

Artist Statement for *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker*

## Framing

Intrinsic to my filmmaking practice is my unapologetic and absolute devotion to amateurism. What I mean by this, primarily, is that I make films for the fun of it. My films are products of hanging out with friends and people I think would be fun on camera. I shoot whatever, whenever, and wherever with a good deal of ambivalence toward how the film might be received. That isn't to say I neglect the quality of the final product, but that I am free to set my own standards (and I am free to let those standards lower and raise and mutate and multiply). I value autonomy over the trappings of professional filmmaking (big budgets, sprawling calendars, specialized crews, wealthy producers) and as a result, my films are able to directly address the desires, ideas, and whims that I personally care about which would otherwise be secondary to commercial considerations. This disposition is not new, I have come to it by way of Maya Deren and George Kuchar:

[Amateur]—from the Latin *amator*, “lover”—means one who does something for the love of the thing rather than for economics or necessity... Instead of envying the script and dialogue writers, the trained actors, the elaborate staffs and sets, the enormous production budgets of the professional film, the amateur should make use of the one great advantage which all professionals envy him, namely, *freedom*.<sup>1</sup>

Now the common man makes films. But he does not and should not make films to compete with Hollywood or Pinewood studios... The common man makes movies to see himself... and we see ourselves, through him, because we too are common men... It is humble, direct and honest, insane and ridiculous [*sic*], it is sexy and it is sincere, it is a reflection of a human being.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maya Deren, “Amateur versus Professional,” in *Essential Deren*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (New York: McPherson & Company, 2005), 17.

<sup>2</sup> George Kuchar, “Possible lecture topics,” in *The George Kuchar Reader*, ed. Andrew Lampert (New York: Primary Information, 2014), 27.

Both Deren and Kuchar clearly call for an amateurism that has a radically different intentionality than professional filmmaking. They reject the popular notion of amateur being inferior or prior to professional, and they demand a serious engagement with amateurism as its own mode. The amateur and the professional not only make different work, but they make work for different reasons.

There is a pleasure in the process of filmmaking adored by the amateur (and often primary to the amateur) that is fulfilled in the very act of the making. It is the more hidden pleasure of the cinematic world, one that isn't celebrated on marquees or on televised award shows. It's a private engagement, obscured from the public eye. The pleasure of the process takes place outside of the frame and between the splices—the frenzy of the unframed and the action of a splice a part of it. It is the direct joy (and compulsion) of the filmmaker at work. To quote Ingmar Bergman, “Film-making’ is for me a necessity of nature, a need comparable to hunger and thirst.”<sup>3</sup> There is a nature to being a filmmaker. A filmmaker naturally/necessarily makes films just as a person naturally/necessarily drinks (Bergman and I are both *filmmaker* and *person*).

It is in this context—as amateur (as this specific delineation of amateur) and with particular attention to the pleasure of the process—that my films should be encountered, *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* particularly so. The film is naturally a product of my amateur practice, but—more than that—*Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* also works as a direct investigation into amateurism, which—despite being such an intrinsic part of my filmmaking practice—is something that I do not fully understand. The particulars of it are hard to delineate.

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<sup>3</sup> Ingmar Bergman, “What is ‘Film-Making’?” in *Film Makers on Film Making*, ed. Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1967), 177.

To call back to the Deren quote, I do *love* making films, but where that love stems from and how exactly it is made up remains elusive. A major goal of *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* is to articulate visually and narratively—to make tangible—the spirit of amateurism so that it can more directly be examined. Toadie’s mode of producing music parallels my amateur mode of filmmaking (his songs seemingly contribute nothing to his ultimate goal of having his transmissions received, but he creates anyways, for the pleasure of it or out of some personal compulsion or out of love). And by being expressed on film (as opposed to being just the hidden practice underpinning the film), the amateur philosophy can be stretched and reconfigured and played with in effort to reveal—or at least to contemplate—different aspects of it. In this process I do not attempt to reach an encompassing definition of the *love of the amateur* (no simple definition exists), instead I sift through pieces, parts, perspectives, and potentials. The film investigates through reflection and exploration. It imagines tests and runs scenarios.

Captain Toadie is isolated in space, apparently abandoned, and he makes his songs—his amateur productions—to pass the time. He, in a seemingly futile act, transmits them through a potentially broken radio. Unbeknownst to Toadie, his transmissions are received by NASA and distributed through public radio back on Earth (to rally national pride and morale, it seems). The public loves Toadie’s music, his family cherishes the songs, and media outlets (newspapers, magazines, and televised newscasts) deem him a celebrity. Through this narrative, *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* contemplates the spirit of amateurism in a few ways. It imagines how an amateur product might hold something of the individual who made it and what that something may mean to others (Toadie’s wife finds marital satisfaction in the household radio, the nearest articulation point of Toadie’s music). It imagines what amateur productions might offer that could be exploited (NASA finds a “certain quality” by keeping Toadie isolated; media

outlets create a celebrity persona around him, perpetuating content for themselves while Toadie remains oblivious).

