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Research Article

Ciné-Clubs and the Elision of Women's Labour

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Abstract

Bournemouth based ciné-club Crystal Productions (1931–1935) provided a flourishing creative ecosystem for aspiring amateur filmmakers, women among them. However, women's labour has been subsumed into the patriarchal legacy of the club. This re-examination demonstrates how women's film labour can be more effectively recognised through a transmedial approach, amplifying an alternative (feminist) narrative.

Keywords

Amateur film, women filmmakers, ciné-club, film archive, participatory media, feminist history

Creator's Statement

"Ciné-Clubs and the Elision of Women's Film Labour" embodies a range of concerns around the recognition of gendered work within amateur film contexts in the UK before 1950. In her work "Pink Slipped," Jane Gaines discusses the idiom that women involved in early film "had the rug pulled from under them" (2018: 12), a concept that has resonance within the amateur sphere where women were target consumers for new ciné-technologies after 1922 (Motrescu-Mayes and Norris Nicholson 2018; Burgess 2024). The pursuance of women as idealised users of ciné was conveyed throughout marketing rhetoric in the 1920s and 1930s, with popular society magazines such as *The Tatler* among the first to promote cinematography to its readers. With this knowledge, it is therefore perhaps surprising that women have relatively few firm attributions tied to extant film works in archive catalogues, compared to their male counterparts (Clayton et al. 2020). Recent work has shown that women were far more active in the amateur space than previously believed, frequently maligned under incorrect or erroneous attributions that the archive catalogue often proliferates (Motrescu-Mayes and Norris Nicholson 2018; Johnston 2023; Arnold et al. 2023; Arnold and Madden 2024; EAFA 2015).

As filmmaking collectives, ciné-clubs first appeared in the mid-1920s following the introduction of narrow-gauge reversal film stocks in 1922–23 (Norris Nicholson 2012). With the rise in popularity of amateur filmmaking, and increased visibility in the press, ciné was portrayed as an aspirational activity. Despite this market positioning and the prevalence of privilege among lone users, the framework of the ciné-club had the potential to democratise filmmaking, supported in part by the uptake in second-hand equipment available from the early 1930s onwards (Burgess 2024). Clubs typically charged a small subscription fee which, while clearly permitted some gate keeping, could open up opportunities for participants from lower income backgrounds who might otherwise be unable to access these technologies alone (occupations observed by Burgess [2024] ranged from shopkeeper, beautician, blacksmith, machinist and waiting/serving staff to solicitor, dentist, chemist and civil servants amongst other roles). Established anecdotal testimony around ciné-clubs has conveyed these spaces as male dominated, a notion typically corroborated by archival catalogues where male names are more likely to be visible. However,

female involvement in these clubs has been vastly understated in the record (Frith 2025: 79), with new evidence demonstrating that around 30% of ciné-club participants were female.
As formalised social spaces ciné-clubs adhered to broader patriarchally controlled "structural processes" (Irving 2020: 250). As such, women were less likely to occupy governance roles in these organisations than men (and if they did, typically as secretaries, as noted by Frith [2025: 78]). The male prominence in amateur club settings manifests as reoccurring attributions in the press, the catalogue, in the physical film reels and in the on-screen space and could be said to mirror a tendency towards auteurism as seen in the film industry, which Yvonne Tasker notes "privileges the authored text over the complexities of context" (Tasker 2010: 213). This sense of context has a particular resonance with ciné-club works created in less formal, unregulated environments where club output is unavoidably imbricated in the context of production. As this essay demonstrates, women were present in numbers in all of these club environments.
Women's ciné-club involvement demonstrates a mutability, an inconsistency that is not present for most male participants. Female lives rarely exhibited the stability afforded by men's consistent and "continuous work histories" (Bell 2021: 7) and would be more likely to be punctuated by life events such as marriage, child rearing, and periods of unpaid work (Summerfield 1998: 95), even when taking into account other extenuating circumstances that impacted both genders. While club activities more or less came to a standstill during the war years, this pause in male (and female) led activities did not impact the strong male presence in the club's overall chronology. The relative constancy of key male participants throughout many societies' lifespans aligns itself with an almost natural assumption that the extant films *should* be retained with these members, in preference to those whose involvement may have been in flux.
Ciné-clubs often emulated industry, borrowing or being influenced by roles and terminology in this space. This often served to reduce creative club functions to a single descriptor and to elevate a handful of named roles, at the denigration of others, deemed "lower in value." I argue that discussion of amateur work, particularly in club environments could be better recognised in terms of levels of *ciné-engagement*, as a way to recognise the fluid nature of club environments without assigning value to certain tasks over others. Eschewing the "great man" paradigm (Gerstner and Staiger 2013) in favour of a more egalitarian reality in this way, allows for acknowledgement of women's fragmented and often uncategorised involvement. Important to mention is that while this essay names a selection of women involved in the club, it is visually apparent that *more* women were active in this space than we have names for. Those names we do know are simply those who filled designated roles either in the club's operation or in the production of extant films, and whose names are documented in contemporary press reports, the scrapbook accompanying the collection and in on-screen credits. This reliance on documentary sources signals a further potential elision that puts the recognition of women in un-defined or ancillary roles at risk, roles seemingly unworthy of attribution. Not all club films in this study provide credits for participants in ancillary roles, this is not to say that these activities did not take place.
The films cited within this essay are all within the collection of the Wessex Film and Sound Archive (WFSA), where they were accessioned under the name of Robert G. Torrens. Having worked for close to a decade with amateur film material at WFSA, I felt a deep sense of the challenges associated with screening this type of moving image content "off the shelf." Rarely are amateur films ready to screen without further editing or contextualisation, and even in instances where they are highly polished and technically proficient there remain challenges in how to make these most accessible for modern audiences. Having presented findings on this collection of film in an academic context on a number of occasions I was struck by how fragmentary and incomplete my re-telling of this story had been—with the notable absence of the very moving images cited as evidence. As a member of archive staff, I have always been cognisant of the level of privilege associated with access to the collection, particularly for un-digitised content, and I therefore wished to elevate my discussion from the page and rather than simply narrate a new perspective, to apply the films themselves as persuasive proponents of women's film labour.

