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**BFI EXHIBITION POLICY: FILMS AND CRITICAL CONCEPTS**

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There are two elements to an exhibition policy, the choosing of films and the development of audience attitudes and expectations. The two are mutually dependent processes, and have to be conceived as elements of a single project, although entailing quite different ranges of skill and work. It is easy, in a sense, to support and monitor the flow of films around the country, but it is much harder to work at the task of building the kind of audience which will support a richer and more varied range of films than those which would otherwise find their way onto our screens. One task is educative, the other commercial and organisational and in combination they can appear, if badly conducted, merely manipulative or patronising: but if they are expertly handled then a real and living national film culture.

The traditional view of the cinema has been one of a commercial industry, dominated by Hollywood product, within which a small cultural sector, usually showing foreign language films, continually struggles for survival. With the decline of mainstream cinema, and the changing demographic profile of cinema audiences, this paradigm of cinema exhibition has become increasingly irrelevant. It is no longer adequate to see the BFI's role as a cultural appendage to a healthy commercial activity. The BFI has to tackle head-on, the question of re-building cinema audiences, if it is not to retreat to a role of critical curatorship of cinema's past.

### The Numbers Game

How can such a reversal be achieved on a lasting basis? Several basic assumptions underpin and inform Distribution Division's practices. The first is that the only valid and vital film culture is one based on the widest possible distribution and exhibition of as wide a range of titles as possible, to as wide a range of audiences as possible. Traditionally the BFI's distribution and exhibition activities concentrated on the non-theatrical markets, such as the educational sector and the film societies, but the very existence of this sector was predicated on a secure theatrical market - a condition which no longer obtains. The policy of Distribution Division has therefore been to intervene in the theatrical marketplace to ensure that the range of films distributed and exhibited in this country is broadened to improve the long-term chances for survival of cinemas outside London, affiliated to the BFI. This was and remains a first requirement if audiences are to be rebuilt and are not to be subjected to a largely undifferentiated, purely consumerist address.

At the same time, Distribution Division also recognises that other parallel exhibition practices, some arising from the BFI's production-oriented clients committed to notions of 'integrated practice', exist or are developing and may also contribute to the new model of theatrical exhibition which is being developed in theatres associated with the BFI.

By deploying strategic subsidies, in order to service 'independent' distributors and regional exhibitors, the BFI has encouraged organisations allied to its policies to assume a more dynamic profile in the theatrical marketplace. To date the sector has seen a steady growth during the past few years in the audiences for its films as the table shows

Table I. Audiences at 33 BFI-supported Cinemas 1982-1985

	Admissions*	%age Increase
1982	696,000	
1983	800,000	14.9
1984	870,000	8.8
1985	975,000	12.1

\*Does not include special events and festivals such as Tyneside's Independent Festival.

#### Reculer pour mieux sauter?

To some, the pursuit of the numbers game may be seen as a retreat into the arms of Hollywood and mainstream commercial cinema, but there are convincing reasons why this is not so. The earlier policy of the BFI attempted to graft a highly centralised, highly politicised and essentially academic philosophy of programming onto a number of theatres whose prime need was to survive and succeed. As a result, the responses from the theatres either tended to be elitist, or institutionalised a form of intellectual tokenism. Exhibition practices were inclined to ossify around set films, set texts and set teachers. Audiences, other than those all-too-exclusively concerned with issues of their own representation, tended to be alienated rather than engaged.

This is not to deny that there are still residual bonuses from the years of 'structured programming' in that either or both of the educative or political projects remain central to today's more gradualist practices. Indeed the formal educational profile of the sector has clearly improved since the demise of centralist dictation; and today, most theatres continue to be engaged in initiatives and partnerships around film and media studies, but ones which are tailored to their local areas and audiences rather than dictated centrally.

Indeed, the clear shift in programming policy in recent years, has been to develop a different paradigm - one which privileges the audience in the complex equations of programming and presentation. A policy which is concerned to develop an audience for cinema by

building on their critical consciousness, their cinephiliac enthusiasm or their cine-literacy, whether they come to an individual film, a season, a seminar or a lecture; whether they read brochure copy, programme notes or special documentation.

The policy assumes, and indeed proceeds from the assumption, that the audience engagement is an active one. Programming policy strives therefore to optimise the conditions of engagement and to encourage such engagements by offering a wider range of experiences through seasons, seminars, festivals, visiting speakers and so on.

The search for bigger audiences, is not therefore a retreat into a naive populism, but rather a strategy designed to build a broader public base for a cinema of active critical debate by both critics and public alike.