## Structure

*Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* doesn't follow a linear narrative structure in the traditional sense—rather it was conceived as more of a web. When writing, I imagined the main joke/concept (an astronaut abandoned in space sings songs through his radio hoping someone will hear) as a bubble at the center of the story, with each scene taking place in the bubble or extending from the bubble. *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* does have a linearity, but it doesn't follow a this-happened-because-this-happened-which-led-to-this-happening formula. One scene does not lead gracefully into the next (or if it does, it does so secondarily). One moment doesn't reveal the cards of another. The structure was conceived as a simple web, and while some points do play with others, none do so out of necessity.



Figure 1 Example of story structure diagram

The pacing of *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* is purposely slow. I linger on shots/segments for extended lengths of time with the intention that meaning will develop or

evolve through duration. Specifically, I'm interested in elongating the humor. I intend *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* to be received as a funny film, but I don't intend for it to be *thoroughly* humorous. Traditionally, jokes are fulfilled in their ability to quickly identify something absurd in an otherwise innocuous occurrence/thing/situation, then find their end immediately in the elicitation of laughter. They tend to have a *striking* quality. The jokes in *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* operate differently—they do strike, but then they meander. The jokes patiently hang around as the initial reaction (the laughter, the excitement) recedes. What is left is simply the absurdity, which can be upsetting to confront—something that was just thought innocuous becomes irrational, what was just taken for granted becomes unfamiliar. This is when the desperation and fragility are revealed, a sort of honesty about the joke that isn't immediately recognizable. The humor gives way to the underpinning discomfort.

### **Indelible Image**

The scenes of *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* can be loosely divided into three categories. The most basic is the category of the narrative image, these scenes primarily serve to elaborate the concept and move it along. They tend to be the most boring visually (Captain Toadie sending out his transmissions, Franny explaining the significance of the radio to the unborn Hurby). The next is the cinematic image, these scenes may serve the narrative—though not necessarily—but are primarily included because they have distinct visual interest (Captain Toadie eating a banana, the montage of spaceship parts as the ambient sound crescendos, a stabbed and bloody hand). The third category is the indelible image. These are the images that epitomize the world of the film. They tend to be the most outrageous (Captain Toadie discovering his dad, Franny dancing with the radio, the butterfly Plutonians).

The concept of the indelible image is based on Guy Maddin's emblematic image. He doodles, "For ALL movies there must be a scene, an image, an idea that stays in the mind long after the movie's end. There must be an EMBLEMATIC image. (That will make poster design easy)."<sup>4</sup> I call it indelible image because I like the word more.

### A. Captain Toadie discovers his father

The notion that Captain Toadie hasn't been alone and that his own family has been on the ship (or of the ship) is shocking. It oozes with joy and frustration. The tragedy strikes when his father doesn't recognize him. And the whole time it is funny because his dad is a giant head built into the rocket ship.



*Figure 2 Still from Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rucker*

The intention of this scene is to complicate Captain Toadie's dwelling, the spaceship. It is his home, but it lacks certain qualities of being a home.

Now it is obvious to those who inquire about it that a syllable is not made of its letters plus combination, nor a house out of bricks plus combination, and rightfully so, for

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<sup>4</sup> Guy Maddin, *My Winnipeg* (Toronto Ontario: Coach House Books, 2009), 17.

neither combination nor mixture is among those things of which they are the combination or the mixture.<sup>5</sup>

What makes a house grand, oh, it ain't the roof or the doors. If there's love in a house, it's a palace for sure. But without love it ain't nothin' but a house, a house where nobody lives.<sup>6</sup>

The spaceship, like a house, is an enclosed space, is made of durable material, and is intended to be lived inside of. But it lacks the essential stuff—the immaterial stuff—to truly be a house in the way that we understand and expect and intend houses to be. The father is an embodiment of this disconnect. He is the representation of the immaterial stuff that is lacking. The father is family, but the spaceship isn't ordered in such a way for family to gather. Family isn't even recognizable in this context—“You're not Toadie... My Toadie has a wife back on earth and a baby on the way. He's probably polishing up the old pigskin, get it ready for tossing when his boy comes. Just like when I used to toss it with him”.<sup>7</sup> Toadie's father is the cinematic articulation of what is real but can't be seen in reality. He is the manifestation of the absurdity that is tormenting Toadie.

### **B. Franny dances with her husband**

Franny's relationship with Captain Toadie (or rather, Captain Toadie's transmissions) enables a few indelible images, her dancing with the radio being one of them (another being the radio burial, another being the general concept of someone being in a relationship with a radio).

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 2002), 159.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Waits, “House Where Nobody Lives,” recorded 1998, track 5 on *Mule Variations*, Anti-, compact disc.

<sup>7</sup> *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker*. Directed by Matt Lutz (2020).



*Figure 3 Still from Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rucker*

This specific scene is meant to establish Franny as an honest partner. She listens to Captain Toadie's song which is just as obnoxious and inaccessible as his first, yet she picks up on whatever subtle difference there may be and understands that he is troubled in some way. This is a sillier scene, but one that conveys an earnest sincerity.

