
PUBLICISING AND DISTRIBUTING FILM AND TELEVISION

Budget allocations in recent years have tended to be organised around the distinction between internal budgets, disbursed by Institute officers themselves, and external budgets, principally in the form of grants deployed by bodies outside the Institute. For several reasons, there has been an inclination to increase external budgets while holding internal budgets at or near a cash standstill.

Politically convenient as the distinction internal/external has been, the problem that it has signally failed to engage is that certain internal budgets exist in a structural relationship with external budgets, to the extent that the failure to increase the former in line with the latter is simply to undermine the very activity receiving increased funding.

The tendency transverses the entire Institute, but it is most acutely felt by the activities carried out by that section of the Distribution Division dealt with in this paper: the Film + Video Library/Publicity and Documentation Unit. This Unit acquires and distributes Film and TV material and supplies publicity and documentation to BFI-assisted cinemas.

A FILM AND VIDEO LIBRARY

This Institute's involvement in production and exhibition is well known and frequently discussed within and without its walls, and it was indeed the perceived structural relationship between these activities which led the Institute substantially to increase funding to BFI-assisted cinemas in the most recent budget allocation. Our distribution activity is however less widely debated and seems perhaps a little opaque, despite its status as a sizeable revenue earning function (the 1982/83 net revenue target is £57,440). A retrospective glance at the BFI's role in distribution will establish the appropriate context for examining its future. The Film + Video Library (ex. Distribution Library) started as the 'National Film Library', created by the National Film Archive as a response to calls for greater access. By the mid-sixties, the Library sprawled shapelessly over a number of disconnected areas: amateur filmmaking, canoeing films, scientific and ethnographic material jostled alongside a core collection of 'classic' films. The re-organization of 'Film Services' in the mid-seventies led to the drastic overhaul of the Library. Large numbers of films were relocated in other libraries and both the material retained and new acquisitions were aligned more closely to the defined cultural aims of the Institute, and in particular to the requirements of the then rapidly expanding film studies sector within education. Such a policy did not imply a restricted range of choices: a considered eclecticism replaced the haphazard acquisitions of earlier years. Important Hollywood films have been made available on 16mm for the first time, key packages of German cinema and the work of, for example, Roberto Rossellini and Michael Powell have been presented through the Library, as well as outstanding examples of independent work. Latterly, the foundations have been laid for the distribution of broadcast TV material normally excluded from non-theatrical distribution, ie. single plays, series drama and light entertainment. Involvement with television has also introduced the Library to videocassette technology for the first time, although this is currently restricted to TV material.

Three recent developments are now undermining not so much the established acquisitions policy as the degree to which the films within the Library will continue to be used by that constituency originally considered as the 'target market':

- a Declining financial resources within education to meet increasing 16mm hire and carriage charges.

- b The availability of VCRs both to record films off-air and to play back pre-recorded cassettes intended for home use. The invisibility of the copyright offence and the financial savings involved would indicate a growth of this practice, unless there is a series of exemplary prosecutions.
- c The changing contours of 'film study' itself, as it moves away from the model of art history, particularly within secondary education, and mutates into 'media studies', in the process losing its dependence upon specific texts for study, and instead focussing upon areas of production for which many (broadcast) examples are readily available.

The future of the Film + Video Library lies, not in the dereliction of previous policies but in a shift of emphasis towards the higher profile activity of purchasing new films for theatrical and non-theatrical releases on both 35mm and 16mm. This of course overlaps with past activity in that a range of 'archival' acquisitions have been successfully exhibited theatrically, eg. M, VOYAGE TO ITALY. A summary of acquisition categories might be formulated as follows:

1 NEW FILMS

New films, either acquired solely by the Film + Video Library or in collaboration with the Regional Consortium (TWO STAGE SISTERS, CEDDO and the forthcoming THE HERD have all been so co-funded). The exceedingly narrow line of profitability walked by the independent distributor/exhibitors inevitably dictates a degree of conservatism in the choice of films bought, but the Institute's removal from immediate commercial pressures allows the pursuit of a slightly more adventurous policy. The vindication of this policy lies not in immediate financial results, however satisfactory, but in its contribution towards the Institute's long-term aims. An essential caveat: the Film + Video Library is neither structurally nor financially in a position to become a full-time 'arthouse' distributor of European films of bankable reputation. We are however equipped to make good the gaps left by the other independent distributors. The acquisition of new films would also help to revive links with the Film Society movement at a propitious time when the BFFS is considering its own Consortium mechanism and there is a mutual desire for greater collaboration.

