shrunk as the industry of the Clyde has spread. A river of shipyards. And of all shipbuilding rivers the Clyde is the most versatile in the world. It makes every kind of ship: cargo ships, the bread and butter traders that feed and clothe the world. Ships that cross all the waters of the globe ... the Clyde makes them all, shipbuilding's greatest workshop. And the passenger liners. The Clyde has given the travellers of the world its own legend of princely luxury and queenly ships. The lush flavour of long, lazy, luxurious days on voyages to the ends of the earth.

In this section of the film, the narrator is keen, some might say overly keen, to stress the inter-relationship between local industrial activity and its resulting global impact. The Glasgow shipbuilders were the focus of this film, but they were valued not in and of themselves but because of what they contributed to Britain's place on the world stage. A token attempt was made, halfway through the film, to give these anonymous workers a voice. In one short scene, over

shots of seagulls, the river and the shipyard, disembodied voices attempted to recreate lunchtime banter between three workers:

- I must have welded about a million tons of plate this morning.
- The boy's got hallucinations again; it's the sun that gets him.
- Oh look who's talkin', you couldnae weld a spoon to a tea can.
- Oh is that your trade? I never tried it.
- Come on ... there's a ship to be welded.
- Oh aye, work, work, work ...

The contained informality of this scene contrasts sharply with the impersonal industrial processes of the rest of the film. However, there is a lingering feeling that these were not actual recordings of the workers, but actors impersonating the working-class. Even here, where their labours are the focus of attention, the men are not allowed to speak for themselves, someone – the narrator – speaks for them.

The film went on to win the Academy Award for best

live action short film in 1961. The poetic sensibility evident in the camera work and editing, in capturing the fevered tempo of the working life, immediately impress. In this, the influence of the American director Hilary Harris can surely be felt. Colin McArthur has criticised *Seawards the Great Ships* for presenting a misleading image of life on the shipyards, seeing it as a mythologising of the industry, indulging in strong visual images at the expense of a thorough analysis of history and class relations.¹ I do not intend to offer an ideological critique of this type; instead I see it as entirely typical of the sponsored documentary film movement, which also includes films such as *The Big Mill* (1963). It is not surprising that *Seawards the Great Ships* presents a romantic view of shipbuilding on the Clyde, given that it is, after all, a sponsored film. Sponsored filmmakers have no responsibility towards history, politics or aesthetics, their only responsibility being towards meeting their sponsors wishes, which quite reasonably lie within the boundaries of successfully promoting a positive image of their brand and product. The financing of the project by the Clydeside shipbuilding industry clearly would have some influence over the finished film, and it needs to be noted that films such as these are *products* to be consumed within the marketplace of commercial and art-house cinemas. *Seawards the Great Ships* and other film of its type were distributed internationally, so the film must acknowledge non-local spectators at the expense of the local audience. It needed to mediate between local and international concerns.

In this film, the local is made 'strange' and exotic for the benefit of the external gaze.

Amateur Cinema As Popular Culture - Stranded

Before going straight into an analysis of the amateur documentary, some context for this very different cultural practice should be established. The amateur film movement as it existed from the 1930s to the early 1980s was not a minority activity, but part of a much wider popular culture. 16mm and 8mm cameras were sold in high street shops and amateur film journals such as *Home Movies and Home Talkies*, *Amateur Cine World* and *Amateur Movie Maker* could be found in many newsagents. Thousands of people around Scotland made films both individually and as part of cine clubs.



Today, when we hear debates about popular culture it tends to be centred around a defence of the pleasures of generically produced mass culture and how its audiences consume it: a popular culture of newness and the fashionable. However, this seems restrictive given the definition of popular culture that John Fiske offers in his book *Understanding Popular Culture*:

Popular culture is not consumption, it is culture – the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system: culture, however industrialised, can never be adequately described in terms of buying and selling of commodities.²

If popular culture is not centred only on consumption or the 'buying and selling of commodities', then what is it about? Fiske himself sees popular culture as the subversion of mass culture: so the consumer uses products for their own individual ends and interests. The implicit dialogue between professionals and amateurs in the use of this commercial culture is important. It seems that amateurs have a special investment in this process of re-appropriating commercial products for their own ends. Amateur filmmaking activity, while relying on mass produced products such as cameras, film stock and projection equipment, ultimately used these products for their own distinct ends; one which tended to be far closer to their own local culture. This may not be a popular culture of widespread consumption of the same product, as in professional cinema culture, but it was a

specific geography the book focuses on has a special meaning, a meaning that more supposedly 'important' histories could never have for them personally. These works are usually published by the regional press and distributed in a semi-formal way. A second quotation from John Fiske has resonance here:

Popular culture is made by the people at the interface between the products of the culture industries and everyday life. Popular culture is made by the people, not imposed upon them; it stems from within, from below, not from above.³

In this statement we can hear echoes of Raphael Samuel and his work on a 'history from below'. Amateurs write local histories, for a readership within the immediate community of a restricted, but not an exclusive audience. In the same way, amateur non-fiction filmmaking tried to capture the everyday life of people that would not be deemed important enough to record in the national or international space. While some ambitious amateurs deliberately played down the local qualities of their film production in an attempt to cross

over into commercial cinema exhibition, most amateur filmmakers in Scotland resisted this strategy and instead pursued their own unique path. The *everyday* becomes significant by the very introduction of the amateur filmmakers' camera.

The Amateur Film and the Internal Perspective

Fit O' The Toon was made in 1978 by the Scottish amateur filmmaker Enrico Coccozza. It did not win any awards nor did it even find a wider audience through the Scottish amateur film movement. In this almost two-hour film Coccozza created an impression of a day in the life of the town of Wishaw, in North Lanarkshire, featuring scenes of daily life and interviews with passers-by. It is immediately striking in its use of Scots in the title, as well as its focus on a small town instead of a large city. Coccozza's voiceover attempts to set the scene:

This film is an impression of the fit o' the toon



popular culture centred very much on production activity.

The parallel between non-fiction amateur film and the popularity of *local histories* seems particularly useful here. Local histories are valued greatly by people who have direct lived experience of the area, but have little interest for people from other areas. They are written by amateur historians and exist in parallel to the national and international histories in circulation from professional historians. Local histories do not need to justify their existence within the international space, they address an audience for whom the very



in Wishaw, in the course of a day in late summer 1978. And you are going to see the following interesting people ... (Cocozza then goes on to list a long litany of everyone who will appear in his film, recognising the importance of each individual by doing so) ... not to mention many other charming people who live, work, serve, gamble, drink or play at the fit o' the toon ...

Here, in contrast to the introduction in *Seawards the Great Ships*, the location seems to need no introduction: there is an assumption on the part of the filmmaker that the spectator already knows these people and places well and can position them within the scope of his or her own experience. Nor is this film solely focused on people's working lives as it was in *Seawards the Great Ships*: in his interviews Cocozza also asks Wishavians how they spend their days, when they go shopping and so on. After a sequence showing bread and rolls being delivered to the bakery, accompanied by 70s funk music, he stops a sceptical looking pensioner:

Cocozza: Are you always the first customer in the morning?
Man: Well yes
Cocozza: What time do you get up?
Man: We're out seven o'clock.
Cocozza: Seven o'clock? You're not up nearly as early as me then?
Man: Oh no.
Cocozza: No, and you're always down here first thing?
Man: About first thing ...
Cocozza: For your rolls is it?
Man: Rolls.
Cocozza: Very good. Do you enjoy your rolls then?
Man: Certainly do.
Cocozza: That's lovely.
Man: (Man tries to say something but Cocozza talks over him).
Cocozza: Fine, fine. Oh well, we'll let you get your rolls then.
Man: Yes.
Cocozza: Fine.

Straight after this short exchange, the film cuts inside the bakery, where Cocozza asks the owner how his day tends to pan out. Here a connection is being drawn between the owner and the customers of the shop: the overall impression being created is that there is a dignity in the everyday. The filmmaker interacts with people and allows them to speak for themselves, unlike *Seawards the Great Ships*. Small businesses are the focus this time, instead of large industrial corporations with a strict division of labour. Compared to sponsored documentaries, this is less of a celebration and more of an impartial look at business practice. After all, the small businessman did not employ him, therefore Cocozza did not

have to promote this shop in the same way that a sponsored filmmaker would have to. Financing their own projects meant that amateurs had complete freedom over what and how they filmed.