### Strategic Programming

Strategic Programming is designed therefore to bring about the long-term strategy outlined above. Much of the practice can indeed be accommodated under the traditional rubric of 'structured programming', in that it still includes critically-conceived seasons of films, contextual screenings or events built around various themes, authors or issues. All these however, are now part of a broader mix which is deliberately intended to be, and indeed to appear, as rather more provocative than prescriptive, thus allowing the audience to make its contributions to the 'meanings' of the films which are seen, rather than simply learning the 'meanings' of those films which have become part of the received critical or academic canon.

No matter how dynamic the context of critical or theoretical debate, the notion of using films to illustrate theses is problematic and often appears an unproductively pedantic and reductionist exercise. The reverse notion of illuminating an understanding of films by reference to such theses or debates has proved more useful and creates less of a mismatch between the currency of ideas and the currencies of film exhibition. The logical corollary of this is to promote the films rather than their abstract contexts.

In this mixed economy of exhibition, much promotional effort is naturally expended on first-run product. This is not necessarily easy to sell or an easy option. In a declining cinema economy when commercial exhibitors have become increasingly conservative and are narrowing the range of product they are prepared to screen and feel able to market efficiently or profitably, BFI-supported cinemas have broadened the range of product they are prepared to screen. They are no longer simply regional art houses but use films from a wide variety of production contexts. More importantly they screen them successfully. 'Strategic Programming' has meant that audiences for films have been built through a continuous process of trial and error, experimentation in programming, presentation and promotion, and with specific strategies worked out for each individual venue.

## The Future

If the growth in audience figures in BFI-supported cinemas, the increasing range of films shown, together with the special seasons, the seminars and the mini-festivals all sounds like a resounding success story, we must enter two profound notes of caution. The first concerns the resources in the sector, the second the intellectual and critical climate within which this work is carried out.

It is commonplace to observe that this increased activity has generated an increased workload for all concerned. Programme Advisers in Distribution Division are now programming 42 screens operating on a full, or part-time basis. A three screen operation like Cornerhouse in Manchester programmes something like 30 films per month. During 1985 the Division programmed over 4,000 titles overall. The volume of the publicity and documentation material distributed to BFI-supported cinemas in 1985 was up by about 80% on 1984. Increased activity in Distribution Division has been paralleled by increased activity in the theatres themselves. For many theatres, not just financial resources but more significantly human resources, are in danger of becoming overstretched.

This increased activity plays a key role in giving rise to a second note of caution which concerns the critical climate in which distribution and exhibition work is carried out. Many of the individuals working within the sector developed their critical formation during the 1970s, and therefore draw on many of the critical and cultural questions opened up in those debates, attempting to apply them instinctively to a new and changing set of films. In many cases, the wiser and more experienced of them can survive, but the sector is really living off what might be called its cultural and critical capital. Unfortunately, little work is being done to renew and revitalise cultural and critical debate within the area, and it is here too, that the BFI must play a crucial role.

The way in which the Insitute might nourish a critical debate around new films needs careful thought. The Institute already supports a number of activities designed to encourage and stimulate new areas of intellectual enquiry and critical thought relating to film culture in Britain. But there is no overall strategy. Much of the Institute's support is simply a reactive response to outside proposals - some from the world of education, others from individuals. Too often, the areas it supports are either aspects of historic enquiry which are of little relevance to today's audiences, or are so obscure that their significance can barely be understood except in polytechnics and universities. Frequently too, what passes for critical analysis are value-laden assertions.

Film, and indeed television and video, are all international businesses. So too are the critical ideas that are emerging not just about films, but about television programmes and videos too. To put these ideas into clear and accessible prose, and to make them available for audiences of first-run films and new television programmes, is a journalistic and cultural challenge which the Institute cannot afford to ignore if its activities are to be of

relevance to the audiences for our distribution and exhibition activities. It is not enough simply to try to work with the news media (although we should continue to try to do so) because all too often their values and their interests cut across those of the Institute.

How the Institute should attempt to solve this problem, is as yet unclear. Should it jettison some or all of its 'arms length' funding principles to ensure a more direct editorial input into the periodicals and journals it supports? Are there ways in which the Institute can develop a broad-based strategy which can take a wide cultural overview which is of relevance to more than one division? How can the Institute get these ideas across in a marketplace characterised by information overload? Or to put it more polemically, is a free market of ideas compatible with a free market in goods and services?

A film culture is not built simply by showing films. It also requires a familiarity and an ease with the cultural and critical concepts which enable audiences to evaluate these films as well as enjoy them.

Vincent Porter  
April 1986