

A POTENTIAL AUDIENCE

Film-makers on Tour in the

South-West: October - December 1977.

Description -

Part One; Pre-Tour Theory and Practice -

- the ACGB Scheme
- the co-ordinator; motivations and choice of
- the film-makers
- seeking and meeting the venues
- administration; SWA, the BFI and SAC
- advance publicity; posters,
Press Releases, etc.

Part Two; The Tour - Practice

- publicity and the venues
- venue and film-maker liaison
- projection problems - good and bad solutions
- the film-viewer; numbers and response
- the film-maker; show responses and the Tour
- the venue responses
- money connections; film-maker/venue/subsidy
- co-ordinator liaison

Part Three; The Next Tour? Alterations, Proposals
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- Comments
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PART ONE: Pre-Tour and Practice;

Film-makers on Tour Scheme was initiated by the Artist's Films Committee of the ACGB in 1977 to encourage the screening of films by their makers in venues which would not normally have the resources (or interest) to do so - by having the film-makers present with the audience it was hoped discussion after a screening would allow greater access for the audience to the often difficult work and give the film-maker opportunity to experience the response to the work directly: financial reimbursement under the Scheme offered incentive to this notion. However, the Scheme was restricted to be applicable to those film-makers who had already received financial support from the ACGB to cover film production costs through awards or bursaries, though indication at this stage did suggest that film-makers coming within the ACGB Film Committee's terms of reference would be eligible for the Scheme. It should be added that when the Scheme was first introduced through a publication no consultation had taken place with any of the film-makers' organisations until the London Film-makers' Co-op demanded an open meeting be called; it was at this that short-comings within the Scheme and its longer-term implications became apparent.

In response to the best parts of the Scheme it was decided in April 1977 by myself to organise the visit of several film-makers during the following autumn to Exeter College of Art film study group. On reflection it seemed that many of the film-makers would be travelling a great distance and occupying two days of their time to present just one show of work - it seemed appropriate for them as well as 'a potential audience' that their presence in the area should be extended to include further screenings. Furthermore, that the existence of the screenings should be publicised as widely as possible and held in centrally located places to allow the widest possible audience

to attend. Being prepared to contribute some time to see if the idea was feasible and following a few discussions with people actively interested in independent film (of which the Artist's Films form a part), a mailing was got off to potential venues around the South West Arts geographical area. (Appendix A). In offering to co-ordinate the proposed Tour, it was being made explicit that once introductions had been made and dates correlated, it was up to the venues and film-makers own enthusiasm to sort out the details of mounting the shows.

The film-makers had been selected with a bias toward those engaged in more formal exploration of the medium; work, in the opinion of the co-ordinator, particularly vigorous and of particular interest to the visually and polemically biased film-viewer at that time; the groups and institutions who received the mailing were likewise biased in this direction. At the same time the rising phenomena of 'the independent film-maker' was felt to be of essential importance in providing a context for these formal experiments and the film-makers selected were felt, to the knowledge of the co-ordinator, to be representative in this way. As such, the list was being recommended to venues who, in many cases, were not even aware of the works' existence.

There was a good (60%) response to the mailing and it became a matter of juggling the film-makers and their available dates with the venues, who they wanted and when. Regular screenings in the same place were strongly recommended and it was hoped that the Bristol area venues (Arnolfini, Bristol Arts Centre and Brillig Centre in Bath) and the Deep South venues (Falmouth College of Art, Penwith Gallery and Newlyn Gallery) would co-operate in these respects. Exeter Central Library and Dartington Regional Film Theatre became the mainstay of the Tour, booking all ten film-makers for the same days of successive weeks: in effect the other venues were fitted in around the Monday in Exeter and the Wednesday in Dartington. Most of this business was conducted

on the phone since it was now the end of June and people were disappearing fast in all directions - the problem of publicity was rearing its holiday prone head.....

(Appendix B - booking chart).

Five of the film-makers at this point had not been recognised by the ACGB Films Committee (Mulvey, Trevelyan, Scott, Tait and MacKinnon) but it seemed that a period of negotiation between the ACGB, the BFI, SWA (and, much later, the Scottish Arts Council), would solve the problem of who subsidised who and anyway should not hold up any longer the earliest possible co-ordination of the Tour.

