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**Thesis Title: Film Appreciation and the Postwar
Film Society Movement**

**Goldsmiths, University of London
PhD in Media and Communications**

I declare that the work
presented in this document
is my own work.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began this research I did not know that it would lead me towards the film societies. In fact I'm not sure that I had much sense of their existence. My interest was in exploring the internationalist sentiments of art cinema audiences. Flicking through an old copy of *Films and Filming*, I read about a film society in Ruislip which showed Buñuel and Kurosawa films on 16mm projectors in my old primary school, and this captured my imagination. I owe thanks to many people for generously sharing their memories and experiences of being involved in film societies from the 1940s to the present, for passing on programmes and magazines from their personal collections and for extending me their hospitality. These conversations deepened my understanding of this movement immeasurably. Thank you to Sylvia and Peter Bradford, Sid Brooks, Gwen Bryanston, Anne Burrows, Percy Childs, James Clark, Brian Clay, Michael Essex-Lopresti, Denis Forman, Leslie Hardcastle, Alan Howden, David Meeker, John and Doris Minchinton, Gwen Molloy, Victor Perkins, Rommi Przibram, John Salisbury, Mansel Stimpson, Mike Taylor, John Turner, Jean Young and Dave Watterson. I am also grateful to Melanie Selfe who generously shared her ideas and writing on film societies.

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DESCRIPTION OF THESIS

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Thesis Title: Film Appreciation and the Postwar Film Society Movement

This thesis is an inquiry into the aims of the postwar film society movement. Film societies provided an organised alternative to commercially run film exhibition: screens and audiences for films overlooked by cinemas and opportunities to study and discuss them within voluntary associations. The thesis assesses the movement's contribution to both these objectives, focusing in particular on its promotion of film appreciation, a set of educational ideas and practices associated with training film viewers' capacity for film critical judgement. Tracing shifts in film appreciation as a discourse and as film society practice centred on screenings and discussion, the thesis contributes to our understanding of what film studies has been in Britain. It argues that appreciation connotes a cultural ambition specific to the postwar moment, broad social participation in discussion of cinematic value.

The thesis brings together research into the activities of individual societies, specifically through detailed studies of the Edinburgh Film Guild and Birmingham Film Society, with a focus on the practices and publications promoted by the Federation of Film Societies that aimed to construct a cohesive movement from disparate societies. The values nurtured by self-organised film education bodies are explored through the ideal of active participation, embodied in the membership relationship, across a spectrum of film cultural activity: exhibition, education and criticism.

The self-image of the film society movement was also that of a vanguard in taste and knowledge. The thesis traces the pressures on this self-conception during a period of radical shifts in judgement associated with emergent critical and educational vanguards fostered in particular by the professionalisation of film teaching. The thesis argues that although this professionalisation created new forms of film society pedagogy it also introduced an ever-widening divide between informal learning, premised on membership exhibition and discussion, and specialised film studies in formal education.

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Introduction

This thesis addresses a period in British film culture when volunteer initiative, coordinated through film societies, possessed a prominence and cultural significance that has long since diminished. In 1945, film societies in England and Wales achieved a degree of collective organisation that had eluded them before the war; they established a Federation.¹ Over the next ten years through their two Federations they established two new film periodicals (*Film News* established 1953; *Film*, 1954), set up an experimental film fund that mirrored a similar initiative of the British Film Institute (1955), a film supply scheme (1956), held annual viewing sessions featuring films that were not exhibited commercially (1946) and organised Britain's first national film conference (1955). Individual film societies operated as film exhibitors under a shared assumption that the way they organised their activities marked them out as different from commercial cinema exhibition. This difference was only partly about the films they showed, films that could not be easily seen in a commercially run cinema. It was also underscored by a commitment to education that was enshrined in each film society's constitution and was the basis of the film society claim to remission from entertainment tax. Film societies were positively encouraged to regard themselves as educators by the example of leading societies and activists and by the corporate activities of the Federation. They were restricted from regarding themselves as akin to commercial cinemas by the negative scrutiny of a guarded film trade. Coupled with this breadth of cultural intervention in film education, criticism and exhibition the film society movement claimed for itself a leadership role in supporting new forms of cinema: it saw itself as a volunteer run equivalent to the BBC's Third Programme.

To suggest that volunteer initiative has a radically diminished and marginal role in the present in comparison with the postwar decades is not to slight the dedication of those who continue to give their time to film society activity. It is simply to point out that the basis of that activity has shifted irrevocably. Film

¹ Scottish film societies created their own Federation in 1936 and began publishing a magazine *Film Forum* three years later.

societies continue to operate as a form of self-organised, not for profit exhibition. But since the development of film study in formal educational institutions and the growth of art cinema exhibition, two developments that have, in a sense, dispossessed the voluntary movement of its key areas of competence, film societies have become, or have allowed themselves to become, a residualised exhibition sector, serving a sector of the population that are unable to access locally what exists elsewhere as specialised market provision.² It is also questionable whether there currently exists a film society movement. The concept of a movement implies both a form of association or group manifestation and the collective pursuit of coherent, consciously articulated artistic and cultural aims. Movements, Raymond Williams usefully suggests, can be defined according to the manner of their internal organisation and by their external relations with other cultural organisations within the same field.³ The tendency of some movements is to specialise, they seek to promote work in a specific artistic medium or branch of an art. Other movements exhibit tendencies that are either alternative or oppositional; the former designating initiatives that aim to provide alternative facilities for the creation and dissemination of work that is excluded from the existing institution. An alternative movement necessarily implies a critique of established institutions that develops into more explicitly articulated dissent in oppositional movements, where active dissent is fundamental to the movement's identity.

Buried and in danger of being forgotten in the contemporary incarnation of film societies is their previous history, a collectively manifested ambition to be a vanguard movement in the fields of film exhibition and education. An article on film society programming in *Documentary News Letter* in 1940 stated, 'Film societies owe their existence to groups of men and women who translate the unspoken need for study and discussion of the culture of cinema into practical action.'⁴ One aim of this thesis is to use a range of historical sources, national and local archival collections,

² This shift from an educationally focused movement to a residualised amateur exhibition sector is implied in the current centrality of the notion of community cinema, under the slogan 'cinema for all' in the work of the British Federation of Film Societies.

³ Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1981), 66-71.

⁴ "Programme Building," *Documentary News Letter* 1, no. 6 (June 1940): 14

periodicals and oral history testimony to reconstruct a sense of the organisational vigour and pioneering educational activism of the film society movement in Britain in the post war decades. This involves restoring an understanding and appreciation of the role of film societies in organised film study activity, film critical writing and debate, and in developing distinctive traditions of film programming. The men and women who led 'study and discussion of the culture of cinema' for adults on a volunteer basis in the two decades after the war have not featured prominently, or at all, in histories of the development of film education in Britain. Contemplating this marginalised history of volunteer initiative in the field of informal adult film education I was struck by a passage in the second volume of Richard Hoggart's autobiography. Hoggart notes that the lives of those who are neither major public figures nor the poor and obscure slip through the gaps of history. He had colleagues working in adult education in mind when he wrote,

They were provincials, they worked in unfashionable institutions, and in unfashionable corners of those institutions; yet in their own ways they too were exemplary... They carried out devotedly for years, without regard to quick fashion or great publicity, work they believed to be important; and they made their contribution to the traditions of that works, added stones to the cairn which had begun to be erected... All of them represented something of the best in an undervalued and often neglected but in many ways model area of education.⁵

The description seemed apt for what I discovered about the volunteer film society movement and what I felt warranted wider acknowledgement and celebration.

The film society movement's relationship to discourses and practices of film education is the central concern of the thesis. The predominant film educational discourse in the postwar period was film appreciation. Mass market paperback books, the lending catalogue of the National Film Library, the film society film programme and adult education classes all consciously aimed to extend the public appreciation of film. The thesis is concerned to understand how film societies pursued this aim through their writing, their programming and their organised study activities and how

⁵ Richard Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning: Life and Times 1940-59*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990): 121.

they related to other agencies of film education, criticism and exhibition. Exploring a range of these initiatives provides a way to critically assess the film society movement as a volunteer-led intervention within post-war British film culture. Tracing the different manifestations of this distinctive hybrid of alternative exhibitor and popular educator, and teasing out what notions of improvement were implied by their different pedagogical practices constitutes one of the key preoccupations of the thesis.

The first chapter sets out to specify the conditions leading to the emergence of a vigorous voluntary film society movement after 1945. This movement inherited a strong organisational legacy from the interwar period, a tradition of exhibiting films considered by the film trade to possess limited or no commercial appeal and of educating the public in their appreciation through programme notes, lectures and discussion. At the close of the war a number of large urban film societies in Edinburgh, Manchester and Merseyside had been in continuous operation for over a dozen years. The chapter begins by surveying this pre-war legacy of film society organisation. The Second World War, however, brought wide ranging social and cultural changes in Britain that had a significant impact on film society activity. Whether on the home front, or in the armed services, the mobilisation of the population no doubt put many British men and women in life threatening situations, but it also brought social mobility and educational opportunity. The armed services in particular were described by contemporary observers as a great laboratory of popular adult education initiatives and symbolic of this educational extension was the use of radio and film and the discussion group. Moreover, the use of 16mm projectors in the forces and in civic organisations, both for education and entertainment, brought that technology out of the classroom and into the community. Within a few short years film societies using 16mm projectors outside of purpose built cinemas would be the majority within the movement. More than just a change of exhibition technology, 16mm made the model of voluntary association viable among smaller groups and therefore fostered the film society boom beyond the dozen or so provincial cities that hosted film societies in the thirties.

