

From Sarah Neely ““Ploughing a lonely furrow”- Margaret Tait and ‘professional’ filmmaking practices in 1950s Scotland”, in Ian Craven (ed), *Movies on Home Ground- Explorations in Amateur Cinema* (Newcastle- Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), pp. 301-326.

“Ploughing a lonely furrow”: Margaret Tait and professional filmmaking practices in 1950s Scotland

Sarah Neely

Margaret Tait - filmmaker, poet, painter, and short story writer - has frequently been cited as a truly independent filmmaker. Her first and only feature film, *Blue Black Permanent* was released in 1992, but she is primarily remembered as a prolific creator of shorter films, ranging from vivid portraits, to cinematic poems and mobile graphic works painted directly onto film stock. When her films were screened at Calton studios in 1979, she was billed as a “one woman film-industry”.¹ Hugh McDiarmid, the subject of one of Tait’s film portraits, had much earlier described her as “ploughing a lonely furrow”, and the majority of her work, although sometimes aided by family and friends, was produced largely on her own and with limited budgets.² She received very little financial support for her productions. Although her film *Colour Poems* was financed by the Scottish Arts Council’s “filmmaker as artist” competition in 1974, the majority of her attempts at securing funding, including a number of approaches made to the Scottish Film Council, were thwarted. To some extent, this was because her work, crossing a range of disciplines, was unable to be placed within familiar traditions. Her experimental methods were frequently misread as “unprofessional” by a variety of funding bodies, more focused on the strengths of Scotland’s documentary revival.³ Despite this lack of backing, Tait managed to achieve a degree of success, distributing her films internationally through diverse mechanisms. Yet it is hardly

¹ Film programme Calton Studios, 6 May 1979, D97/25.

² McDiarmid, “Intimate Filmmaking in Scotland”, 417.

³ Neely, ‘Contemporary Scottish Cinema’, 151-165.

surprising that the oversight of her work on a funding level in Scotland, is reflected in the filmmaker's absence from critical histories of Scottish cinema.

Tait's work could also be read as part of a more general and problematic history of the critical reception of women avant-garde artists, a reality that has prompted a number of feminist initiatives to begin the recovery of a fragmented film history. As various commentators have noted, the material most at risk of being lost is often driven by personal, intimate narratives dealing with issues perceived as having lesser value than those deemed to be of cultural, "collective" importance.⁴ As with Tait, such filmmakers also often risk being overlooked because of difficulties in identifying their work within existing genres or filmmaking practices, and their often attendant designation as "substandard" with reference to aesthetic as well as technical measures. Robin Blaetz has countered such instincts, and criticised the narrow-vision of previous film scholars for not realising that the play with focus, the haphazard framing, the disjunctive editing, and the often abbreviated length, found in the films of Gunvor Nelson, Chick Strand, and others working in the 1960s and beyond, were not signs of incompetence, but marks of a radically different vision, often exercising remarkable influence on other filmmakers. It is only in the past several years that Marie Menken has been credited with influencing Stan Brakhage and others, many of whom have been lionized for half a century for displaying Menken-like qualities, while she herself was forgotten, and her own films allowed to disappear.⁵

Like the avant-garde filmmakers mentioned earlier, Tait's work focused on the particular and the personal. Like other non-narrative films that explore the materiality of the medium, their primary focus is not to attempt to address issues of national identity. Tait's oversight can be seen as part of a general issue around the invisibility of avant-garde filmmakers within studies of Scottish cinema where artists are relegated to an international framework lying outside the radar of the national and are often marginalised because of their inability to contribute to the debates around national identity.⁶ Similar to the critics' misreading of Nelson and Strand's work as unprofessional and therefore incompetent, Tait's work has often been described as "amateur" in the most negative sense of that term. When she sent her work to BBC Scotland in the 1960s, the response was simply that the "filming and editing were technically inadequate" and that it was "difficult to find a theme of interest". Interestingly, from local perspectives, it was also suggested that she try further of Scotland, or more specifically, London.⁷

In many respects, Tait's methods of working encapsulated those of the "true" amateur. Essentially she was a one-woman show, although freelance assistance

⁴ Rabinovitz, "The Future of Feminism", 42.

⁵ Blaetz, "Rescuing The Fragmentary Evidence", 154.

⁶ Morgan, "Life On The Margins".

⁷ Letter to Alex Pirie from Finlay J. MacDonald, BBC Scotland, 20 June 1967, D97/2.

was very occasionally brought in. Production was often protracted, and assembly driven by opportunity rather than deadline. On average she produced one film a year, but like many amateurs, would have several projects in various developmental or production stages. For some films, it would take a number of years for her to collect the material necessary for their completion. At the same time, her activity emulated professional models in certain respects, and sought to exploit the output commercially, if only to fund further filmmaking. Whilst she sold prints to various organisations however, she rarely garnered profit from her activities, and her company, Ancona Films, continually worked at a deficit. Although her films were included in a number of international filmmaker tours, she also frequently organised exhibitions of her own, screening her work locally. This essay traces Tait's earlier filmmaking practices, and the fusion of amateur and professional instincts which constituted her formulation of an "independent" film practice. Although Tait did not align herself with organised amateur filmmaking in Scotland, the account will consider her work in relation to the general critical debates around the nature of amateur versus professional filmmaking.