Channel Four

Discussions have already been held with Channel Four on the exhibition and distribution of both commissioned and bought-in feature films. The importance of theatrical exhibition prior to transmission has been recognised by Channel Four and the Institute, through its Film + Video Library and network of assisted cinemas, is well placed to undertake this work.

2 ARCHIVAL SELECTIONS

The increasing concentration of the major 16mm libraries on new releases and their incipient involvement with videocassette distribution (for group viewing, rather than home use) implies a growing neglect of their back catalogue. The Film + Video Library has already concluded agreements with Twentieth Century Fox, United Artists, CIC and Columbia-EMI-Warner for the non-theatrical rights to titles of historical importance that they would not otherwise place in distribution. It is now time to expand this scheme on the lines already successfully established and to create a 'BFI Classics' division of the Library. This could then attract greater participation from the major companies and develop into a substantial activity of the Film + Video Library. Without this intervention on our part, it is likely that a large part of Hollywood's past will fall out of distribution.

3 TELEVISION

The problems involved in the clearance by the BFI of broadcast television for non-theatrical use have been well rehearsed elsewhere and it is difficult now to see a significantly enhanced role for the Film + Video Library in the

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distribution of current British material (with the exception of Channel Four), unless there are basic changes wrought in the existing agreements between the broadcasting authorities and the unions involved. Areas for future research should include the distribution of foreign television and of archival TV material.

Channel Four

The already good working relationship with Channel Four should help our attempts to become the Channel's main UK non-theatrical outlet for those programmes it might wish to place in distribution, in addition to the feature films mentioned above.

4. VIDEOCASSETTES

The BFI does not hold cassette rights to the overwhelming majority of titles within the Film + Video Library. Before committing the considerable capital involved in launching a videocassette label (assuming prior agreement that the Institute should be active within a market primarily composed of home users), a pilot project should be mounted to test the demand for the range of material that we would both wish to promote and could also afford. Distribution of these cassettes would be via BFI membership and the Film + Video Library (ie. from a central stock) and also via participant regional sites. Documentation, either on tape itself or in printed form, should be provided. The project, if mounted with flair, could bring the Institute into contact with a wider audience that it can currently engage either through non-theatrical distribution or its existing cinemas.

A brief closing note on documentation and promotion for the Film + Video Library: the 1978 Catalogue represented a significant textual advance on all its predecessors, but its own successor, incorporating that advance, must be designed to function more effectively as a Catalogue, as a promotional device designed to encourage all categories of film user to book from the Library. The 1978 edition and a specimen double-page spread from the Supplement in preparation are enclosed.

B PUBLICITY AND DOCUMENTATION UNIT

The Unit is responsible for the supply of publicity materials and documentation to the thirty or so cinemas in receipt of BFI assistance. The commitment to 'integrated practice' invoked in recent papers has a tendency to overlook precisely that activity which communicates the nature of this practice to the public and attempts to involve it in a less casual relationship with cinema and television. Without an effective centralized publicity and documentation service and adequately funded regional activity, the BFI's client cinemas are deprived of the opportunity to develop their audiences and forced to request higher levels of subsidy. The proposals outlined below are conceived as extensions of existing work, based on our knowledge of existing shortcomings and on the intended development of regional exhibition.

The Unit has a primary responsibility to promote those films in which the BFI has a financial stake (or some other expressed commitment): Production Board films, Consortium and Film + Video Library acquisitions.