The second chapter examines the consolidation of film appreciation as a pedagogical discourse through the circulation of accessible introductory textbooks on the subject. The method of this chapter is one of contrasting the concept of aesthetic appreciation developed by theorist Rudolf Arnheim in his 1933 book *Film*, with the understanding of film art proposed by Roger Manvell in his 1944 Penguin paperback of the same name.⁶ Even as Manvell's book, read with great enthusiasm by the new generation of film society activists, drew upon the film aesthetic ideas of the thirties, it substantially shifted the focus away from a concern with cultivating awareness of the medium.

Chapter three further develops the discussion of film appreciation by looking at the archiving practices of the National Film Library and their impact on film society programming. During the war the National Film Library reorganised its collection in order to make a limited number of films available on loan for film appreciation use. The authority of the National Film Library consolidated the reputation of these films as classics. The chapter is concerned both with the cultural authority that this film appreciation canon exercised within the film society movement and its limitations. The latter are explored through the distinctive programming traditions of the film societies, enacting impulses that ran counter to the archive's rigorous canon formation.

What was distinctive about film societies was an organisational form structured around the two poles of voluntary activism and subscription-based membership. I have tried to tease out the significance of these characteristics for the exhibition and educational practices engaged in by film societies. The ethos of activism and the membership relationship led to a consistent emphasis on creating opportunities for participation and involvement. Active membership was identified with the activity of selecting and booking films, writing articles, reviews and programme notes, holding discussions and assuming organisational responsibilities within a formally democratic organisation. Whilst it needs to be acknowledged that voluntary association has long been understood as inextricably bound up with the

⁶ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933); Roger Manvell, *Film*, 1st ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1944).

formation of class identities, a fact that tends to be confirmed by the professional occupations of the individuals who held office in the voluntary societies, it should also be seen as bearing the impulse to create a different mode of reception to the alienating conditions of anonymous and passive consumption. As I have noted, film societies were an alternative cultural institution in the sense that they came into existence to exhibit forms of cinema excluded from the commercial cinemas but they were also alternative in the sense of seeking to create a mode of film reception different from those possible within a commercial milieu through the organisational form of the voluntary society. The thesis considers the extent to which these two impulses were compatible, exploring the tension within the film society movement between the ideal of an active and participatory mode of film reception on the one hand and the often-repeated aspiration to be an audience supportive of the most challenging and advanced forms of filmmaking. This tension also pertains to the financial basis of the film society as an organisation dependent on membership subscription. What conflicts arise from the competing impulse to support work in advance of public taste whilst needing to retain members and their subscription income, and how are these contradictions resolved?

Chapter four takes as its theme the often-stated vocation of the cinema to facilitate understanding between peoples, a responsibility assumed to be shouldered by alternative forms of exhibition on account of the overwhelming dominance of American films in commercial cinemas. The chapter addresses the relationship between alternative film organisations such as film societies and cinematic representation of the non-Western world. It contrasts two modes of internationalism, on one hand an affirmative mode promoted within Britain's first international film festival, Edinburgh that included new forms of documentary production sponsored by international agencies like Unesco and the colonial film units in south east Asia and Africa. On the other hand a critical internationalism, explicitly anti-colonial, mediated by left distributors Contemporary Films and Plato. Two films that exemplify these modes of internationalism are juxtaposed and discussed in detail: *World Without End* (1953) by Paul Rotha and Basil Wright and *Song of the Rivers* (1954) by Joris Ivens,. A final section deals with the work of Contemporary Films who, with activists within

the film societies, were able to construct a definition of world cinema that promoted films from culturally and cinematically underrepresented nations.

Chapter five is concerned with the film society movement's contribution to film writing. It examines a distinctive reviewing practice developed in the magazine *Film News*. *Film News* featured reviews of films available for film society use written by film society organisers and circulated to booking secretaries to assist programme planning. Striking for the way in which the film society critics characteristically anticipated the responses of members to the film under discussion, these reviews provide valuable evidence of taste and judgement within the film society movement during the 1950s and early 60s. The chapter explores the response of *Film News* critics to the film aesthetic and critical innovations of that period authoritatively promoted by professionally managed international film organisations.

Finally, in chapter six I consider the contestation of film appreciation ideas, focusing on the development of the film teaching movement and on the publication of *The Popular Arts* by Hall and Whannel. *The Popular Arts* attacked the taste improving philosophy of film appreciation and provided a radically different model for teaching with film centred on detailed study and criticism. The chapter considers the relationship of film societies to film appreciation as curriculum, exemplified by Ernest Lindgren's *The Art of Film*, and the impact of the growth of film studies. Although the subsequent development of academic film studies coincided with a diminished commitment to organised study activity in the film society movement, I was keen to resist a simple historical narrative of decline or eclipse. Throughout the chapter I look at the educational activity of Birmingham Film Society during this period of transition towards film studies situated in institutions of higher education. Birmingham Film Society put a renewed emphasis on its film study activities from the 1960s onwards and forged a highly innovative partnership with Birmingham University's Centre for Cultural Studies.

What I have aimed to do is structure the thesis around detailed case studies relating to the film society movement's involvement in exhibition, criticism and education. These case studies are grounded in the work of individual film societies in some instances and in others on activities sustained collectively by the movement

through its Federation. The resulting account does not purport to be a comprehensive study of a geographically diffuse movement that numbered several hundred societies at its historical peak, clearly a practical impossibility. As with every historical research there are questions about the selective availability of historical records. For every film society that leaves behind a record of its activities in a local history archive, a bundle of programmes or committee minute books, there are countless others that leave behind no trace of their activities. Many societies formed, lasted a few seasons and disappeared. Programme notes, magazines and publicity pamphlets are thrown away, believed by their authors and owners to be of no interest to posterity. Having said that there is a vast amount of documentation relating to film societies residing in local history archives around the country that I have not had the means to visit. Also falling outside the remit of this thesis and its focus on film appreciation are the scientific film societies that used voluntary associational methods to encourage a scientifically informed citizenship.

There appeared to be a number of methodological alternatives for approaching a study of a movement composed of geographically dispersed societies of this kind. One possibility was a detailed and focused local study of film societies in one location. The considerable advantages to such a localised approach have been demonstrated by Selfe's study of film societies in Nottingham that situates the city's two film societies within the specific social and cultural space in which they operated whilst at the same time reconstructing their relationship to wider cultural geographies by virtue of their involvement in a national movement within which international films circulate.⁷ Building on this work my aim to contribute towards a broad historical assessment of the movement would have confronted the limitations implicit in generalisation from a study of the history of one society. A second alternative was to anchor the study around the institutional embodiment of the movement, the Federation of Film Societies, the national body set up and run by the film societies themselves to represent and advance their collective interest. The Federation sponsored certain important activities that cultivated a sense of a co-ordinated

⁷ Melanie Selfe, "The Role of Film Societies in the Presentation and Mediation of 'Cultural' Film in Post-War Nottingham" (University of East Anglia, 2007).

movement and these form an important part of this study, specifically the publications of film criticism and the national viewing sessions, both widely valued by film societies. The Federation's complex relationship with the British Film Institute also revealed something of the distinctive ethos of voluntary organisations relevant to this study. Like the film societies that were its members, the Federation operated without public money for most of the period concerned with in the thesis.⁸ Reliant on membership subscriptions, the Federation was not in a position to disperse funds to support ambitious educational plans. Often the Federation's schemes, such as those aimed to facilitate film supply, were conceived and executed on the slenderest of means. To have limited the scope of the study to the Federation alone would have meant neglecting the activities of individual film societies, some of which provided a sense of leadership and direction to the movement that the Federation itself was unable or perhaps unwilling to provide, though in all likelihood many societies would have strenuously resisted a national leadership with a strong policy agenda.

The central concern of the thesis with the changing meanings and practices of film education influenced my decision to focus in some detail on the work of two culturally ambitious and dynamically led societies, the Edinburgh Film Guild and Birmingham Film Society, both of which had their origins in the interwar film culture discussed in chapter one. Situated in large industrial centres, both societies represented the movement's educational ambitions at their most compelling, creating practices of film study that ought to be more widely known. At the same time I hope to have balanced this desire to represent exemplary film society activity with a broader understanding of practices that seem more representative of the character of the movement's relationship to film education. Specifically the publications and documents that circulated within the movement, written by member societies,

⁸ Between 1950 and 1963 the Federation's administrative work was carried out by Margaret Hancock, who worked full time as an unpaid honorary secretary running a national organisation from her home in Sheffield. Mrs Hancock's retirement from the organisation and the unlikelihood of replacing her with a volunteer able to make a similar commitment led to a crisis for the Federation in 1964. The following year, under a new arrangement, the BFI agreed to pay the salary of a Film Society Liaison Officer who would also act as the Federation's secretary.

pamphlets of advice and guidance, magazines of film criticism, are examined as indicators of the movement's values.