The relationship between Franny and Captain Toadie interests me because it is the reverse of the metaphysical game played when Toadie discovers his father. This time the material isn't present, but a sort of immaterial essence is articulated (or communicated). The radio facilitates a presence of Captain Toadie that, parasocial as it may be, enables a marital relationship with love, care, earnestness, and—when lost—mourning. To Franny, it is as if her husband is really there, in the form of a radio (again, it is one of the sillier scenes).

### **C. The nude, blue Plutonians**

Once Captain Toadie gives up on his performing, there was little left I could imagine him doing. That was his existence as a character. It seemed for a satisfying ending there needed to be a death or a salvation. And since I prefer happy endings, I had him saved by the Plutonians.



*Figure 4 Still from Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker*

The Plutonians bring with them a rapture. They mark the end of Captain Toadie, both in the film and on Earth (and the end of the film itself, though it continues to fizzle for a scene). After his bleak stretch in his lonely rocket ship, Captain Toadie is brought to an exit full of pleasure and promise and happiness. The Plutonians promise a cohesion of artistic integrity and commercial viability (and plenty of erotic massages and knee caressing). In true melodramatic fashion, there is a tinge of the tragic underpinning this: he must give up his family. There are many potential meanings to this. Maybe it is a criticism of celebrification and the necessary commodification of the person that “celebrity” entails. Maybe it is an observation of the hinderance familial ties pose to the pursuit of individualism. Maybe it’s an observation of the totalizing force of satisfaction (artistic and/or erotic). Any of these are fine conclusions. But really, my intention was simply to introduce a bit of sadness in the impossibly jubilant situation.

### **Aesthetic**

I want film which literally *hurts your eyes*, like one of those old screenings where the film breaks and self-destructs and you can see the numbers 1, 3, 5, 7 at full speed. I’ve always loved the numbers passing on the reels; maybe because they appeared in the old

and beautiful classic films and my taste has moved from *what I loved to what accompanied this love*.<sup>8</sup>

I find it important to foreground the material stuff of the film so that the audience is continually aware that they are looking at a *film*—they are looking at something constructed, which all films are but few actively make apparent. This emphasis on and embrace of artificiality allow *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* a way of participating in grand cinematic traditions of popular filmmaking (namely that of horror, melodrama, and sci-fi) while maintaining its amateur integrity. The film references the genres of popular cinema by highlighting what is inherently present in both the amateur and the professional—the artificiality—without denying the major differences. In this way, *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* is like a George Kuchar film in that they both are eager to borrow language/imagery of popular cinema (by referencing through transparently amateur means) to articulate personally motivated intentions. For example, George Kuchar holding a plastic bird on his finger to express a perfectly idyllic harmony between his self and the rhythm of the world borrows language from Disney-like animations.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Captain Toadie captures a fake butterfly in his hand to express the arrival of an impossibly ideal rectification to his loneliness.

The butterfly is far from the only fake-looking thing in *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker*. Toadie's spaceship—the central location—is made out of aluminum foil, secondhand stereo equipment, a car seat, and stock footage. In fact, nearly all the sets (5 out of the 6) were constructed out of surplus cloth, recycled cardboard, aluminum foil, and foam board in a single

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<sup>8</sup> Isidore Isou, *Treatise on Venom and Eternity*, trans. Ian Thompson, Anna O'Mera, Nadege LeJeune, Catherine Goldstein, and Julian Kabza (Annex Press, 2009), chapter 1. No page numbers given.

<sup>9</sup> *Hold Me While I'm Naked*, directed by George Kuchar, on *Color Me Lurid: The Weird World of George Kuchar*. (Connoisseur Video), VHS.

room in my parent's basement. They intentionally look cheap. But it shouldn't be thought that it was done out of a careless or hasty attitude—my friends and I spent many hours cutting and taping cardboard. It also isn't an attempt to parody the inherent artifice of filmmaking in general. While *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* does address artifice, it does so earnestly and with reverence. It is exciting to find a dimension of an otherwise overlooked object that facilitates an expression entirely separate from that object's intended use. This speaks to a philosophy of production that values inventiveness over production value—a philosophy that embraces looking cheap (and spends a good deal of time finding the most interesting cheap look).

I chose to shoot *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* on Super 8 film because of the layer of visible artificiality inherent to it. The content of the film is delivered with the unignorable accompaniment of the film material, wobbling the image between the grain. Super 8 film is continuously seen as material and—furthermore—firmly establishes *Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* in the domain of the amateurly produced because of Super 8's history as a consumer-intended product. It looks like a home movie, and so it is contextualized as such. Every aspect of it is—of course—nonprofessional, but the personal motivation—the simple sincerity towards documenting the subject—is palpable.

## **Conclusion**

*Captain Toadie: The Rocketeer Rocker* is an amateur film about the amateur ethos. It both participates in and investigates its situation, experimenting with form to address itself and explore other relevant topics. Nontraditional approaches in story structure, pacing, and medium are employed to carefully probe scrambling ideas of pleasure, metaphysical properties, humor, and artificiality. It is a film staunchly aligned with the amateur philosophy of Deren and Kuchar; it is fundamentally a film of cinematic love, cinematic freedom, and cinematic sincerity.

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