Production Division

The Unit would like to foster a far closer relationship with the Production Division so that we are able to collaborate on the creation of materials likely to aid the successful British release of their films. Closer co-operation in this area presupposes the recognition by Production of the importance of domestic exhibition and the crucial position of BFI-assisted cinemas in this work.

Consortium/Film + Video Library

Consortium deals with distributor/exhibitors present fewer problems than direct acquisitions whereby we open the film ourselves in London. With the latter, the Unit is involved in the production of posters, trailers, advertisements, radio clips and other promotional work involved in theatrical distribution.

Lectures/Special Documentation

The Unit has no resources that it can deploy on the production of special documentation to accompany regional exhibition, or on support for lectures and other events mounted by regional cinemas. Some 70% of the budget is (necessarily) expended on the purchase of basic publicity materials, but programme notes are regularly assembled by the Unit for a wide variety of films (see attached notes for THE AVIATOR'S WIFE, LA COMMARE SECCA and '10'). Increased resources would allow for the resumption of the long-discontinued practice of producing films on films (or maybe videocassettes on films in support both of direct acquisitions and touring packages).

Other Activities

There are topics of direct relevance to Pub and Doc which fall outside any clear sectional brief, but should be addressed if the consolidation and expansion of regional exhibition is to proceed without losing sight of the 'educative' aims of the enterprise:

- a Resources Centres need to be established and maintained within the main cinemas, and other venues sufficiently well funded to establish and maintain 'core' documentation.
- b Reprographic facilities are indispensable for the provision of programme notes to audiences.
- c Sales points for BFI publications and other books and journals must be created.

The decline of commercial theatrical exhibition is already well recognised, and, although admissions are holding steady in our sector, both the proliferation of the videocassette and the imminent opening of Channel 4 with a more adventurous film policy should concentrate our attention on defining the precise nature of the various operations, so that their 'difference' may be identified and promoted to a public ever less anxious to visit the regular commercial cinema. In other words, the combination of intelligently organised programmes backed by critical documentation, and discussion, presented in theatres equipped with 'social spaces', has maintained audience levels in BFI-assisted cinemas, while traditional commercial theatres have gone into decline.

FINANCIAL CODA

Governors have recently appreciated the need for increased subsidy of regional exhibition and it should be underlined that film distribution is an activity that supports exhibition and that the benefits of centrally funded distribution are felt principally by regional exhibitors. The Film + Video Library is attempting to broaden the range of material in distribution, but the existing acquisition budget cannot cope with the increasingly heavy demands made upon it. (The budget covers not just the purchase of distribution rights, but also the costs of importation, sub-titling, new and replacement prints, film cleaning etc.)

The budgets for publicity and documentation work are way below the levels needed to carry out this work effectively (£7030pa to provide support to thirty cinemas). The Division is also embarked on a policy of acquiring films for theatrical exhibition with no budgetary provision for the production of posters etc. or for payment of

advertising space. The Film + Video Library has a miniscule advertising budget of £660 that bears little relationship to the revenue target figure.

The arguments for subsidized distribution and for the importance of publicity and documentation are rarely made, but both activities form essential components in the BFI's increasingly effective involvement in British film and television culture, particularly in the regions.

Finally, here is some indication of the budgeting levels appropriate to the activities outlined in this paper if they are to match the considerably increased contribution that the Institute is making outside London:

Film + Video Library

As explained earlier, there is the single budget to cover all acquisition activity (1982/83 £38,870) but listed below are the additional sums related to particular areas of acquisition that are needed to consolidate or develop the Library:

NEW FILMS	£15,000
ARCHIVAL SELECTIONS	£10,000
TELEVISION	£15,000
VIDEOCASSETTES	A feasibility study needs to be made but a pilot project could be mounted for £5,000

Publicity and Documentation

EXPANSION OF EXISTING SERVICE	Additional £5,000
PUBLICITY EXPENSES INCURRED IN THEATRICAL EXHIBITION	£7,500 (no money currently available, except as skimmed from existing budgets)

Lectures/Special Documentation £10,000