The other important methodological concern was to pursue a broadly chronological trajectory, but one that highlighted both shifts in the ideas about film art and education around the film society movement and the most significant processes of historical change within the film culture. The period of investigation stretches roughly from the publication of Roger Manvell's *Film* in 1944 and the formation of the Federation of Film Societies a year later to the early seventies and the creation of BFI funded lectureships in three university departments. The changes in both film education and exhibition across this period were considerable. In the 1940s initiatives sponsored and organised by film societies, often in association with adult education organisations, largely defined the field of film education. This changed with the growing film teaching movement slowly gaining acceptance for film study within secondary and tertiary education. The progressive professionalisation of film teaching and the disciplinary specialisation of film study is therefore one of the underlying historical dynamics of great significance to the voluntary film societies. The other important historical change is the wider circulation of European cinema both through an expanding subsidised regional exhibition sector and specialised commercial provision. Films in a foreign language were one of the kinds of work excluded from all but a few specialist metropolitan cinemas and therefore constituted a significant part of the film society programme. But the distribution and exhibition landscape was changing in the fifties, with more cinemas, though still numerically few, incorporating 'continental' films on their programmes in a bid to keep hold of their dwindling audience.

The interwar film societies have attracted considerably more historical interest than the larger movement that emerged after the war. With a few notable exceptions this research interest has been invested disproportionately in The (London) Film Society. The (London) Film Society has been privileged for its vanguard role in contributing to the development of film theory and criticism and in the formation of a

film art canon.⁹ Beyond the specific concerns of these archaeologies of film theory, the return to the interwar years, and the late twenties and early thirties in particular has been motivated by a sense of the unlimited aesthetic potential of the new medium of film at this juncture, a potential that was advocated with fervour and intensity by contemporary critics and theorists. As the editors of a recent anthology of writing in the modernist journal *Close Up* suggest, this was a protean moment in which ideas about cinematic art were being formed. They frame their return to the debates and enthusiasms of that period, cinema's 'critical age,' as taking place in the shadow of the introduction of new technologies that are changing cinema irrevocably.¹⁰

Another kind of return to the thirties shifted the weight of interest from the vanguard modernism of the (London) Film Society and *Close Up* to radical politics and from an interest in alternative institutions to a more oppositional conception of independence. Inaugurating a critical reappraisal of the dominance of sponsored documentary in orthodox histories of British cinema, the aim was to identify 'traditions of independence' capable of suggesting possibilities for radical action in the altered circumstances of the late seventies and eighties.¹¹ The tumultuous politics of those earlier decades, pregnant with the possibility of radical social transformation were fertile circumstances for politically radical organisations whose activities in filmmaking, distribution and exhibition networks constituted this 'tradition of independence.' Interest was stimulated in the exhibition activities of the countrywide network of workers film societies and their struggles with repressive censorship regime.

⁹ Duncan Petrie, "Paul Rotha and Film Theory," in *A Paul Rotha Reader*, ed. Duncan Petrie and Robert Kruger (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999); Jamie Sexton, *Alternative Film Culture in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008); Gerry Turvey, "Towards a Critical Practice: Ivor Montagu and British Film Culture in the 1920s," in *Young and Innocent: Cinema and Britain 1896-1930*, ed. Andrew Higson (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Anne Friedberg, "Reading Close up, 1927-1933," in *Close up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 4-9.

¹¹ Don Macpherson, ed., *Traditions of Independence: British Cinema in the Thirties* (London: BFI Publishing, 1980).

Britain's postwar years have been considered far less promising terrain than the interwar decades in terms of what can be learnt from film practices that challenge the film industry. It is perhaps a common perception that the radical impulses of the twenties and thirties manifested in the efflorescence of alternative and oppositional film activity were extinguished after the war, yielding to aesthetic conservatism and political consensus. The fifties represent a kind of hiatus before the flame of radical practice is reignited again by the spirit of revolt in May 1968. In Dickinson's description this was a period of 'hope deferred.'¹² Where a tradition of independence has been identified, maintained against the deadening weight of conformity, it is symptomatic that this has been identified with the cultural activism of left-wing distributors with personal connections to the thirties rather than the very many film societies to whom they supplied films.

It is possible that the tendency to leapfrog over the postwar decades to the organisations and practices of an earlier time has been exacerbated by inter-generational conflict and its lingering influence over our historical imagination. Each new generation of cultural theorists, critics and educators advance their claim to authority by announcing breaks, ruptures and discontinuities with the critical approaches and taste formations of the past. Underlying continuities are occluded. In doing so they inevitably shape the historical perception of the practices they come to succeed. The emergence of film studies as an academic discipline was accompanied by a powerful drive to develop and promote greater analytical rigour and theoretical sophistication, qualities it was argued were wholly absent from available film criticism and the film appreciation of the past. The progressive front in film culture was considered to lie with the universities and with the process of theoretical specialisation that they promoted. With some historical distance from the ideological battles of the past, the time would seem to be right for a re-appraisal of the pre-history of university film studies. This thesis, by focusing on a phase of a movement that has been historically neglected or, worse, judged as moribund and conservative, is a contribution to such a re-examination. Unashamedly this study also seeks to

¹² Margaret Dickinson, ed., *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945 - 90* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).

convey the energy and commitment that sustained a healthy tradition of education through film exhibition across the decades. It compliments other recently completed or current research on key institutions of postwar film culture, including studies of the British Film Institute and the Society of Film Teachers, and various manifestations of amateur film practice.¹³

The thesis bears the conviction that the dilemmas and contradictions of the volunteer film society tradition that flourished in the postwar period are equally as resonant for the present as their better-known prewar forebears. Not the least compelling of these contradictions, genetically programmed in the organisational make up of a voluntary society, is the tension between residual vanguard ideals and membership engagement and participation. A dramatically expanding membership based institution is an ideal context in which to explore the tensions between enabling active participation in discussion and decision and the reception of aesthetically innovative work. During a phase in which most alternative film organisations were becoming wholly professionalised, with the resulting centralisation of cultural authority, the role of volunteer cultural activism is thrown into sharp relief. Focusing on education within the film society movement enables us to view the development of academic film studies from the perspective of the informal modes of learning that were fostered by the former. In the current phase of specialisation of film and screen studies, intensified by the impact of bureaucratic audit culture on research output, we might be inclined to consider the development of film study in formal education with more ambivalence.

In essence, the post-war film society movement can be seen as a series of experiments in creating a democratic, locally responsive cultural organisation. It is these experiments and their intrinsic tensions and contradictions that remain of great interest to a radically altered present. Embedded within the kind of formally democratic organisational apparatus that now appears to be in terminal decline, film

¹³ Terry Bolas, *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009); Ian Craven, ed., *Movies on Home Ground: Explorations in Amateur Cinema* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009); Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ed., *The British Film Institute: The Government and Film Culture, 1933-2007* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010 forthcoming).

societies were powerful sites for the acquisition of critical skills and film historical knowledge. They held to an ideal of active participation in which all members might contribute to a constructive critical debate about what should be valued in the twentieth century's most popular artistic medium. As film critical knowledge was increasingly being developed outside of the voluntary sector by film educational professionals what became crucially important were the forms of co-operation and exchange that could be established between organisations of informal adult learning and the university. It was this stress on cooperation that informed the notion of film culture developed by the BFI's former education officer, Paddy Whannel, in which criticism, popular education, intensive research and film screenings were all interrelated, mutually reinforcing activities. We need to ask what has become of this vision. To what extent does it animate either university film education or film society activity? A film society based on voluntary association is clearly not the only way to organise culture in the interests of democratic participation, but it represents a historical model of such an attempt. It is hoped that a better understanding of this historical model might inform the efforts to create a participatory democratic culture in the future.

Chapter One

The Post-War Transformation of the Film Society Movement

At the beginning of 1947 we moved from the Library to the Athenaeum, Muswell Hill. The Athenaeum had once been a cinema, but was now a dance hall, and we were lost in its vastness. To make matters worse the fuel crisis came upon us, and no heating could be switched on. Those who remember the bitter winter of 1947 will realise what it was like sitting in a freezing dance hall on a Sunday afternoon.

Ronald Taylor, "Ten Years in the Life of a Film Society," *North London Co-operative Film Society: Tenth Anniversary Pamphlet*, 1956.

The most frequently told film society tales of the 1930s are stories of dogged persistence in the face of implacable and arbitrary local licensing authorities. Accommodated in cinemas on the one day of the week when, according to a law concerned with the proper observance of the Sabbath, there could be no public performances, film societies could not escape the scrutiny of local authorities. Not only did the local authority possess the power to intervene to halt a performance on grounds of safety, but it was left to their discretion to decide whether or not a film society show was a public performance, and therefore in contravention of the law, or a private one. Reaching their milestones as organisations, their two hundredth show, their tenth anniversary, film societies looked back to their beginnings and recalled 'cat and mouse games' with the local watch committee and the painstaking process of drafting and redrafting their constitutions so as to create a set of rules that would pass their scrutiny.¹ Little wonder that Ivor Montagu described provincial film societies in the 30s as 'living on the edge of a volcano.'²

Postwar film society stories are quite different. They are tales of draughty halls and noisy, temperamental 16mm projectors wrapped up in army surplus blankets to muffle their incessant whir. The orchestras that had accompanied the

¹ Arthur Blenkinsop MP in *Tyneside Film Society's 200th Performance*, (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Tyneside Film Society, 1954), 3.