Continental Optimisms

Like many other amateur filmmakers, Tait's work seems to have gained impetus from wartime experience, and to have developed post-war on return from service. Shortly after qualifying in medicine, she had joined the Royal Army Medical Corps, before serving in the Far East from 1943-1946. It was there that she became increasingly interested in photography, and time spent in the region would provide material for a number of scripts and stories, which would be developed later in a wide range of forms. Upon her return, she enrolled in a night class at the Edinburgh College of Art, moving to London the following year, where she was engaged in a number of writing projects. The most conspicuous output of the stay was a novel, *The Lilywhite Boys*, drawing upon her experience of being stationed in Jhansi, a city in northern India that served as a recuperation point for troops returning from Burma.⁸ A manuscript was eventually sent off to publishers who were unresponsive, citing the current glut of war novels as cause for rejection. After a few years, Tait moved on to Perugia's school for foreigners, improving her Italian for a year, before enrolling in The Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, in Rome, where she studied from 1950 to 1952.

Tait's presence at the Centro must have attracted a certain attention, for upon her return to Britain, Gavin Lambert approached her to arrange a screening of student films produced in the school for the London Film Society. The previous

⁸ The Lilywhite Boys, unpublished manuscript, D97/33.

year Lambert had written a lengthy account of post-war Italian cinema for *Sight and Sound*, and perhaps because of this, also requested that Tait write a short article on the works that might contextualise the screenings, and possibly find publication elsewhere.⁹ Although the article never appeared in *Sight and Sound*, it may well have been used to accompany the Film Society screenings. The surviving account captures Tait's optimistic mood after returning to Britain. She writes:

Rome is a centre of cinema, that is of cinema as an art even more than of cinema as a speculative enterprise. The people are enthusiastic about the cinema; they love films and the comments one overhears in bars and restaurants are critical and a good deal more adult than the "Who's in it?" type of discussion I seem to have heard so much of. Intelligent persons discuss cinema as elsewhere they discuss literature or painting. This status of being a "centre" is kept up, and subject matter for the discussions is provided by the liveliness of production here. There are always two or three important directors making important films as well as countless minor productions going on. And everybody knows about the films in production, - indeed one meets the companies filming in the streets all the year round. There in the Piazza di Spagna was Emmer making his "Le Ragazze della Piazza di Spagna", while at the top of the stairs Fellini was shooting another film, and at the same time De Sica, taking a rest from directing, was acting in "Buongiorno Elefante" in a suburban street.¹⁰

Within this heady atmosphere, Tait forged a number of friendships that would prove influential throughout her own career as filmmaker. For the production of her first projects, *One is One* (1951) and *The Lion and the Griffin* (1952), she collaborated with fellow Centro students Peter Hollander (later worked a documentary filmmaker for United Nations), and Fernando Birri (now an established director and co-founder of film schools in Argentina and Cuba).

After leaving the Centro, Hollander and Tait established the production company, Ancona films, named after lodgings in the Via Ancona, Rome. Early letterheads for the company cite offices in Rome, New York (where Hollander resided), and Edinburgh. Later, promotional materials list only the offices from which Tait worked in Edinburgh's Rose Street from the 1950s, until relocating to her native Kirkwall in 1974. She would remain there, making films, until her death in 1999. Electing to work from Edinburgh, but especially from the Orkneys, was frequently a source of amazement for fellow practitioners, puzzled by both her desire and ability to produce films in locations remote from the centre of industry activity. In a letter written to Tait in 1982, Lindsay Anderson commented on the frustration she must have felt working outside of London where all of the

⁹ Lambert, "Notes on A Renaissance", 1951, and "Further Notes on a Renaissance", 1952.

¹⁰ Tait, "Independence: Small Budget Production in Rome", 1.

“wheeling and dealing” occurred.¹¹ Her Ancona films partner Peter Hollander encouraged her, at various points in time, to move to London. Although Tait resisted such encouragements, exploring working methods that allowed her a greater deal of freedom in this sense, the contacts made in film school would form an essential basis for the success she achieved in distributing her films internationally.

The 1950s proved a particularly active period in Tait’s filmmaking career, and fuelled by the optimism generated by her time in Rome, she produced a variety of films that serve as early indicators of those to come. The desire to master basic skills is combined with excitement about exploring new possibilities. Whilst many of the results seem exploratory, they also represent disciplinary exercises, as her developmental notebooks remind us. Here shot lists appear, later edited and responded to, and commented on by herself - to herself. There are also notes on editing, which are later responded to - after a job has been done. In relation to the making of *Orquil Burn* (1955), *Happy Bees* (1955) and *The Drift Back* (1956)¹² for example - the films to be discussed in this essay - Tait expressed the importance of knowing the medium, confirming that she had “learnt a lot about camera movements in making these films even if the ones I have used are very conventional”.¹³ Overall the notebooks confirm the time period as particularly crucial to the development of Tait’s approach to filmmaking. Her interest in experimental possibilities, alongside ambitions to master standard technique, and a surprisingly open-minded approach to more commercial ventures, provides a fascinating case study of tensions between amateur and professional impulses evident in the work of many “non-professionals”. Tait pursued commercial opportunity thereafter whilst guarding her independence, always mindful of the balance to be struck between the supposed “integrities” of amateurism, and the economic necessities of engagement with professional bodies. In a brief statement of intention, Tait reveals her belief, for example, in the virtues of smaller budgets, and describes a plan to follow the Italian method of working that would avoid the hazards later encountered by the neorealists, “forsaking their post-war economic way of working.”¹⁴

Balancing ambition and economic necessity often proved difficult. Although she did manage to accrue funding from various sources, Ancona films operated at a significant loss. For the most part, her films were supported from her own earnings

¹¹ Letter from Lindsay Anderson, 22 Feb 1982, D97/25.

