Anyone who uses – or even considers purchasing – a video camera is bound to encounter a large amount of advice of different kinds. Family members, friends and salespeople are likely to offer more or less helpful suggestions; but beyond personal contact, there is a whole world of advice literature in the form of manufacturers’ publicity materials, handbooks, consumer and hobby magazines, television programmes and websites aimed both at novices and at more experienced users. Such material typically offers quite prescriptive ideas about what to film, where to film, who to film and how to film. While it is certainly diverse, it all serves to define and construct the meaning of amateur video-making in particular ways. It specifies what counts as proper or desirable forms of practice, identifying what is to be emulated and what should be avoided at all costs; and in the process, it also helps to define what it means to be an amateur video-maker.

The activity of amateur video-making is thus by no means simply a matter of individual self-expression. On the contrary, the video-maker enters into and participates in a practice that is already socially constructed and defined in specific ways. In line with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) analysis of the ‘middle-brow art’ of photography (discussed in Chapter 2), this chapter explores how the cultural field of amateur video-making is discursively constructed. According to Bourdieu, any given cultural field is regulated by discourses that attempt to legitimate and accord social status to particular practices, and to delegitimate or marginalise others. In the case of photography, he suggests, only quite specific events, practices and people are considered ‘appropriate’ subject matter for filming.

In this chapter, we analyse the discursive construction of amateur film- and video-making within books, manuals, magazines and other material, dating from 1921 to the present day. The literature we discuss here
defines the practice and purpose of amateur moving image production in quite specific ways: it addresses the user as a particular type of person, with particular aims and needs, and thereby seeks to regulate their practice in particular ways. As we shall see, the policing of boundaries between the ‘amateur’ and the ‘professional’ is one key dimension of this broader process whereby social and cultural identities and hierarchies are established and sustained.

We begin by exploring the broad rhetoric of ‘democratisation’ that characterises popular discussions of the potential of amateur film- and video-making. To what extent is this practice seen as an alternative, even a challenge, to dominant modes of audio-visual expression – or is it merely recuperated as a harmless, trivial family pastime? This leads on to a discussion of how the technology itself is framed and defined, how the identity of the amateur video-maker is constructed and how the aesthetic dimensions of this practice are characterised. Despite the excitement which commonly surrounds new visual representational technology, and despite the accelerating pace of technological change, we argue that there is a considerable historical continuity in terms of how amateur film- and video-making have been framed and defined.

A rhetoric of empowerment

As we saw in Chapter 2, increasing levels of access to media production technologies have been seen to promise considerable democratic potential. Video and digital media in particular are believed to reconfigure the relationships of power between ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’, or ‘professionals’ and ‘amateurs’. Such arguments are by no means confined to academic discussions: they are also quite strongly apparent in some of the advice literature produced for amateurs themselves. For Matt York, who started publishing Video Maker Magazine in 1986, camcorders are all about empowerment:

Camcorders today are more like what paper and ink were ten years ago when anybody who was literate could express their spiritual or political feelings on paper. Now people use videos to get on television. There are more and more outlets that provide more power to the individual.

(Video Maker Magazine 1986, quoted in Baum, 1991 n.p.)

The political potential of these developments is most apparent in popular discussions of ‘citizen journalism’, an area that will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 5. As early as 1988, the first edition of Camcorder...