A pink sheet for the venues and green sheets for the film makers were, before holiday plague became epidemic, despatched forthwith (Appendix C).

A poster was designed by the two resident film-makers, (mixing the names of the film-makers with the titles of the venues), to provide a visual frame to a space left for the venues to fill out according to their own requirements. These were printed in rapid time by ICW and distributed, with further general information, during the holiday period, ready for use from the beginning of September.

PART TWO : THE TOUR - Practice

A couple of weeks before the Tour started a Press Release was prepared and mailed to all local papers, local radio and TV; arts information bulletins and other publications with an advanced copy date had been provided with skeleton information earlier. It became apparent at this stage that publicity to that point was probably not going to be adequate and that this factor was going to hinge on the collaboration of film-maker and venue organiser. It was becoming evident as messages requesting information from both quarters arrived that this hope of a 'self-made festival or tour' had either been badly communicated or simply had fallen flat from vocational exhaustion.

The venues without projection facilities or much experience of screenings were given confident re-assurances of a technical nature and their initial enthusiasm seemed to be becoming tempered by the more practical aspects. One venue organiser began to refer to the Tour as 'the South West Arts Tour' clearly relying on the centralised organisation this institution often takes on, forgetting or misunderstanding the stated aims of the Tour in encouraging direct contact between film-maker and venue - an aspect which the ACGB idea was obviously setting out to foster. It appeared too that some of the film-makers expected to do little but arrive (in style?) at the venue five minutes before the appointed hour, expose their films (and themselves), get back on the train and run for the secure anonymity of the Metropolis. For the most part they were efficient at letting the venues know about the equipment they would require to do the shows - five of the film-makers required something more than just the conventional single screen projection facility (with or without change-over facility). One required three-screen simultaneous projection and but for the art galleries, no problems were encountered in providing expanded projection facilities. But the forwarding

of visual and written information suitable for a) initial and advanced publicity, and b) programme information and notes to accompany the show, was either profuse (the minority) or extremely scant (the majority).

The publicity put out by the venues to their respective constituencies consequently was in many cases (where they weren't prepared to chase the film-maker), disadvantaged from the start. Newspapers, radio and television provided no publicity for the event - community newspapers were the exception and almost all screenings were listed in the SWA newspaper, (though a generous editorial article didn't hit the streets until half-way through the Tour.) Consequently attendances were quite varied throughout the period and at the different venues. Dartington RFT with its 'captive' resident student population encouraged by the energetic John Gridley probably succeeded in guiding a reasonably consistent number of 70 - 100 film viewers through the admittedly exhaustive series. Exeter too maintained a regular hardcore of 30 (consolidating from an initial 100), drawn mainly from the students at the various city educational establishments. The remaining venues which were not running regular screenings and with less experience it seemed, in running such events, fared less well with audiences in the 12 - 40 bracket. The film-makers however, reported back (in most cases), satisfaction with the screenings and the audience response even in the cases where the audiences were small and unfamiliar with the area of work. It seemed that in general at least a third of the audience would be ready to remain after the screening and discuss the work with the film-maker and amongst themselves for an average time of between 20 - 30 minutes (though there were the exceptionally short and the exceptionally long anomalies). In Exeter a discernable change of attitude amongst the hardcore actually meant that the verbal responses and exchanges became more efficient as the Tour went on.

Film-makers filled in the forms providing information about each individual venue attendance and response and a digest of these appears in Appendix D. In addition the co-ordinator received two written responses from film-makers, one having initially been sent by Peter Gidal to David Curtis at the ACGB. This is reprinted in Appendix E since it raised the most pertinent issues to do with the successes and short-comings of the Tour and its implications are discussed later.

Very little was heard from the venue organisers after the Tour was completed and was taken by the co-ordinator to indicate the most serious problem encountered in the Tour; motivation and commitment.