¹² Although the date given to this film is 1956 in several different sources, Tait completed this before *Happy Bees* and *Orquil Burn* dated as 1955. According to Tait’s notes and details of their first screening dates, *The Drift Back* was completed before or at least around the same time.

¹³ Tait notebooks, D97/3.

¹⁴ Tait notebooks, D97/38.

as a General (medical) Practitioner. Like many amateurs, she practiced a kind of creative parsimony, and was particularly frugal with available stock, re-using old sequences for new projects. For *Calypso* (1955), one of Tait's hand-painted films, she recycled found, 35mm stock which she discovered in Rome, working with its existing optical musical soundtrack. Tight budgets led to the resourceful approaches that informed much of her other filmmaking. *Portrait of Ga* (1952), the first film produced by Tait as a truly "lone worker", was made for under £100. *Happy Bees* and *Orquil Burn* were both made for a total of £700.¹⁵ Certainly no external funding seems to have been available for films such as these; some however, recouped some of their expense through later sales and rental.

The Drift Back, one of Tait's few wholly sponsored short works, was produced for £87, and was supported by the Orkney Education Committee, for distribution via the Rural Cinema Scheme. The film explores issues around migration and depopulation, following the movement of people from mainland Scotland, back to Orkney, or from the Orkney mainland, back to one of the smaller islands. Unlike several later films, which employ a personally narrated commentary, the film makes some concession to its sponsors, and incorporates a more conventional voice-over, delivered here by Harald R. Leslie, an Edinburgh Barrister, originally from Orkney. Produced as a pilot for a local film magazine, it was hoped that by addressing themes of local interest, the film would appeal to local filmgoers, as such materials had in various other locales. Such magazines were staples of the amateur film movement elsewhere, playing an important role within local information services.

Local initiative underpinned the Rural Cinema Scheme, set up to offer cinema projections in parts of mainland Orkney and on several of the outer islands. Feature films were shown eventually regularly (either weekly or fortnightly) in twenty-seven different locations. By 1953, the committee had chosen to book films independently of the local Film Society, the Highlands and Islands Film Guild, to curb expenditures, but also to allow for an approach to programming that would be more considerate of the preferences of local audiences.¹⁶ After a successful screening of an amateur film of the Queen's visit to Kirkwall, which nearly doubled audience figures, the Committee had agreed to consider the future programming of local interest films, and proposed the production of a monthly film magazine, with local filmmakers provided with the necessary film stock for its production. The first film produced under this scheme was eventually *The Drift*

¹⁵ Letter to DN Lowe, Secretary Carnegie Trust, 14 May 1957, D97/30.

¹⁶ The Highlands and Islands Film Guild was a mobile cinemas scheme operating throughout the region that would provide screenings - usually in village halls - of feature films, newsreels and educational films.

Back. Although the expense proved considerable for the council, it was suggested by Alex Doloughan, member of the committee and locations manager of the film, that prints could be sold for additional income. It was also proposed that Tait should continue with the magazine, producing six films a year, at a cost of £1500.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the budgets proved too large for the council, and the project was swiftly abandoned. A camera was however eventually purchased for more limited use, and short films were later produced by employees of the Scheme. Doloughan and principal projectionist, Sandy Wylie's film of a royal visit in 1960, is just one example.

The Rural Cinema Scheme was itself suffering considerably throughout the 1950s. Shows were often cancelled because of bad weather, and projectors and equipment were often damaged by snowstorms and hurricanes. Attendances also declined, as television was reported to have "hit the islands with a vengeance."¹⁸ Such was the impact that, just a few years after *The Drift Back* was made, it was proposed that all of the mainland screening centres be shut down, and several of the island locations were also considered for permanent closure. It was not until 1965, almost a decade after *The Drift Back*, that Tait could complete what could be considered the second installment of the Orkney Magazine, in the form of a short film of the Kirkwall sporting event - akin to rugby- *The Ba*, followed by footage of the Stromness ploughing match. Although prints of this material were again sold for nominal sums, Tait's production costs were not covered in the same way as with *The Drift Back*. With the Rural Cinema Scheme facing financial hardships, and the committee now capable of filming its own local material to accompany screenings, it soon proved financially prohibitive to exhibit in this way.

As always, Tait remained imaginative in her exploration of support mechanisms. Around this time, she was certainly also in contact with the Highlands and Islands Film Guild (HIFG). In 1964, she approached the organisers to arrange a screening of her film *Rose Street* (1956), filmed long ago around her studio in Edinburgh. Although the Guild was keen to exhibit the film, once again there were issues around funding. Films for the organisation were generally booked as entire programmes from renters in London. The hire of additional films was clearly deemed an extravagance, particularly difficult to justify when the material's subject matter did not relate to the local interests of the Highlands. In May of 1965, Tait wrote to the secretary of the HIFG, Hugh Ross, suggesting that they "might be of mutual help to each other"¹⁹. Offering to film local events for exhibition on the

¹⁷ Minutes of the Orkney Education Committee, Kirkwall, 7 May 1957, p. 1340.