² Ivor Montagu, "The Film Society, London," *Cinema Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1932-33): 42.

silent film shows of the largest film societies disappeared, to be replaced by piles of gramophone records from the booking secretary's collection, cued to musical themes to suit the changing moods of Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and Griffiths' *Intolerance* (1916). Film society magazine editorials, letters and commemorative histories describe heroic efforts to ingeniously adapt unsuitable buildings for film exhibition, and recorded sincere apologies for the austerity of the seating arrangements. Knowing how to prepare a village hall for a screening using old black out material, and how to operate and maintain a 16mm projector became essential film society knowledge. A publication on 16mm projection and presentation circulated by the Federation of Film Societies designed to inculcate good practice urged film society committees to adopt as their maxim, 'Prepare for the Worst.' Striking a more soothing note it added, a 16mm projector 'becomes quite a friend to you and you learn to trust it implicitly.'³ The 16mm projector wasn't a new invention, but its wartime development changed the face of the postwar movement, facilitating a numerical growth and geographical expansion that made the film society accessible to a new social constituency.

This chapter begins with a survey of the different strands of film society voluntarism that constituted the pre-war movement then contrasts this organisational legacy with the movement that flourished after the war. It explores the significance of changes in the technologies of projection used by societies: the wider availability of 16mm projectors. Secondly, it discusses the revival of film societies in the context of broader shifts in adult education provision that fostered a greater willingness on the part of educational bodies to promote film appreciation as a topic of study. Accompanying these changes in exhibition practice was a new language of film society activism, a do it yourself discourse emphasising the importance of the activity of members and viewers. Concluding the chapter I consider the importance of discussion, engaging in an exchange of critical opinion, as an ideal of active viewing within the film society movement.

³ Dr. F. Bruce Jackson, "Guide to 16mm. Film Projection," (Federation of Film Societies, 1951), 8.

Film Societies as Voluntary Association

The (London) Film Society, according to one of its founders, was directly inspired by two important precursors: the ciné clubs of Paris and the Stage Society formed in London in 1889 and still a force in the theatre scene in the 1920s.⁴ Ciné clubs began to form in Paris in the early twenties and were hubs of experimental film activity, spaces that facilitated meetings and collaborations between film enthusiasts, filmmakers and visual artists. In London, the Stage Society performed dramatic work that was unlikely to be staged in a West End theatre either because of censorship restrictions or because producers considered it lacked commercial potential. Performances were paid for out of the subscriptions of the society's members and because attendance was restricted to members-only, plays did not have to be submitted to the Lord Chancellor's office for approval. The organising committee of the (London) Film Society discovered on the eve of their first film performance in October 1925 that the same privileges in relation to the censorship apparatus did not apply to private film screenings in public cinemas. Nevertheless, the potential of this exhibition model, one funded by membership subscription, to overcome the perceived limitations of commercial provision was firmly established and then vigorously promoted.

The success of the (London) Film Society was acknowledged as an important stimulus to the formation of similar societies around the country; Glasgow in 1929; Edinburgh, Salford and Leeds in 1930; Merseyside, Tyneside, Birmingham and others following not long after. But if regional activists were partly inspired by metropolitan or continental precedent, they were also able to draw on experiences closer to home, the prior existence of active local traditions of volunteer initiative in cultural provision, particularly in repertory and amateur theatre. These traditions were decisive in successfully mobilising active support for a film society. The biographies of many pioneers in the film society movement suggest a mutual interest in building

⁴ Montagu, "The Film Society, London."

institutions of alternative theatre and cinema.⁵ In its organisational form, the film society is a late descendant of a much older tradition of voluntary association whose emergence and growth was crucial to the development of Britain's towns and cities. Setting out something of the character of this parentage will give a fuller sense of the cultural inheritance of the voluntary film societies.

The rise of voluntary association as a form of sociability and as a means for taking organised public action is a central part of Habermas's influential account of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere.⁶ According to Habermas, the network of associations that began to form in Europe from the seventeenth century represented a novel sphere within which private citizens meeting voluntarily and deliberating in public could formulate and advance a challenge to the declining power of feudal structures of authority.⁷ Voluntary associations served to crystallise and advance the claims to moral, cultural and political leadership of the economically ascendant professional and commercial middle classes throughout Britain's urban centres.⁸ Middle class elite leadership was exercised through organised public action across the closely related areas of moral reform and cultural improvement. Responding to anxieties about the effects of an expanding leisure market on the working class, moral reform initiatives, led by religious evangelicals and non-conformists used voluntary associations for a broad range of interventions intended to discipline, train or improve behaviour. At the same time, associational life and its norms of sociability and interaction developed hand in hand with the increasing commercialisation of leisure. Voluntary associational initiatives played a vital organisational role in mobilising public support and raising funds for a vast range of new recreational facilities and public meeting places, concert halls, assembly rooms, lecture theatres and libraries in

⁵ One example among many that could be mentioned would be Alec Baron, the founder of the Leeds Film Group and later the Leeds Film Institute Society. Baron was also involved in the workers theatre movement and formed a Unity Theatre in Leeds modelled on the one established in London. His memoirs are held in the Alec Baron Archive at Leeds University Library.

⁶ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27-31.

⁸ See Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

Britain's provincial towns and cities.⁹ Works of art, musical and dramatic performance, literature and painting, increasingly produced for commercial distribution and performed or exhibited in public spaces such as these, lost the sacred aura they had previously possessed through their connections to ritualistic and ceremonial functions bound up with public representations of power and authority.¹⁰ What was significant about this process of commercialisation of literary and artistic works was that it constituted culture as an object of discussion in a way that was historically unprecedented. New opportunities to listen to music, watch plays and read literary and philosophical texts increasingly emancipated the work of art from its restricted functions and reception and in the process rendered it an object of choice and changing preference.¹¹ The art work that people paid to experience as a reading public or as a concert and theatre going public submitted itself to their critical judgement, exercised in face to face meetings and in printed media. The commercialisation of leisure, which made the products of culture accessible to all educated people who could pay, weakened the interpretative authority of existing intellectual and moral authorities, specifically the Church, and created a space for new institutions of criticism that staged a public debate over the meaning of works of art using reasoned argument that was subject to contestation. This public critical debate and the formation of opinion took place in voluntary associations and through the print medium. Habermas describes the expanding genre of the periodical as a vehicle of public critical debate, an extension of the debating functions of literary societies and other public settings such as coffee houses and clubs.

Historians regard the rise of voluntary associational life as an important vehicle for the consolidation of a distinctive middle class consciousness. Organised cultural activity brought the affluent and educated together, creating a greater awareness of a shared civic identity that cut across occupational, religious and

⁹ Ibid., 301-02.

¹⁰ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 31-43.

¹¹ Ibid., 36-37.

political differences.¹² Middle class voluntary association repeatedly staged a tension between its reforming public aims and its capacity for exclusion and for more overt assertions of class interest. Mellor, for example, has linked Britain's urban civic renaissance to an idealistic phase of voluntary associational activity during the 1860s and 70s, partly inspired by the influential writings of Matthew Arnold, whose vision of social cohesion forged through the unifying and universal values of culture and capable of averting the conflicts created by rapid economic change resonated with a generation of volunteer reformers.¹³ Arnold's proposition that a dedicated group of individuals should commit themselves to introducing the values of culture into the lives of all classes found passionate advocates in Britain's expanding cities among educationalists, social reformers and clergymen. In the last decades of the nineteenth century as municipal art and cultural facilities were being extended, Mellor argues that the idealistic phase of voluntary associations, organising for public cultural improvement, began to exhaust itself. Membership of clubs and societies was increasingly mobilised as a way to assert one's prestige and status. The culture that provincial voluntary associations supported was aesthetically conservative, resistant to new artistic and cultural movements. Mellor implies that this was a defensive reaction to the rise of new social forces, an upwardly mobile, educated professional strata created through structural transformations such as the expansion of white collar occupations in the press, advertising and publishing industries. But if established, prestigious provincial clubs and societies could erect defensive barriers, both to a new social constituency by operating membership by nomination, and to new artistic and cultural currents by venerating only the most remote forms of classical art, voluntary association could also be mobilised as a means to challenge these assertions of cultural superiority, by organising public action in support of cultural forms that were new and by operating in ways that were more socially inclusive.

¹² See for example H. E. Mellor, *Leisure and the Changing City, 1870-1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1976), 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48-62.