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Biography

Zoë Viney Burgess is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of West London. She earned her Ph.D. in Film from the University of Southampton (2024), where she focused on gender and class in amateur film within the collection of Wessex Film and Sound Archive (WFSA). Zoë is also Film Curator at WFSA where she has been in post since 2016. In 2023–2024, she served as Senior Research Associate on the *Women in Focus* project at the University of East Anglia. She has taught various MA courses and participated in research projects with the *Social Practices Lab* and the school of Languages, Cultures, and Linguistics at the University of Southampton.

Review by Keith M. Johnston, University of East Anglia

Given my own research interests, and preexisting knowledge of Zoë Viney Burgess's work as both researcher and archivist, there is a lot in this submission that I liked and enjoyed. The desire to combine research and visual evidence—the well-argued perspective that it is important to use the archival film itself to illustrate ideas and gaps in existing histories—is a strong one. While the power of that combination of archival and newly filmed material, catalogue records, sound effects, music, and voiceover does vary across the running time, this revised version offers a compelling argument both for its chosen videographic approach and for the need to be more creative when engaging with amateur (or other) media. Visually and aurally, there is often a lightness of touch to the montage or combination of elements that can lift this beyond its documentary roots. I particularly liked the overall framing of the essay around the idea of women in such film or ciné-clubs (and likely beyond) being "ciné-engagement" and the acknowledgement that such engagement is only partially captured in existing records or filmed material.

There are strong visual moments in here—including, but not limited to, the scratched archive film running horizontally across screen, the camera lens coming in and out of focus, the split screens of film footage and credits, the shots of specific women and their credits, the shots of catalogue records—that add to the overall topic but also create an attractive visual representation of the argument. It may be an obvious point to make, but the use of the archival footage from the various Bournemouth club films is strong throughout, expressing the idea that words cannot fully encompass amateur filmed content or these archival absences.

Alongside the good work, there are some moments that do not quite land for me: the addition of iris shots of the different women from the clubs in one early sequence is (roughly) period specific, but it perhaps adds a voyeuristic element to the footage that was probably not in the originals. In the second half, the use of a more dominant narrative voiceover to explain contexts is never as strong or convincing as the layering of audio and visuals found elsewhere (this feels like a place where the written statement could have provided the argument). The audio track as a whole feels a little less polished, with a couple of abrupt music edits and the clipping of various voiceover lines: the voiceover also appears to be a mono track, rather than stereo—which might have given it more presence. These are minor quibbles, however, given the bulk of the essay holds the attention and offers a strong (and often quite playful) documentary-led sense of advocacy for these ciné-engaged women.

The comment that lands particularly well, and offers a summation of the whole piece, comes just after the halfway point: "There are more women, but we just don't know their names." The video is a creative and regularly compelling attempt to find a way to better represent those unnamed or absent from film history.

Review by Heather Norris Nicholson, University of Huddersfield (affiliated researcher) and independent writer

Bringing film clips out of the archive to a wider audience with reminders about how to read the imagery and catalogue entry, as explored in this video essay is always welcome. Such work strengthens the importance of archival repositories for film preservation and helps to alert researchers to the gaps and silences in catalogues and promote professional best practice within and beyond archiving circles.