¹⁸ Annual report from the Minutes of the Orkney County Council Education Committee, Kirkwall, 2 Oct 1962, January 1959-December 1961, C05/1/20.

¹⁹ Letter to Hugh Ross, Secretary, Highlands and Islands Film Guild, Inverness, 22nd May 1965, D97/37.

circuit, with no imagined financial gain, she requested only occasional use of a 16mm projector in return. The Guild seemed in even less of a position to assist her than the Orkney Education Committee. Ross responded quickly to Tait's request, but felt unable to take the proposal forward. Television again seems to have been the key factor. He writes simply, "There was a day perhaps when such mutual help as you suggest might have been of some benefit but in these days of almost complete coverage by television, I doubt if such a scheme would be viable from the point of economics."²⁰

Potential support-structures seem to have remained unexplored for loosely ideological, or perhaps merely instinctive, reasons. The rapid expansion of the Film Societies movement, a distinctive feature of Scottish film culture through this period, might in other circumstances have provided the backing for Tait's local production that it offered filmmakers elsewhere.²¹ Close to home, the Kirkwall Film Society (KFS) was certainly experiencing a period of revival. *The Orcadian* optimistically reported in 1957, for example, that the society "defies TV".²² One of the few to be established during the war, a time when many Scottish groups were disbanding, the Society was run by close contacts. KFS Secretary Alex Doloughan had been Tait's partner on *The Drift Back*, and key to the development of the experimental film magazine. Despite such familiarity however with those involved, Tait herself had little direct involvement in the group, occasionally offering advice regarding programming, but remaining at a distance from its actual gatherings. Film Society culture and its emphasis on "appreciation", seem to have been a source of anxiety. Whilst on occasion she looked to the societies as a source of information, useful for locating skilled professionals, a deep-rooted cynicism is apparent in her condemnation of the Edinburgh Film Festival, which she likens to a "film society movement rather than commercial cinema", an exercise akin to collecting antiques - "what scots do when they want to be artistic."²³

Localised Illustrations

Tait's films always drew a good deal of interest from "cultural" societies, with Scotland or, more specifically, Orkney as their focus. In April 1956, a screening was held by The Dunedin Society For the Promotion of the Scottish Arts, of which Hugh MacDiarmid, later the subject of one of Tait's short film portraits, was president. Various Orkney- and Shetland-based associations also proved interested

²⁰ Letter from Hugh Ross, Film Guild, 26 May 1965, D97/37.

²¹ See essays by Melanie Selfe and Richard MacDonald elsewhere in this volume.

²² Insert reference to *The Orcadian* report.

²³ Tait notebooks, D97/33

audiences. In 1961, when Tait was still living in the capital, screenings were arranged as part of an “Orkney night” for the Edinburgh, Leith and District Orkney Association. In 1964, she accompanied her films north, for a screening at the Aberdeen branch of the Orkney and Shetland Association. The screening caught the attention of James Wilson, producer of the BBC’s television magazine program *The Talk of North*, who subsequently approached the filmmaker to request viewing copies of *The Drift Back* and *Orquil Burn*. Tait, by now living in Sutherland, again offered to film local events for the programme.

Initial involvement and interest in the local magazine series in Orkney could simply be testament to Tait’s financial acumen, but also reveals a commitment to providing local images of the community. In a press book for *Orquil Burn*, she explains how the motivation was two-fold:

partly to provide entertainment (and attract bigger crowds to the rural cinemas and help to make the scheme pay) and partly to counteract the “call away” effect of the average exotic film by presenting an equally interesting “look what you’ve got here” sort of document.²⁴

Such commitment would seem welcome, particularly throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as fruitful relations between the Scottish Film Council and the Scottish Association of Amateur Cinematography developed, and their interests came together in bodies such as the Scottish Educational Film Association.²⁵ Although like many amateurs involved with such bodies, Tait prized the filming of local events, she approached the subjects, as always, on her own terms. The frequent incompatibility of her dual aims was sometimes quickly discovered. On the one hand, the small amounts of funding involved would provide her with basic materials, would allow her to work independently, and to pursue her own artistic experimentation. On the other hand, as with the experience with the Orkney Education Committee, required emphasis on historically representative material, and its potential educational use, pulled against the experimentation towards which Tait was habitually drawn. It is not surprising that when Tait sent her films to the Scottish Film Council in the mid-1950s, the work was assessed in terms of its instrumental value, and fared badly in these terms. In general, the films were described as “too bitty”, “too long”, “too repetitive”, “lack[ing] in unity” and generally too difficult to use for school room purposes.²⁶

Although hope for the continuation of an Orkney Film Magazine dwindled with the evidence of slow financial returns, and despite largely inappropriate

²⁴ D97/12.

²⁵ McBain, “And The Winner Is...”, 100-1.

²⁶ Scottish Film Council, DM Elliot, 23 Jan 1956; SFC, Elliot, 26 April 1956; SFC, Elliot, 28 May 1956, D97/37.

criticisms from official bodies, Tait continued to make films about Orcadian life. During the production of her next film, *Orquil Burn*, she sketched a rough plan for an Orkney series or “omnibus”, presumably once again with the intention of appealing to the local film market. In addition to *Orquil Burn*, the roughly seventy-minute series would have included *Happy Bees*, a film about an Orkney farm, a film about wild animals, and another on the subject of Skara Brae. Most of these sections would never be realised however.