Film Societies and Alternative Film Culture in the Inter-War Years

The impulses that led to the establishment of the first wave of provincial film societies were varied; the desire to organise in support of artistic and educational uses of the new medium combined with reservations about the actual direction of cinema's development as a mass entertainment industry. Adapting long-established associational methods, public meetings and critical publications, combined with film shows, lectures and exhibitions sustained by membership subscription, the newly formed film societies were attempts at organising public opinion in support of a broader or better range of films than could be routinely found in the commercial cinema. As the cinema exhibition business developed in the 1920s, American films became increasingly dominant on British screens. Michael Chanan and others have emphasised that this dominance was underpinned by a structural commercial advantage: American producers possessed the world's largest domestic market for their products.¹⁴ As Chanan points out this meant that American productions could be rented in foreign markets at rates that substantially undercut their competitors. It also meant that American productions were much more heavily capitalised, rapidly outspending their competitors. This constituted the material basis for what Maltby dubbed Hollywood's 'commercial aesthetic' that so powerfully shaped the expectations of film-goers, not only in Britain but around the world; entertainment that cost millions to make but pennies to enjoy.¹⁵ By the mid 1920s American distribution companies exercised a dominant influence over commercial exhibition maintained through various forms of distributive malpractice. Then, as now, the exhibition business made its profits by showing the products of the American film industry. This was the context in which protectionist quota legislation was introduced in 1927 with the intention of giving assistance to British film producers by compelling both distributors and exhibitors to handle a proportion of British product.

¹⁴ Michael Chanan, "The Emergence of an Industry," in *British Cinema History*, ed. James Curran and Vincent Porter (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983).

¹⁵ Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995).

This commercial exhibition environment was also the context for the first significant wave of voluntary activism channelled into film society organised shows. Generally speaking, film societies held three objectives in common. Firstly, to show films that couldn't be seen in commercial venues. Given that studio-made United States originated films predominated in the cinemas this tended to correlate to the vigorous counter-promotion of European and British production. But it would be a mistake to conclude that this stemmed from an all-embracing hostility to American films. Interviewed in the 1970s and 80s by film theorists of a generation identified with the critical reappraisal of American film, both Ivor Montagu and Forsyth Hardy pointed out to their interviewers that activism focused on European features and British documentary because that was where an amateur intervention was most needed.¹⁶ A variety of terms with slightly different connotations were used in film society constitutions to describe these films. Frequently they were referred to as unusual films, sometimes, artistic films or better films, and occasionally they were termed films of a high-class character. Secondly, societies saw themselves as agencies of reform and centres of criticism, guiding their members to support what was good in the local cinemas. Crucially, many began circulating reviews on the films shown locally among their membership so that they could make decisions informed by discriminating standards rather than relying on exhibitor's publicity alone. These would have been the first examples of film criticism in most provincial cities. Prominent film society activists such as Forsyth Hardy and Ernest Dyer of Tyneside Film Society also wrote film columns for local and regional newspapers.

¹⁶ Forsyth Hardy: 'You have to remember that coming into Britain at that time there would be perhaps five hundred films a year from Hollywood, the number of films coming from Europe was a tiny percentage of that. And these seemed to us to need much more support than the great mass of Hollywood films.' "An Interview with Forsyth Hardy," in *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Cinema and Television*, ed. Colin McArthur (London: BFI, 1982). Ivor Montagu (answering his interviewer's comment that the Film Society like *Close Up* were 'totally ignoring most productions from the States'): 'But let's be fair on the other side. Into all these things goes a great, great deal of amateur effort. By that I don't mean crude and incapable, but I mean work for love, the literal sense of amateur. People don't want to do anything...that somebody else is going to do. If the other people are going to show the American stuff you don't spend all your time doing it. And if the critics are all writing about American films you don't write about them.'"Interview: Ivor Montagu," *Screen* 13, no. 3 (1972): 84.

Finally, in addition to guiding member's interests towards good films, film societies aimed to inform their members about the film medium, cultivating a broader, historically grounded understanding of film technique among their members through programme notes, lectures, and exhibitions, providing the tools for critical judgement.

Film society activism of the interwar period can be identified with four distinct but closely related and overlapping conceptions of education in relation to cinema. Each educational discourse corresponded to a somewhat different understanding of the vocation of a film society. Developed by a range of emergent film cultural movements and organisations, these educational discourses also constituted forms of practical alignment between local film society activism and national movements. The first two versions of educational activism both relate the film society's role to the encouragement of film appreciation, seeing this as a way of elevating the quality of cinema. They can be explored by contrasting the (London) Film Society and the British Film Institute. One of the central objectives of the (London) Film Society was to facilitate comparative study of film technique with the aim of improving the quality of British filmmaking.¹⁷ Although the Society's founder Ivor Montagu eschewed the descriptions 'artistic' and 'cultural' film, favouring instead the widely used term 'unusual film,' the (London) Film Society was a decisive influence on the way ideas of film art were formed and disseminated.¹⁸ The films imported by the organisers of the (London) Film Society between 1925 and 1939, ranging from influential film art movements in Germany, France and the Soviet Union, and the way they were presented, focusing critical attention on comparative study of film technique, brought a modernist emphasis on the characteristics of the medium itself and its creative potential into the forefront of debate about film art from the mid 1920s. Acting as a distributor and programme advisor to the emerging provincial film society movement, the (London) Film Society exercised an important

¹⁷ See Jamie Sexton, *Alternative Film Culture in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), 15.

¹⁸ Ivor Montagu, "The Film Society, London," *Cinema Quarterly* 1932-33, 42. See Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 38-39. See also Gerry Turvey, "Towards a Critical Practice: Ivor Montagu and British Film Culture in the 1920s," in *Young and Innocent: Cinema and Britain 1896-1930*, ed. Andrew Higson (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2002).

influence on taste and opinion outside of London. Provincial societies were conscious, however, that London's choices may not always be to their member's tastes. R. C. Knight recalled a dip in membership at the Birmingham Film Society between 1935 and 1937, which he put down partly to films 'excellent in themselves which disconcerted members.' Gallophiles in the membership were especially disturbed by a double bill of *Rien Que Les Heures* (1926, shown at the London society in 1928) and *New Babylon* (1929, shown in London 1930) described as a 'frankly Communist account of the Commune of 1871.'¹⁹ The relationship of provincial activists to discursive manifestations of this modernist film culture such as *Close Up* was more ambivalent. Recalling the motivation behind the establishment of *Cinema Quarterly* by Scots film society activists, Forsyth Hardy remarked, 'we (he and co-editor Norman Wilson) felt that *Close Up* was a comic publication. It was a way out avant-garde thing that had no relationship to the total development of movies. We wanted a publication that would bring the whole of the filmmaking world into review.'²⁰

The formation of the British Film Institute was also bound up with a commitment to raise the standard of public appreciation of film. A Commission on Education and Cultural Films was formed in 1929 following a conference convened by a broad coalition of educational and scientific organisations. The commission considered methods to improve the use of film in education and explored ways to raise standards of public appreciation of film.²¹ The term appreciation, denoting an aesthetic training in the established arts, was then much in vogue in liberal education circles. In this context the idea of appreciation, broadly influenced by the Kantian tradition of aesthetic philosophy, was premised on the distinction between three different modes of interest and attention: an intellectual interest, a practical, instrumental interest and an aesthetic interest characterised by free and disinterested

¹⁹ R. C. Knight, *Flashback: A Hundred Shows of the Birmingham Film Society 1931-1948* (Birmingham: Journal Printing Office): 11. According to Knight, in 1934 permission to show the films *Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928) and *Deserter* (1933), both of which had been shown at the London Film Society without a BBFC certificate, was refused by the City of Birmingham Licensing Justices.

²⁰ "An Interview with Forsyth Hardy," 76.

²¹ "The Film in National Life," (London: 1932), 1.

perception. Educationalists argued that training a young person's aptitude for the latter would cultivate their capacity for absorption and self-forgetfulness, ultimately leading to greater emotional self-control.²² The commission adopted the term appreciation and made it the cornerstone of the constructive approach to the film industry that it favoured. By the time the commission published its report *The Film in National Life* in 1932, film societies had become a nationwide movement. The report set out a progressive vision of how to improve the entertainment film, a project, which placed the education of the public at its core. Better films could be encouraged, by creating a public that demanded them. Changing public taste would necessarily begin in the classroom, training the next generation of film-goers to appreciate what was good. It would also involve other means of suggestion such as the publication of authoritative and informed criticism, and the development of educational initiatives such as lectures and meetings.

What is striking about the report and what defined its 'constructive,' reforming approach was a desire to engage the tastes of the general public. In this respect the authors took care to stress that good cinema was not necessarily highbrow but embraced films that were, in their phrase, 'good of their kind.'²³ Collectively the cinema public was likened to a pyramid. The general public made up nine-tenths of the base, on top of which there was a thin layer of educated filmgoers who were occasional patrons and at the apex, the film society members. From this model the value of the film societies as collaborative partners of a future film institute was evident. As the report argued,

What we need today is to enlist the interests of (men and women who belong to film societies)....

...They will provide the nucleus of effort in the provinces to promote cultural activity....Their enthusiasm should be used and their knowledge may be of great service.²⁴

²² See for example Nancy Catty, ed., *Training in Appreciation: A Study of Modern Educational Theory and Its Applications* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1921).

²³ "The Film in National Life," 85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83 & 85.