In Zoë Viney Burgess's submission, the materiality of archive film and the implicitly joyous discoveries plus associated challenges, from an archivist's perspective, that occur during acquisition, cataloguing, conservation, interpretation and outreach all play their part. Her video essay explores the elision or omission of women both from ciné-club productions and the cataloguing system. Combining moving image, film stills, club memorabilia, catalogue details, and archival shots, viewers encounter the interconnected worlds of ciné-film and archiving. This transmedial richness benefits from Burgess's archival and academic backgrounds, drawing on access to imagery unfettered by conventional limitations of cost and print publication.

Through voice-over, visuals and the accompanying summary, Burgess provides her audience with a well-illustrated dive into extant club productions undertaken by members of

Bournemouth's ciné-club, on the southern English coast, in the early 1930s. Club produced ciné-films were acquired by the Wessex Film and Sound Archive (WFSA) and catalogued under the name of Robert Torrens. An accompanying scrapbook and other club correspondence also identify key club members and acknowledge some female activity. However, Burgess argues, even this valuable metadata underplays the real agency and contribution of women as producers of visual meaning although they appear on screen, not simply in walk-on roles and they are listed in some film credits.

We learn of how female club activity, very usefully framed as "ciné-engagement," is repeatedly underacknowledged—in surviving documentation about club life and most obviously in film credits that reference only acting roles or women's involvement in writing, camera or production work. Indeed, other essential roles (continuity, make-up, costumes, stage management, props, titling, etc.) are ignored. Burgess highlights the visual disparity between the relatively few named individuals with specific club roles and unnamed females whose presence is recorded on club footage: whether in fact all the young women featured in one sequence were all active club members or friends, companions, and hangers-on that became part of the scene we do not know. Even the ultimate transfer of club-related materials into archival care tends to be, as seen in the Bournemouth example, in the single name of one male club member. Burgess points out how this consequence of patriarchal governance at club level concentrates a club's assets into the hands of a long-standing male club officer and subsequently affects how catalogue entries are compiled, thus obscuring women's ciné-labour.

Comparisons with professional film industry workplace relations—and the reassessment of women's varied and under-recognised roles within film history—are not new in studies of amateur media but here, industry's structures are believed to shape the nomenclature of amateur practice, too. Just as commercial studios sustained male-dominated workplace hierarchies and downplayed women's agency in film production, Burgess argues that this model came to dominate the amateur sphere, via a transfer of borrowed terminology circulated by writers for the hobby press. Women's labour in ciné-circles, she suggests, thus lost its visibility. Torrens's networking with other south coast ciné enthusiasts in setting up the club was another potential influence in this formative period. But did the amateur cinematographer's new lexicon of film-related words "shot," "lighting," "location" also arrive with a sense of industry-derived production roles? Textual evidence could augment this idea. Potentially it is a compelling contribution to the well-worked territory of the professional and non-professional binary in amateur media studies. Alternatively, was Torrens, a dentist by training, just reflecting the times and circles in which he moved? Were he and his other club participants influenced by perspectives borrowed from the film industry or just by prevailing social conventions? I feel that societal attitudes towards women more generally on opportunities in and beyond the home should get a mention, too.

Playfully conceived, this video essay displays Burgess's knowledge of amateur film history and the richness of the WFSA's collections. Imaginatively edited strong visuals recur and screen shots of the Torrens catalogue entry bring valuable clarity to the argument, even if less visually engaging than the evocative ciné-imagery. Scratched and worn emulsion, flickering exposures, and slipping sprocket holes evoke the medium's materiality and fragility. Film clips evidence the versatility of the club's early output: mainly story plays shot indoors and outside, actuality reportage, a local travelogue and recording of club activities. The curated imagery points to a dedicated group of young male and female enthusiasts with time and resources available to experiment with emerging ciné-technologies, within prevailing constraints and opportunities. Imagery highlights women's on-screen participation and clues to agency within club life, as directors, script writers and actors but as Burgess makes clear, a fuller understanding of women's labour—ciné-engagement—within England's early ciné-club movement could be better served by more nuanced indicators of women's activities that remain hidden in archival collections. Further work on other ciné-clubs well-represented in the early hobby literature or on club materials already in archival care, informed by Burgess's discussion, will help to shed more light on the elision of women's labour in the early ciné-club scene in Britain and, indeed, elsewhere.

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Competing Interests

The author works part time as Film Curator at Wessex Film and Sound Archive, as well as for the University of West London.