Orquil Burn was produced, on a minimal budget, and relied on unpaid assistance from the family and friends who appear in the film, and The Orkney Strathspey and Reel Society which provided the music. Tait’s “poetic” approach is well illustrated by the making of the film. Films often began life in the pages of Tait’s notebooks, where lists of places, images or scenes carve out the rough sculptural forms. The premise for *Orquil Burn*, following a burn from Scapa Flow, back to its source, is based on a film that Tait had seen about a film crew tracing the course of the River Nile. Comparisons could also be made with the work of contemporary filmmakers such as William Raban’s *Thames Film* (1986) or Chris Welsby’s *Streamline* (1976), both films re-working predictable treatments of actual locations as triggers for experimentation. Like these films, *Orquil Burn*’s examination of a particular place provides its loose ideological structure, yet whilst always foregrounding a distinctly personal context. Departing from the conventional narration of the *The Drift Back*, Tait’s own voice provides the voice-over. Speaking about the landscape in a familiar and personal register, her words draw attention to “the old dog spot” and note that “the local farmer is Uncle Peter”. Like the filmmaker’s later *Land Makar* (1981), a portrait-like film of Mary Graham Sinclair, a neighbouring crofter, where interactions between filmmaker and subject during an interview are suffused with an intimacy and familiarity, the *Orquil Burn* stresses Tait’s highly personal approach.

Tait’s notebooks for the project attest to the maintenance of a professional approach, clearly informed by her formal training, alongside commitment to the personal and poetic. A variety of shooting scripts, listing over two-hundred shots for the film, are intertwined with reflective prose pieces on the burn - some poetic, others more like personal reminders. In one instance, Tait recalls how “The water used to meander and get lost in the fields. Uncle Peter had the burn channeled straight for the proper drainage of his lands. The flowers came and grew beside it.”²⁷ Later, poems merge into lists of desired shots. A string of subjects, reading like the seeds of a poem, “caldale cows, meadowsweet, a small water fall” becomes a catalogue of what she will shoot, “must do trickles out of peat, sphagnum moss and cotton”²⁸. Sometimes the words on the page are translated into

²⁷ Tait notebooks, D97/3.

²⁸ Tait notebooks D97/3.

filmic images, and on occasion the words form the basis for Tait's poetic voice-overs. Shooting becomes an extension of her writing practices, a necessity when faced with industry constraints. Amongst the notes for *Happy Bees*, also developed in this caméra-stylo-like way, sketches for what would become *Rose Street* appear as: "Wet Monday: Make it in Edin. Weary and wet. Grim faces, pavement, etc."²⁹

Jonas Mekas' use of personal narration and collage techniques (especially in terms of his diary filmmaking) justify further points of comparison.³⁰ What is read in Mekas as collage, is very reminiscent of what Tait described as "condensation", implying a certain filtering of sensation and idea, to produce a direct and immediate effect, akin to poetry.³¹ In the programme notes for her film *Where I am is Here* (1964), she explains how when she started filming again in 1963, she:

made a conscious decision that there was no use working in this lone way and at this sort of budget level, unless I was doing it at the level of poetry, that is on the same level as what I had been lately writing, and translating, and painting (particularly in twenty-nine illustrations, in aniline colours, for Lorca's "Poet in New York").³²

Such creation of virtue from necessity, and rationalisation of limited resources as aesthetic incentive, echoes very amateur stresses on "accommodation" to one's circumstances as a basis for distinctive creativity, as well as Mekas' celebrated designation of "substandard" cinema as a potential folk art on the basis of its freedom from commercialised norms.³³ Other points of connection might be stressed: Tait's use of "unsynchronised" sound in particular might be compared to that of Mekas, although while both filmmakers play with the debasement of sound and image as an element of collage-making, specific emphases occur in their respective work (eg. Tait's sound is usually natural rather than synthesised).

As the Scottish Film Council's response to Tait's films reveals, such divergences from familiar aesthetic norms and agreed professional standards, may well be construed as failures of realisation. Such choices of subject matter and styles of commentary, palpably comfortable in their origins in the personal, are probably more likely to be read as traces of an amateur cinema at its most functional, akin to "aide-memoire" or home movie of personal significance, rather than artistry of any wider, cultural value. Mike Leggett has usefully defended Tait's work against this classification, stressing its transcendence of the casualisms often recognised in writings around the home movie. Writing about *Portrait of Ga*

²⁹ Tait notebooks D97/3.

³⁰ Ruoff, "Home Movies of The Avant-Garde", 294-312.

³¹ Tait notebooks D97/25.

³² *Where I am is Here*, programme notes, D97/37.

³³ Mekas, "8mm. Cinema as Folk Art", 83.

(1952), Tait's portrait of her mother, whose direct and familiar expressions reveal personal context, suggests that it "demonstrates a certain intensity of observation (motivated by affection) which is possible in intimate domestic circumstance but is entirely unrelated to the 'home movie' tradition..."³⁴ His stance against assimilation of Tait's work to the home movie tradition comes as little surprise. As Karen L. Ishizuka comments, apart from "visionaries such as Jonas Mekas, most people don't take home movies seriously".³⁵

Rooted in the domestic, the home movie is often read along divisions of gender, and Tait's womanhood is an important factor here, possibly further encouraging designation of the films as amateur, in terms that assume a pejorative status for that condition.³⁶ Zimmerman describes how "by the 1950s, amateur film was almost completely isolated within the confines of the nuclear family" and how by the mid-1950s "children were photographed more than anything or anyone else".³⁷ Tait's preoccupation with the domestic may have some resonance here, especially in relation to her own *Happy Bees*, a film about a child's experience of summer in Orkney, which featured young members of Tait's own family. However, extracts from her production notes for *Happy Bees* reveals a conscious resistance to labelling in such terms. The important distinction here is that for her, the film was to be made "for children not too much about children (note; difference between this and the home movie tradition - not just filming family!)"³⁸ Tait's films remain personal and poetic in the domestic sphere as elsewhere, adopting a direct and candid mode of address, but moving beyond biographical ambitions at every turn.