Above all the report valued the film societies for retaining a vital connection between a cinema of artistic expression and cultural enrichment on the one hand and on the other, the commercial cinema as it existed. Merseyside Film Society became the first of a cluster of film societies to formally affiliate to the organisation. Other societies that became fully affiliated Film Institute branches included Manchester, Belfast and Leeds, each launched with a special visit from Institute governors or officers. But many established film societies such as Tyneside, Birmingham, Ipswich and Southampton remained formally unconnected to the Institute. There appeared to be an expectation among some hardworking volunteers in Film Institute branches that funds would flow from the national organisation to their regional branches.²⁵ These grants were not forthcoming; in fact it is difficult to see what, in practical terms, the BFI contributed to the branches that sprung up in its name. Some of the most energetic activists in the movement doubted that the Institute itself was a credible authority when it came to contributing to film appreciation initiatives. An editorial in *Cinema Quarterly* had cautiously acknowledged the establishment of the British Film Institute whilst appearing to distance itself from what it termed, 'the mixed public of bishops, aldermen and schoolmasters' that had brought it into existence.²⁶

Film appreciation in the (London) Film Society was concerned with developing an understanding of the breadth of the cinema medium, adopting a comparative perspective that could bring the qualities of film as an artistic medium to the foreground. It addressed a specialist constituency of filmmakers, artists and intellectuals. *The Film in National Life* articulated a notion of quality that could be cultivated through public education and criticism. Good films are regarded as those which are technically well crafted and where the characterisation and acting are credible. The educational constituency addressed is the wider public and the film society is conceived as an agency of public education. In 1945, hoping to stimulate the revival of the film society movement, Norman Wilson, Chair of the Edinburgh Film Guild and the Scottish Federation of Film Societies, wrote an article in *Sight and Sound* that reworked these two distinct tendencies of film education into two

²⁵ H. F. Vaughan, "Organising a Branch," *Sight and Sound* 1935, 114.

²⁶ "The Spectator," *Cinema Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1933): 4.

tasks for the film society movement.²⁷ Acknowledging the considerable achievements of the movement, Wilson highlighted two areas of work. Firstly, film societies must understand themselves to be reforming agents, working on the millions of filmgoers whose tastes were 'deplorably low.'²⁸ Wilson stressed that film societies had a wider civic duty, which compelled them to work through the network of local voluntary associations through which the public could be guided towards serious and purposeful films. Secondly the responsibility of film societies was to create an informed public actively supportive of experimentation among 'advanced film workers.' Film societies, Wilson argued, must also be a vanguard 'ahead of the general advance of film ideas.'²⁹ Wilson's two tasks expressed a perennial tension in the film society movement, the competing aspiration to be both specialists and generalists at the same time; objectives that implied differing organisational styles and approaches.

A third area of convergence between cinema and education was being advanced by the documentary movement. Co-operation and partnership between the film society movement and the documentary producers was actively cultivated on both sides. Strategically the documentary producers considered the film societies an important part of the 'new cinema public' that it hoped to cultivate outside of the commercial cinemas.³⁰ Although the documentary film units welcomed opportunities to show their films theatrically when the opportunity arose, an important part of the strategy for creating a public service cinema was to establish an extensive non-theatrical distribution and exhibition system. Through the Empire Marketing Board and GPO Film Libraries the sponsored film units sought to build up audiences outside of the commercial cinemas in a range of voluntary associations including film societies. Grierson had justified such a development, arguing that the ideal place for the civic lesson that the documentary film could teach was not the dream palace, but

²⁷ Norman Wilson, "Film Societies - the Next Phase," *Sight and Sound*, July 1945.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁰ Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990), 101-02.

‘the citadels of suburban improvement.’³¹ Grierson and his colleagues wrote continuously and extensively about their evolving practice and the cinema more generally, publishing these writings in the film society sponsored publications *Cinema Quarterly* and *World Film News*.

Film societies were also formed in the thirties to contribute to the formation of working class consciousness and activism.³² Film society methods of exhibiting films were adopted by left political groups seeking to remedy the absence of films addressing working class interests in the commercial cinema. A Federation of Workers Film Societies was formed as early as 1929, to assist the establishment of individual societies. This Federation set up a distribution company, Atlas Films, which imported workers’ films from Germany and the Soviet Union. Workers film societies formed around the country in the industrial centres, Manchester, Glasgow, Cardiff, Merseyside and Bradford. Strongly associated with the exhibition of Soviet films, the workers film societies waged a constant battle with the police and local authorities, wielding powers they assumed to regulate and censor the exhibition of 35mm films. Beyond the workers film societies, however, leftist distributors supplied a range of political organisations in the context of meetings and fundraising.

The Development of 16mm and its ‘Small Audience Economy’

The war disrupted film society activities. Some of the eighteen societies that were active in 1939, including large, well-established societies, such as Billingham in the north-east, and Leicester in the Midlands, suspended their operations. The loss of key activists and organisers called up for the services and the demands of home front duties took their toll on the active membership of these societies. Added to which the import of new foreign films ceased altogether with the fall of France. Despite the wartime difficulties, financially secure film societies with large memberships

³¹ Quoted in John Caughie, "Broadcasting and Cinema, 1: Converging Histories," in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr (London: BFI Publishing, 1986), 190-91.

³² See Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain 1929-39* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986); Trevor Ryan, "Film and Political Organisations in Britain 1929-39," in *Traditions of Independence: British Cinema in the Thirties*, ed. Don Macpherson (London: BFI, 1980).

evidently felt a renewed sense of vocation, putting on film shows for schoolchildren, civil defence units and the armed forces. The two Manchester societies combined their efforts, running joint shows for several of the war years, but the range of their activities was impressive, including a series of lectures and events at the College of Technology and a film weekend organised with the University extra-mural department. A series of 16mm film shows were presented in 1942 featuring Czech, Russian and Chinese films introduced by speakers addressing the theme, 'Films of our Allies.'³³ In cooperation with the Regional Commission for Adult Education in the Armed Forces these societies also presented educational films to anti-aircraft and searchlight units in the area. The Merseyside Film Institute Society undertook fundraising activities, holding additional film shows in aid of the United Aid to China Fund. A series of lunchtime 16mm films 'contrasting international and domestic problems' were organised for the Rector of Liverpool and held at the parish church.³⁴ Merseyside also ran special film shows for schoolchildren including a programme of educational shorts on the theme of citizenship.

The extension of the activities of these two film societies using 16mm projectors in premises other than cinemas such as churches and libraries is significant. The use of 16mm film intended for exhibition outside cinemas was growing rapidly and this would have a decisive and dramatic impact on the film society movement, profoundly shaping its development after the end of the war. The large majority of film societies before the war preferred to show films in cinemas, occasionally using smaller gauge film for study and discussion groups. From the early twenties several companies had been developing smaller gauge film, such as 16mm, 9.5mm and 8mm, for the growing market in amateur cinematography. The projectors for the so-called substandard gauge films were lighter than industry standard 35mm cinema equipment and they were intended to be portable. In Britain in the 1930s, 16mm was most closely associated with the use of films in school classroom teaching. Mobile 16mm projection vans were also utilised by the documentary units who were developing audiences outside of cinema. Political film

³³ "News from the Societies," *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1942, 86.

³⁴ "Some Notes and News," *Sight and Sound*, May 1944, 22.

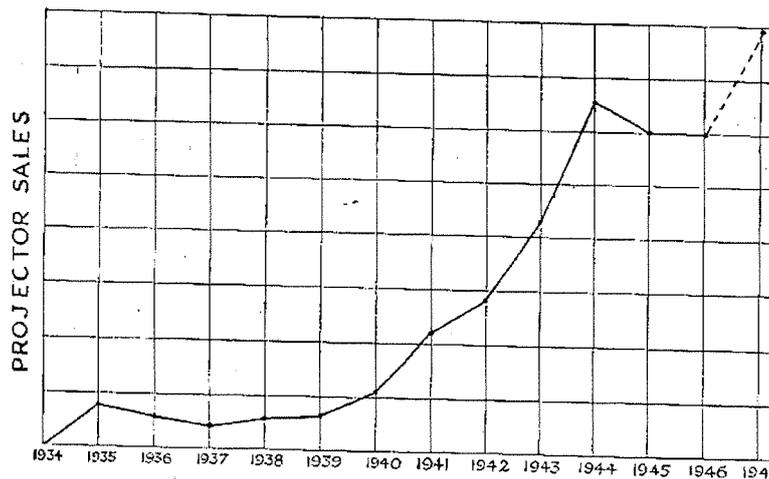
distributors also developed non-theatrical film exhibition using 16mm film. The smaller film gauges used a cellulose-acetate base which made them slow burning and safer to handle and store than 35 mm nitrate film. 16mm film therefore fell outside the provisions of the 1909 Cinematograph Act, providing an opportunity for evading local authority interference. The strategy adopted by successful distributors of workers' films such as Kino in the 1930s was therefore to handle 16mm films, which would be shown by trade unions and politically affiliated organisations like the Left Book groups in their halls and clubs around the country.