The five film-makers who remained 'un-adopted' by the ACGB at the outset of the Tour were 'placed' by the time their show came round, though in the case of Margaret Tait who lives in the Orkneys there was an absurdly prolonged hassle between the Scottish Arts Council, the ACGB, SWA and the Co-ordinator which consumed a lot of his time and the film-maker's, to the point where she had decided that filibuster was the name-of-the-game and that in fact her tour was off. Eventually this was sorted out the day before she was needing to leave Orkney and clearly indicated loss of communication between the various funding bodies and a lack of understanding about the obvious strains and practical problems of getting oneself around the country with the additional luggage of prints, meeting different people asking often complicated questions all making unusual demands on concentration and stamina. It is understood however, that liaison between the various funding bodies has since improved and no adverse reflection is intended; indeed the co-operation and active encouragement of South West Arts was exemplary as was the assistance and co-operation of individual officers in the ACGB and the BFI attempting to

liberally interpret their rule-books..... Certainly the post-administrative formalities of covering the film-makers fees and expenses went through without any complaints, though there was some confusion over the payment of rentals for the prints in addition to the fees. (This too has since been clarified). It seemed too that venues were happy with the financial arrangements paying out only £10 for an evening's engagement - for better or worse in their eyes. All the venue organisers were generous and efficient in providing overnight (or longer) accommodation at no charge to the film-makers, an expense otherwise essential to the notion of touring, not subsidised, as in other performing arts, by the funding bodies - but quite possibly remaining an advantageous anomaly in the case of this performing art!

PART THREE: The Next Tour? - Alterations, Proposals and Developments

The Tour met with obvious successes and shortcomings. The primary purpose of making the work available to a larger number of people, particularly to those who would not otherwise, by virtue of being in one of the traditional cultural centres, have a geographical access to it, obviously succeeded - some 1500 attendances were recorded for all of the venues and film-makers a number usually only recorded at festivals of independent work.

In general audiences were generous to the film-makers in giving them time and space to elaborate verbally upon their films. (The exception was in the lecture theatre of Falmouth College of Art where students seemed to feel secure enough to be impatiently aggressive - maybe or maybe not indicative?) There was something of a tendency, perhaps due to inexperience, for some film-makers to talk either too technically or too esoterically, to audiences who were quite obviously ill-equipped to engage immediately with the issues and concerns in the film-makers' heads. Also, apparent ignorance of the work of other film-makers on the Tour did not make it easier for audiences to make connections between the various film-makers and attempt to comprehend the wider and undeniably vigorous discourse around the existence and practice of so many individuals and groups. In a word, it seemed that some of the film-makers were tending to regard the screening as 'another gig', rather than seeing the potential in collectively creating and encouraging the potential audience.

At very least then, the existence of the Tour created a Festival of independent film: the question about the value of festivals as being an appropriate outlet for independent work, devoid, as these events so often are, of relevance to a particular locality and its population, then posed the more appropriate alternative of regarding independent work as an essential part of a developing

and evolving cultural and social scene. There was a deliberate resistance at the outset, of being too optimistic about what was being regarded as a pilot project, by introducing the Tour to the South West as a regular feature until the extent of the response, both, to the work and practicalities of showing it, had been gauged. It was nonetheless tempting to engage in a theoretical meander about the value of such an event as did Archie Tait, programmer at the Arnolfini, before the Tour had been tried. (Extract of his letter Appendix F). Ironic indeed that the Bristol arrangements for the Tour and screenings of independent work came in for much criticism after the Tour was over, where poor projection annoyed the film-makers and where the co-ordinated programmes of the Arnolfini and the Arts Centre failed to attract the audience that a conurbation of Bristol's size and reputation undoubtedly hides - it is hard to correlate the proportion and type of publicity afforded the independent film-makers which the Arnolfini claimed to be (solely?) championing with the amount given to the already well-publicised international art cinema which these establishments were in practice promoting. Tait's comments remain, of course, excellent, accurate and theoretically sound in the opinion. I should predict, of all British independent film-makers - to actually begin to know what the practice is, and how it might be most usefully deployed, from the points of view of film-viewer and film-maker, rather than solely that of the programmer and the administrator, is what the tour was setting out to detect.

Film-makers undoubtedly benefited from the Tour in, possibly for the first time, being co-responsible for those areas of film practice traditionally left to other people - exhibition, publicity, distribution and response. In some cases, the unnerving experience of elaborating upon that practice to people who saw simply a residue of it, (the film), became a factor bound to affect the details likely to be included or excluded from the next new film.