The feminist postcolonial critic bell hooks employed a self-referential approach to feminist theory, incorporating biography in her writing. As Moore-Gilbert et. al. describe,

what hooks does is to reorient the idea of the self, and she would not certainly apologize for the emphasis she places on personal experience, seeing this instead as liberating, and as a crucial cultural component of the bases of her radical female subjectivity. Indeed, it is the erasure of the body and of a history of the self in white academe that hooks is in part exposing. Teaching to transgress entails making the teacher more visible in the classroom.³⁹

Although it would be misguided to argue that Tait was adopting such a radical ideological stance, her personal mode of filmmaking challenges professional filmmaking practices, through tendencies to reveal rather than conceal personal

³⁴ Leggett, "The Autonomous Filmmaker", 2.

³⁵ Ishizuka, "A Veil of Poetry", 45.

³⁶ Zimmerman, "Democracy and Cinema", 74.

³⁷ Ibid., 76-77.

³⁸ Tait notebooks, D97/3.

³⁹ Moore-Gilbert, Stanton and Maley, "Introduction", 44.

contexts. Interestingly however, such revelation was confined to the films themselves. Tait, whose projects were developed from her own personal experiences, did not embrace the media's focus on the biographical details of her own life. Television programmes made about her, for BBC Scotland's *Spectrum* series in 1979, and a Channel Four profile in 1983, both supposedly highlighting her achievements, were not greeted enthusiastically by the filmmaker: both, she felt, seemed more interested in her than the films.⁴⁰ Having agreed to the programmes, in the hope of re-generating interest in the films, and attracting funding for future filmmaking ventures, her disappointment is understandable.

The fact that more money was probably granted to make programmes about her than what had ever been granted to the filmmaker herself, must have been a bitter contradiction to resolve. While forging biographical accounts of little-known women filmmakers is a constructive activity, as Lauren Rabinovitz discusses in relation to the future of feminist film studies, more is required:

The radical politics of lost-and-found scholarship lies not in merely correcting a record that swept away women's contributions but in refashioning film theory and historiography. It develops a women's history that teaches the centrality of intimate, personal and sexual issues, as well as of the spheres of the everyday that embrace subjects with lesser cultural status.⁴¹

In this sense, a biographical account of Tait's life and working method gave the filmmaker a certain degree of exposure, but remained incapable of addressing the reasons for her oversight in the first place.

Strategic Amateurism

The interpretation of Margaret Tait as amateur filmmaker, raises a number of important issues, both critical and concrete. As Patricia Zimmermann has stressed, such definitions may have serious implications for both the accounting of the past, and the very possibility of its study in the future. To label a film as "amateur" she recognises, often means, "to banish it forever to the territory of the inconsequential

⁴⁰ 'Poet with a camera', *Spectrum*, BBC Scotland, 30 mins, tx 5 Jan 1979, 10:15pm; 'Margaret Tait; Filmmaker', Channel Four and the Arts Council of Great Britain, 35 mins, tx 25 April 1983. Although Channel Four followed the 1983 documentary with a broadcast of her film *Where I am is Here* and in 1987 screened a selection of her films as part of the *Eleventh Hour* series (tx 9 March 1987, 10.55pm) the earlier BBC Scotland documentary relied solely on extracts. Tait was resistant to the use of extracts in the profiles and voiced concerns that people would assume that what they were seeing were the actual films, D97/1.

⁴¹ Rabinovitz, "The Future of Feminism", 42.

and the meaningless.” Once defined in this way, such material becomes unusually vulnerable to physical degradation and prone to eventual disappearance, “It is also, in the world of film preservation, to erase it from the historical record.”⁴² Cash-strapped archives, she suggests, will often prioritise the big picture over the smaller one for restoration, with value defined in terms of national, aesthetic, or technological histories. Thankfully, Tait’s films have been largely restored through the efforts of the Scottish Screen Archive, and LUX (formerly The London Filmmaker’s Co-operative).⁴³ The latter’s role in the restoration and circulation of Tait’s films, including a reader edited by Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook,⁴⁴ as well as a DVD of a selection of her films, is pleasingly consistent with the way in which her work was historically sustained, by the support of fellow artists.