With the outbreak of war the 16mm industry developed rapidly. Projectors were distributed throughout the armed forces and elsewhere on the home front in hospitals, factories, ambulance depots and civil defence posts. Teachers projected films for classes of evacuated children and 16mm film was used extensively for training and instruction in the forces. It was also used to bring entertainment to service men and women wherever they were posted. Like the Entertainments National Services Association (ENSA) touring groups, mobile cinema vans with a generator and a substandard projector brought entertainment to isolated units of service men and women.³⁵ Projectors were bought by the Army Kinema Service, ENSA, the Royal Naval Film Corporation and the RAF. Voluntary welfare bodies such as the YMCA also operated mobile film units organising educational film shows in towns and villages on the home front.

A 1947 survey of the growth in the use of 16mm noted that the demands of the armed forces began to make an impact around 1940 when the manufacture and sale of projection equipment rose steeply.³⁶

³⁵ "Note by the Editor," in *British Film Yearbook 1947-48*, ed. Peter Noble (Kingston upon Thames: British Yearbooks Ltd., 1948).

³⁶ "Is 16mm. Infant, Child, Adolescent or Adult? A Story in Figures of 13 Years' Growth," *The Mini-Cinema*, March 1947, 9-10.



Manufacture and sales of equipment have grown enormously since 1934. Fig dropped slightly immediately after the war but are again rising steeply.

Figure 1: Table from “Is 16mm. Infant, Child, Adolescent or Adult? A Story in Figures of 13 Years’ Growth,” *The Mini-Cinema*, March 1947, 9-10.

This peaked in 1944 with 28 projectors sold for every one sold in 1934, the year Gaumont British Equipments began manufacturing 16mm sound projectors. Furthermore, the expected dip in demand at the end of the war did not happen. In the year of the survey, based on sales orders, Gaumont were anticipating a further 37% increase on the peak year of war production.

As well as vastly increasing the numbers of 16mm projectors manufactured and sold, one would expect the military use of the technology to have made new demands of projector design leading to improvements in the apparatus. 16mm was originally an amateur format and projectors had long struggled with quite severe technical limitations. Spottiswoode outlined the ‘impossible demands’ made on the manufacturers’ skills.

He is expected to provide a screen image as brilliant, as sharp, and as steady as the audience is accustomed to see in its neighbourhood movie theatre. Yet the picture frame he is given has only one quarter of the area of the 35mm frame he has to compete with, and the sound travels at less than half the speed. He is not allowed to design a solid, heavily engineered machine like the theatre projector; a frail schoolteacher must be able to lift his 16mm projector, and it is expected to give the same performance wherever it is set down. Perhaps the designer can hurdle all these fences by some miracle of

engineering skill. But the buyer refuses to pay the price...Faced with these contradictions, design consists of a long series of compromises.³⁷

Of the situation in the United States, Spottiswoode observed that the armed forces and the manufacturers co-operated on developing clear equipment specifications for delivering improved projector strength and performance.

The abundance of 16mm projectors in service units no doubt broke down some of the mystique of commercial cinema projection. Thousands of service men and women saw how films were projected at close quarters on equipment that was easy to use, though occasionally temperamental. Many gained direct experience of using and maintaining the apparatus and putting on improvised films shows, acquiring skills that they would use after the war. Some of course had seen projectors in schools introduced by a particularly enlightened Geography or Science teacher. But outside local education authorities like London, Middlesex and Edinburgh, the use of the 16mm instructional film had made few inroads. On demobilisation a considerable number of ex-servicemen invested their savings in projection equipment, took to the road in converted vans and tried to build up a circuit of mobile film shows. Crippled by entertainments tax they rarely lasted long.

In the first two years after the end of the war the 16mm film entered an extraordinarily buoyant period. An indication of the growing numbers of 16mm film users both commercial, mobile vans, and non-commercial, churches, schools, societies and clubs, was the arrival in 1946 of two new specialist 16mm magazines: *The Mini-cinema*, published monthly and pitched at the professional user, and the *16mil Film User*, a monthly which announced that it was intended 'for all engaged in the screening of information, education and entertainment.'³⁸ Both became invaluable sources of information on film suitability and availability within the film society movement as well as providing vital information on matters such as the liability of 16mm users for entertainment tax. Reading these magazines now, one encounters an extraordinary tide of optimism that surrounded the technology. The editorial of the

³⁷ Raymond Spottiswoode, *Film and Its Techniques* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 258-59.

³⁸ "Editorial Reel," *16mm. Film User*, November 1946, 3.

first volume of the *16mil Film User* claimed that people had begun to realise that 'the development of the 16mil film might open as wide a door as did the invention of printing, that 16mil equipment was as portable as a library and that the 16 mil film offered a method for disseminating knowledge in a manner even more effective than the printed book or journal.'³⁹ The advantages of 16mm film over the standard 35mm gauge were emphasised, the latter whilst meeting the 'many requirements of the commercial cinema, lacks the mobility, the simplicity, the small audience economy and the ability to cater for the minority, all qualities that are treasured by the 16mil user.'⁴⁰ 16mm equipment was light and portable; it could be taken to the audience rather than the audience having to come to it. It was simpler to use because it didn't require the services of a professional projectionist, neither did it demand fire-proof projection rooms. With smaller audiences, 16mm produced the same results as the standard gauge but at a fraction of the cost. 16mm made it possible to cater to special interest groups; it offered a mode of film production, distribution and exhibition liberated from the demands of the box office that prevailed over standard gauge film. 16mm renewed the vision of an educational as opposed to commercial definition of the medium.

For the next five years the development of 16mm film transformed the film society movement. The figures show that in 1944, seven of the twenty film societies were operating on 16mm. Five years later the number of societies using only 16mm film shot up to 114 compared with forty-two on 35mm and forty-seven societies showing on both gauges.⁴¹ The significance of the development of 16mm was likened at the time to the development of branch lines on the national railways. In 1948, the head of MGM's 16mm division wrote, 'something like a revolution has quietly occurred in the film world since the end of the war. Although it has taken place without any fuss or publicity, it is almost as far-reaching as though the railways had suddenly put out extensions from their main lines to all villages in the country.'⁴² The

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *BFI 11th Annual Report*, 1944, 9; *BFI 17th Annual Report*, 1950, 12.

⁴² F.D. Russell-Roberts, "The Progress of the 16mm. Film," in *Winchester's Screen Encyclopedia*, ed. Maud M. Miller (Winchester Publications Ltd., 1948), 358.

use of 16mm film within the film society movement did mean that societies could form where there were much smaller populations, in towns and rural areas, taking advantage of those small audience economics emphasised by the *16mil Film User*. The average size of film societies was shrinking. By 1950 nearly two thirds of the film societies in England and Wales had less than 150 members. By comparison a large 35mm society often had in excess of 1500 members. As well as permitting this 'branch line' geographical extension, 16mm film also meant that societies operated in different buildings and venues and were created out of new forms of co-operation with educational bodies, arts organisations, little theatres and libraries. Documentation on the film society movement between 1945 and 1950 is patchy, but a directory of film societies appears in the 1948 edition of *Winchester's Screen Encyclopedia*. It lists eighty-five societies and although it is not comprehensive it presents an interesting snapshot of a growing movement. Twenty-one of the societies, many of them new, were formed either at an educational institution or else through the co-operation of various educational bodies such as the Workers Educational Association (WEA) and the Co-operative societies.⁴³ Broadly speaking these can be distinguished between, on one hand, film societies serving a social function at formal educational institutions such as grammar schools, public schools, training colleges and military training camps, and on the other hand a growing number of societies organisationally supported in terms of personnel and buildings and financially underwritten by educational bodies such as the WEA and the Consumer Co-operative movement.⁴⁴ The involvement of the Co-operative movement in promoting the establishment of film societies is a good indication of the wider engagement with film appreciation within the adult education movement at this time. Burton has indicated

Winchester's Screen Encyclopedia was formerly published in 1933 under the name The World Film Encyclopedia (Amalgamated Press).

⁴³ For example in South East London, Peckham was formed as a Cooperative film society, South London Film Society was set up with the backing of Cambridge House in Camberwell, a residential settlement of the University, Goldsmiths College Film Society was formed by part-time students of the Evening Studies department.

⁴⁴ Cheltenham College, Eton College, Marlborough College, Tonbridge School were listed. As one activist who first joined a film society as a pupil of Eastbourne College observed, school rules forbade going to the cinema, the presumably more wholesome attraction of the film society was offered as an alternative.

that a small number of local Co-operative societies had promoted film society activity in the 1930s, notably at Royal Arsenal and Walsall.⁴⁵ Whilst they were formed to promote the study and appreciation of films, these societies were also aligned with the objectives of the workers film societies and sought to make films illustrative of working class life. The rapid growth in the Co-operative film societies came between 1945 and 1950 with well over a dozen societies formed, among them Slough, Peckham, Dartford, Tooting, Gillingham, Ruislip, Watford, Nottingham, Doncaster and Birkenhead. As Burton has pointed out the objectives of these latter societies were not distinguishable from the other film societies organised along film appreciation lines.