The subsidy bodies undoubtedly found out (and still are!) a thing or two, not least the curious division of film-makers into classes, applicable to one government agency but not another. The establishment of a body to represent the views and wishes of all independent film-makers, such as the IFA, would clearly lead to the formation of a single film authority and (theoretically at least), reduce the amount of time drawing up rule-books, and then applying them. Certainly the confusion over who was subsidising or promoting who, used up a lot of valuable time and energy which, if nothing else, showed up the short-comings of these bodies in meeting the needs of such events.

There was some confusion over prints. Those film-makers associated with the London Film-makers' Co-op and who had been engaged already in creating screenings for their work were more attuned to making their own arrangements for providing and bringing with them prints. Those being 'promoted' by the BFI were more used to having the BFI making arrangements for prints to arrive at venues. Consequently one film arrived only just in time for the screening and another occasion, the film-maker had to bring an earlier and, it was felt, inferior film as substitute for the print of another film that was in another part of the world on the date of the screening, (confirmed some 2½ months earlier!). Such snags led to later clarification rather than advanced anticipation.

Overridingly what emerged as the weakest link in the Tour and a problem associated with and encountered by all independent film-makers in the problem of publicity. In the face of massive advertising campaigns for the commercial cinema and the effortless consumption of nightly television, the actual location and timing of screenings to fill a slot or create a fresh space outside the immediate appeal of cinema, remains as a seemingly insurmountable problem closely associated with the more specific financial and organisational problem

of publicity. Certainly the galleries on the circuit fared poorly - perhaps they suffer from the kind of type-casting expectations as does the Odeon - so no simple solution appeared (or was sought) from that direction and very little possibility even appeared. The experience in Dartington and Exeter pointed out a much more optimistic opening - that the work had a lot more to offer those seeking stimulation or elucidation than those seeking distraction in novelty and spectacle.

1. The appeal to the film-viewers' active rather than passive involvement in not only the practical reading of the film but its implications and proposals for (rudimentary) group analysis, confirmed suspicions concerning the pedagogic obsessions of much work in the independent field.
2. A strengthening of this positive feature and a move into formal educational techniques such as course construction and presentation of lectures seemed appropriate development.
3. Linking with other official groups concerned with broadly based educational concerns such as EAS and Publications at the BFI and Screen Education magazine, etc. To improve both the quality and presentation of documentation and publicity would seem desirable.
4. More careful briefing and meetings with both film-makers and venue organisers - few of the bookings were made person to person except via letter or telephone. Written documents explaining purposes behind a Tour proposal together with details concerning the venues and potentially bookable film-makers need to be more elaborate leaving less (unhappily) to the imagination of the individuals and groups involved and more to the co-ordinator and local arts association. (The mould/mold? of Support seems already well cast.....)

5. The co-ordinator needs to start work six months before rather than four, and should be paid a fee and expenses.
6. Chiefly this allows far greater time to be devoted to adequate structuring and design of the Tour and its effective publicity to the appropriate quarters. This would include cultivating the interest of the mass-media without losing sight of the Tour's intentions so that the temptation is not to end up designing 'an attractive commodity'. (A refusal to make compromise with what the media would like to publicise could of course lead to the alienation of that quarter....)
7. Linking with other areas of film practice such as production and regular study weekends, technical courses etc. as well as cross-media reference, would strengthen the contributions that touring film-makers could make.
8. Financing of the visit needs to leave open wider options to the venues so that for instance a venue can charge admission at the door. In the case of those venues with established audiences who could raise more than the £10 in effect, loss they would otherwise incur, requires amendment so that the Scheme becomes more allied to the notion of 'guarantee against loss'. For the venues to pay rental for the film for instance, whilst the Scheme pays for the film-makers attendance, benefits not only the film-maker but, through the utilisation of the normal distribution channels, the film-makers organisations.
9. The encouraging of venues to run regular programmes preferably so that a degree of integration takes place with their other programmes and/or activities would be seen to be an important part of the co-ordinator's job. The Exeter experience of 'non-captive' audience/ten film-makers, one a week,

showed that the regularity of the screenings, time and place, were a major factor in maintaining the audience through a long (and tough) series.

(Moral: Keeping regular is the Exeter experience....)

10. Can't think of anything else for now, but I will.....