During her lifetime, the exhibition and distribution of her films was heavily reliant on Tait’s own efforts. Like other Avant-Garde artists, she exhibited her work through semi-formal or utterly informal screenings. Films would be shown in village halls or even in her own home, projecting her films into a gilded frame in her living room. Shortly after leaving Centro Sperimentale, Tait set up a film studio on Rose Street in Edinburgh. Following the busy production period detailed in this essay, she held the first Rose Street film festival there in August 1954. The informal event provided the opportunity to screen her work, alongside the films of fellow classmates. Tait recalled the event in the following way:

In my workrooms in Rose Street, Edinburgh, I fitted out a small theatre. The biggest room has a reasonable length of throw for the projector and very nice acoustics for sound reproduction. A couple of small windows daringly made in an intervening wall turned a neighbouring small room into a projection booth. Ingenious if slightly confusing manipulation of switches and leads by a colleague gave me adequate control of theatre lights etc. from a central point. My New York partner, Peter Hollander, designed us an excellent poster, I had invitation cards printed, and advertised as well as I could the coming of the “Rose Street Film Festival.”⁴⁵

After the festival, a review in an Edinburgh paper noted the attendance of John Grierson, who was reported thus: “Fantastic, I haven’t seen anything so beautiful for a long time.” Unfortunately, Grierson’s appreciation of Tait’s work at that Festival would never extend beyond that initial praise. When she approached him

⁴² Zimmermann, “Democracy and Cinema”, 73.

⁴³ The range of classifications given for Tait’s films, from amateur (*Orquil Burn*), to fiction and avant-garde experimental (*Happy Bees*), and genre/sponsored (*The Drift Back*) is testament to the slipperiness of taxonomies, particularly when considering the work of an innovative artist, working across a variety of disciplines as a non-professional.

⁴⁴ Todd and Cook (eds.), *Subjects and Sequences: a Margaret Tait Reader*.

⁴⁵ Tait, “On Throwing a Film Festival”, D97/13.

in 1963, to ask if he would include her portrait of Hugh McDiarmid in his television series *This Wonderful Life* (1957-1966), she received a response saying that the film was seen to be unsuitable for transmission.

Outside Scotland, her films were exhibited in a number of locations such as India, Malmo, Riga, Berlin, etc. Ancona partner, Peter Hollander was instrumental in the screening of *Calypso* and *Rose Street* by WGBH-TV of Boston. The University of California also purchased a few of her films for their archives. Sales such as these helped to supplement production costs. A catalogue printed in 1955, lists copies of the films selling for £20-£25 each. At the time, Tait was particularly proactive and inventive with regard to marketing, writing to a number of parties regarding the potential purchase or hire of her work, including various embassies. In 1955, *Happy Bees* was sold to the Government of India for £25. A couple of years later, she wrote to the Eastern Railway Co. in New Delhi, to suggest that they hire her films for exhibition on their trains.

Many of the avenues Tait explored for distribution seem surprisingly commercial, and complicate our usual conceptions of the 'avant-garde' artist, a term Tait herself was outspokenly uncomfortable with. In some respects, the pursuit of such outlets for her films seem indicative of ambitions to be perceived as a professional, even as she clung to distinctly non-professional practices in her own production methods. Writing in depth on the subject, Patricia Zimmerman identifies the term "amateur" as originating from nineteenth century capitalism: "professionalism was linked to rationalised work [...] while amateurism was located within leisure, the private sphere and hobbies."⁴⁶ From this perspective, Tait's case represents a fusion of a very traditional amateurism of privatised distraction, with more modern formulations of the artist as opportunist-entrepreneur. When the Guinness Company, for example, wrote to Tait in her capacity as a General Practitioner about the health-benefits of their product, Tait wrote back immediately, suggesting the possibility that she produce a film, similar to *Orquil Burn*, about the organisation of the hops harvest. In 1957, she was in correspondence with the J. Davis, the director of the Scottish Associated News Theatres, following an encounter at the Edinburgh Film Festival. She suggested that she produce a number of short comedies for their cinemas. Gaining a positive response she drafted a number of proposals, including an idea for several ten-minute portraits of Edinburgh residents, based on her experience filming *Rose Street*. It seems unlikely that anything ever came of this, but the effort is emblematic of Tait's way of thinking about her work in relation to popular cinema.

Tait also devoted considerable effort to ensuring that *Happy Bees* garnered a wider audience. In addition to Walt Disney, *Happy Bees* was sent to the London-based Children's Film Foundation, for potential commercial distribution. In a

⁴⁶ Zimmermann, "Democracy and Cinema", 74-75.

detailed letter to the Foundation, Tait described the positive reception of her films by children in attendance at the Rose Street festival:

During the Edinburgh Festival last year we put on a show of short films here at 91 Rose Street. All sorts of people came to see it, among them the children of Rose Street. Rose Street is rather a tough street and I know the children just came up in the first place because it was a free show. But some of them came several times and watched apparently with great interest the several shorts which we showed. The films were all products of Ancona Films or of Sperimentale Film co-op. r.l. of Palermo, and mostly of a documentary character. Only one film was actually devised for children.⁴⁷

Such initiatives in distribution reflect deep-seated tensions between amateur and professional instincts, detected by others in their encounters with the filmmaker. Within a commercial context, her work was perceived to be *outside* the mainstream. Encounters with various funding bodies, by contrast, reveal a tendency to equate the practice of her filmmaking *with* the commercial. In 1957, a funding application submitted to the Carnegie Trust, was rejected on the grounds that they did not support filmmaking conducted for profit. Tait's detailed response to the Trust questions their lack of support for filmmaking, highlighting their general statement of encouragement for the Arts, "in particular amateur music and drama activities", and stressing her own non-commercial status.⁴⁸ In addition to detailing the deficit Ancona operated under, she identifies the significance of the 16mm gauge as testament to the small scale distribution intended, deliberately playing upon general assumptions associating the gauge with amateur filmmaking, if this might prove to her own advantage.⁴⁹

Although the term amateur is often employed to imply a sort of deficiency, Maya Deren's defence of amateur filmmaking in 1965 offers a more optimistic account, and relates well to Tait's own approach. Deren champions the poetic, rhythmic potential of an amateur filmmaking "never forced to sacrifice visual drama and beauty [...] to the relentless activity and explanations of a plot."⁵⁰ Whilst Tait undoubtedly found comparable liberations beyond the mainstream, it is important to note that her method of working was dictated as much by necessity, as any deliberate choice. Tait's ultimate belief was that:

⁴⁷ Letter to Mary Field, Children's Film Foundation Ltd., 10 Feb 1955, D97/37.