Amateur films found it much easier to move in and out of professional and leisure activity than sponsored films, and a different picture of life emerged from this. This tends to mean amateur films have a somewhat relaxed or meandering style and pacing. In *Fit O' The Toon* scenes and interviews do not have to add up to something larger than what they are: collages of places and people become important not for what they contribute to the national or international culture but for what they contribute to the imaginary local space. Benedict Anderson has described the national space as an 'imagined community'.⁴ Similarly, the local space is also a series of imagined communities, but with more closely imposed borders. This is an 'imagined community' not in an illusionary sense, but one agreed and conceived by the group of individuals introduced at the beginning of the film.

This very different way of looking at an apparently everyday world was possible because of the parallel film production and exhibition network that existed within amateur cinema: a network that made this form of popular culture possible. *Fit O' The Toon* was made with a small Super-8 camera, edited at home and shown in community spaces such as town halls and at screenings organised by other film societies and amateur cine-clubs. This active and highly localised exhibition network meant that it could be seen by many people who would be interested in how it represented their own and neighbouring towns without ever being recognised by an international consciousness: this film was never mentioned in national or international newspapers or magazines, something that is often used as an indicator of a film's importance. Enrico Cocozza has preserved a time, a place, a way of life and people that have now changed or disappeared altogether. With *Fit O' the Toon* there is no sense that you are looking in at these people and places from an external perspective. A film such as this is *not a product* to be consumed by an international audience, so it need not mediate between local and international concerns. In this film, the local is made 'strange' for the *internal* gaze.

Fit O' The Piece

You should now have a sense of the very different ways that sponsored and amateur films engage with the local space. It seems that when amateur filmmakers engaged with their local space it resulted in films that emphasised regional differences (such as accents, dialects and landscapes) that were erased in films for mass audiences. This approach to filmmaking is only now beginning to

be recognised and appreciated. Scottish literary figures, on the other hand, have tended to be far more attuned to the diversity of local voices and histories that exist under the national space.

Novelists such as Alexander McCall Smith are currently trying to popularise the potential value of the local. Writing in the *Scotland on Sunday* (26 February 2006), he opens his article with Hugh MacDiarmid's poem 'The Little White Rose of Scotland'. He goes on to urge contemporary Scottish writers to adopt this view of the world, because:

... the celebration of the local, and the local voice, is of the utmost importance. Scotland is well placed to play a part in that process. Scottish writers can show the world a local world, a small world, that has real flavour, that acts as a corrective to the assumption that we are all the same in our tastes and views.⁵

This statement could be seen as having importance at a time when debates are still dominated by literary traditions such as the Kailyard and the more recent development of Clydeside-ism. However, there are some tensions within McCall Smith's thesis. Seeing MacDiarmid's influence in poets such as Norman MacCaig, Edwin Morgan and Iain Crichton Smith, he notes their work 'embodied a sensibility that was not striving to communicate with an audience elsewhere: it was perfectly confident of what it was and where it was'.⁶ This suggests that the use of a local vernacular means giving up the truly global audience that McCall Smith is encouraging Scottish authors to write for. The question, it seems, is how best to represent a nation and its people through art that must cater to the assumptions and prejudices of an international audience?

As *Seawards the Great Ships* demonstrated, to make the local attractive and accessible to an international audience required a treatment acceptable to the external gaze. This was a problem that an inherently indigenous cinema, such as the one crafted by amateurs all over Scotland, simply did not have. By 'taking the global and making it local', they offered a diverse vision of Scotland. In doing so, the local became the voice for the amateur in a way that could never be the case for the professional. These artefacts of a genuinely popular film culture gave people outside of the centralised Scottish film industry a voice that had real sensitivity for the people and places they were creatively documenting.

Endnotes

1. Colin McArthur: 'Scotland and Cinema: The Iniquity of the Fathers' in his (ed): *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Cinema and Television* (London; BFI Publishing, 1982) p. 63.
2. John Fiske: *Understanding Popular Culture* (London; Routledge, 1990). p. 23.
3. Ibid. p. 25.
4. Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; Verso, 1991).
5. Alexander McCall Smith: 'Spreading the word' *Scotland on Sunday*, Review supplement, 26 February 2006. p. 2. (Also available online at <http://living.scotsman.com/books.cfm?id=294522006>).
6. Ibid.