⁴⁸ Letter to DN Lowe, Secretary Carnegie Trust, 14 May 1957, D97/30.

⁴⁹ In the programme notes written for Gavin Lambert, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Tait described how 16mm did "offer a freedom and a close contact with the medium which is not always so easy to get in 35 mm. work." Tait, "Independence: Small Budget Production in Rome", 5.

⁵⁰ Deren, "Amateur Versus Professional", 45.

The real masterpieces of cinema have mostly been made within the Film Industry; in spite of all the pressures of working with others to a timetable to a large budget, and for a market, which one might expect or imagine to be restricting, out comes a work of art, surprisingly often.⁵¹

She may have cited the experience working with 16mm as “invaluable” but she was also clear about her intention “to work in 35 mm. as soon as possible”. For Tait, 16mm was a platform for experimentation that would hopefully lead into filmmaking on a larger scale, or as she later expressed in one of her film notes: “The short films were done, keeping the concept of big-film making in mind”.⁵² Although filmmakers like Maya Deren, champion the mobility of the truly independent or amateur filmmaker, Tait’s positive response to working with a team on *Blue Black Permanent* suggests she would have continued that way if possible. In a letter to Peter Hollander in 1995, she is doubtful of further opportunities for feature filmmaking and is considering new approaches. She writes, “that sort of 16mm filming is hardly possible anymore. Having worked with a team, with a crew and a cast – if I ‘go back’ to lonesomes working it might be better to try video and really DO something with that.”⁵³

Conclusions

Margaret Tait’s work on *Blue Black Permanent* suggests immediate connections with other filmmakers such as Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, or Sally Potter eventually achieving “cross-over” into the mainstream; yet unlike them, she was only able to produce one feature film in her lifetime. As has been suggested her, based in Edinburgh and Orkney, it may be that Tait was in the wrong place, but in many respects it may also have been the wrong time. In the programme notes for the NFT’s third International Avant-Garde film festival, Malcolm Le Grice described Tait as “the only genuinely independent, experimental mind to precede the current movement which began here (Britain about 1966)”.⁵⁴ In later years, Tait achieved much greater degrees of recognition in Scotland, when a retrospective of her work appeared at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1970. Without doubt, as Le Grice’s comments attest, she was a pioneering British experimental filmmaker, but as the historiographical account of Tait’s work reveals, within 1950s and 1960s Scotland her work failed to register with a variety of influential funding bodies.

⁵¹ Filmnotes, D97/37.

⁵² Letter to Sharon Morris, Slade School of Fine Art, 1 October, 1992, D97/27.

⁵³ Letter to Peter (Hollander?), 15 May 1995, D97/3.

⁵⁴ Malcolm Le Grice’s, *Film London: 3rd Avant-garde International Festival* (Programme notes), London: NFT, 1979.

Thankfully, like many pioneers, Tait was able to remain independent, working to a clear vision. As for her amateur or professional status, it is clear where Tait's own preferred identity would rest. In her opinion, Ancona films was one of the few companies in Scotland making films in a professional manner with "serious artistic intentions".⁵⁵ In a letter to *The Scotsman* in 1957, she questions the legitimacy of the Films of Scotland Committee, of which she argues "only one member (John Grierson) is a professional film-maker." All of the rest, she describes as perhaps distinguished in other fields, but "amateurs at production."⁵⁶

Hugh MacDiarmid, writing in 1960, noted the gap between the developments in opportunities for filmmakers in other countries and what was available in Scotland, but predicted that the lonely furrow ploughed by Tait had "set a process in motion [that was] bound to develop".⁵⁷ Although MacDiarmid's prediction proved partially accurate, in that Tait was eventually given enough support to produce a feature film, the process set in motion, and the significant attempts made by Tait to establish funding and distribution opportunities for experimental film, sadly failed to gather significant momentum.

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⁵⁶ Tait, "Making Films About Scotland", 7.

⁵⁷ McDiarmid, "Intimate Filmmaking in Scotland", 417.

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Colour Poems, 1974, 11.20 mins, 16mm

One is One, 1951, with Fernando Birri and Peter Hollander, 33.03 mins

The Lion and the Griffin, with Peter Hollander, 1951, 13.33 mins, 16mm

Orquil Burn, 1955, 35.40 mins, 16 mm

Happy Bees 1954, 16.07 mins

The Drift Back 1957, for the Orkney Education Committee, 10.56 mins, 16 mm

Calypso 1955, 4.29 mins, 35mm

Portrait of Ga 1952, 4.27 mins, 16mm, colour sound

The Ba, 1965/75 62.42 mins, 16mm

Rose Street 1956, assisted by Alex Pirie, 14.44 mins, 35 mm

Land Makar 1981, 31.32 mins, 16 mm

Where I am is Here, producer Alex Pirie, 1964, 32.48, 16 mm