Changes in Adult Education Provision

During the closing stages of the war, the adult education movement was engaged in a vigorous debate about aims, purposes and methods. The white paper on education published in 1943 had acknowledged that after the war the scope of adult education would be widened to include all kinds of recreations and hobbies with which people occupied their leisure time. With the 1944 Education Act, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were given new responsibilities for organising adult education in co-operation with recognised voluntary bodies. The expansion of LEA-supported adult education between 1945 and 1950, responded to what Fieldhouse terms a 'remarkable growth in adult demand for evening classes, especially from women.'⁴⁶ As the white paper had anticipated this growth was mainly in recreational subjects as opposed to practical or vocational training. In the decade before the war, tutors and activists in the Workers Educational Association, formed in 1903 to provide a university education to working class people who had been denied the opportunity of one, had been engaged in a debate about the desirability of providing

⁴⁵ Alan G. Burton, *The British Consumer Co-operative Movement and Film, 1890s - 1960s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 205-08.

⁴⁶ Roger Fieldhouse and Associates, *A History of Modern British Adult Education* (Leicester: NIACE, 1996), 90. Fieldhouse draws on a statistical study that showed the number of enrolments in evening classes at evening institutes and major establishments increased from 568,000 in 1936-7 to 1,295,000 in 1949-50.

courses on the arts in general and literature in particular. According to Steele, the debate, conducted through the WEA's publications, polarised between individuals such as W. E Williams, later adviser to Penguin's editor in chief Allen Lane, who defended the extension of WEA classes to the study of literature and the arts, and those such as George Thompson, who argued that the Association's chief responsibility was to teach courses in politics, economics and social theory to working class activists.⁴⁷ The two positions represented fundamentally opposed conceptions of the WEA's purpose and key constituency, those who supported the view that the WEA should aim to strengthen working class solidarity and consciousness and those interested in educating a broader public in popular courses in the arts that had as their aim the cultivation of an informed citizenship. The trajectory of the WEA in the post-war years was, as Fieldhouse has shown, moving further from advancing class specific aims and towards a notion of universal adult education provision.⁴⁸ This movement away from a radical conception of education in support of those engaged in class struggle was favoured by the prevailing ideological climate after the introduction of state welfare reforms. Added to which the WEA's ever increasing dependence on government funding and an attendant apparatus of state supervision and inspection that was one of its conditions compounded the onset of the Cold War to diminish the space for political radicalism in the WEA. The other important change for the WEA was that proportionately fewer of its students were enrolled on the three-year tutorial classes, which had been a central focus of the earlier phase of the organisation, whilst provision of shorter general interest classes continued to grow.

The trends were confirmed by a study conducted in 1949. The popularity of courses in music appreciation and art and architecture within the WEA had been rising steadily against the declining popularity of core subject areas in social studies.⁴⁹ The first WEA courses in film appreciation appear to have been offered in

⁴⁷ Tom Steele, *The Emergence of Cultural Studies: Cultural Politics, Adult Education and the English Question* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), 72-97.

⁴⁸ Fieldhouse and Associates, *A History of Modern British Adult Education*, 180-82.

⁴⁹ S.G. Raybould, *The WEA: The Next Phase* (London: The Workers Educational Association, 1949), 10-18.

1947-48.⁵⁰ Among the first tutors to teach a short course on film in the WEA was Raymond Williams. The article Williams wrote describing his approach and criticising the available film appreciation literature available to him was grounded in the passionately argued debates about the purposes of literary study. Williams's emphasis on criticism as a practical training in exercising discrimination and judgement would prove highly influential to later film educationalists (See Chapter 6).⁵¹ Although the scale of film teaching in the WEA was modest, the association and several university extra-mural departments were regularly involved over the coming years in supporting joint educational ventures with film societies and their regional groups.

Alongside the increasing willingness on the part of adult education providers to engage in shorter, leisure-based courses, wartime education in the armed services made significant educational use of the mass media. The scale of the services educational schemes themselves was wholly unprecedented. In the words of one report they were a 'huge laboratory in which new methods of adult education (were) being evolved.'⁵² Novel techniques of popular education were developed in the forces; structured discussion groups, the use of visual aids, film and theatre. One scheme revived a pre-war BBC project of radio programme discussion groups conceived originally out of a concern to modify the uni-directional nature of radio, turning receivers into discussants.⁵³ The original scheme involved group listening to programmes on a wide variety of topics covering the arts, science and current affairs, followed by discussion led by a BBC trained tutor. It was eventually abandoned because of the apparent impracticability of collective wireless listening. However, the collective nature of life in the armed services made the scheme highly suitable for

⁵⁰ Ibid., 101-06.

⁵¹ Raymond Williams, "Film as a Tutorial Subject," in *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education*, ed. John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood (Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 1993), 108.

⁵² "Planning: Education in the Services," *Adult Education: A Quarterly Journal of the British Institute of Adult Education* XVI, no. 2 (1943): 192.

⁵³ Brian Groombridge, "Broadcasting and Adult Education," in *A History of Modern British Adult Education*, ed. Roger Fieldhouse and Associates (Leicester: NIACE, 1996), 359-60. The project was enthusiastically supported by R. S. Lambert, editor of *The Listener* and co-author of *The Film in National Life*.

revival. The educational methods adopted emphasised participation in discussion and acknowledged the value of entertaining whilst educating. These approaches influenced a generation of teachers entering the profession. How these innovations could be sustained and form part of a massive extension of adult education provision among the civilian population after the war were questions debated extensively within the adult education movement.⁵⁴

Film societies organised on film appreciation lines showing artistic or cultural films also flourished in service units at home and overseas. An educationalist writing in the journal *Adult Education* observed 'borrowings from the National Film Library increased tremendously as a result of unit film societies springing up wherever an enthusiast could beg hiring fees from the PRI.'⁵⁵ There is some evidence that this was being organised on an official level with the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA), which had pioneered innovative forms of popular education in the Army, also involved in organising film appreciation groups and courses. The 1945 annual report of the British Film Institute reported that ABCA had consulted with the Institute on a list of suitable films for a course on film appreciation. How many of the individuals who had helped organise these film societies or who had attended film appreciation groups in the forces became actively involved in the film society movement in civilian life is impossible to say. We have only anecdotes, of which one of the most striking appeared as a short note in *Sight and Sound* on the formation of the Oldham Repertory Film Society.⁵⁶ A group of soldiers from Oldham serving in Jerusalem in 1945 decided that the cultural facilities available to them at their Army headquarters was superior to anything in their hometown. To remedy this state of affairs they agreed that the first man home would set about forming a repertory film club. Following up on this plan Sergeant Clifford Brown got the club up and running whilst training to be a teacher under the emergency training scheme back in Oldham.

⁵⁴ "Adult Education: Its Place in Post-War Society," *Adult Education: A Quarterly Journal of the British Institute of Adult Education* 16, no. 2 (1943).

⁵⁵ "Book Review of "Adult Education: The Record of the British Army by T.H. Hawkins and L.J.F Brumble," *Adult Education: A Quarterly Journal of the British Institute of Adult Education* 19, no. 4 (1947): 231.

⁵⁶ "Books in Brief and Film Societies," *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1946/47, 159.

After moving to London, Brown became involved in the London regional group of the Federation of Film Societies (the first regional group within the national body) and in the organisation of the national viewing sessions.

Sid Brooks, another film society activist who took an organisational role in the Federation's national viewing sessions, recalled building a mobile projection box on the back of a Bentley van during a long convalescence in the Atlas mountains after being injured during Operation Torch in Algeria.⁵⁷ His makeshift mobile cinema toured the army posts in Algeria giving open-air screenings, mosquitoes swarming round the projector lights. Advancing through Italy with the allied forces, Brooks became acquainted with foreign language films and returning to London tried to follow up on his interest. The Academy and the Curzon were 'expensive for someone like me,' so he joined Tooting Co-operative Film Society. The wartime activities of Jack Griffin, a Peterborough Film Society activist who became involved in the Federation's executive committee were related in a local newspaper profile. As an RAF wireless operator stationed fifty miles outside Baghdad, Griffin was given teaching responsibilities, put in charge of the cinema and started writing film criticism for the unit newspaper. He recalled this as his first opportunity to take a serious interest in films.⁵⁸

The evidence is abundant that film appreciation was increasingly attracting attention as a potential adult and youth education subject. In 1944 the British Film Institute began running an annual summer school dealing with film appreciation. It was intended for 'teachers, youth organisers and others who realise the important part played by films in the lives of many of our fellow countrymen and who wish to replace their visually passive attitude by an active one.'⁵⁹ *Sight & Sound* reported subsequently that the course could have been filled three or four times over with

⁵⁷ Interview with Sid Brooks conducted by the author on 20th September, 2005

⁵⁸ David M. Dorman, "People You Know - No. 15," *Peterborough Standard*, 2nd July 1954.

⁵⁹ "Notes & News," *Sight and Sound*, July 1944. It is interesting to compare the relaunched summer school with the educational events run by the BFI in the mid to late thirties in which film appreciation was a very minor part of activities focused on film's usefulness in teaching specific school subject areas.

students whose appetite for seeing films was 'insatiable.'⁶⁰ Around this time the first articles began to appear in the adult education journals on approaches to teaching film appreciation.

With film being claimed as a part of education across a broad spectrum of educational contexts from schools to the Co-operative education departments, film societies could assert confidently that they had been performing important work in this area for some time. Mervyn Reeves of Manchester and District Film Institute Society, a prominent figure in the movement, contributed an article to *Adult Education* which claimed 'I don't think it would be extravagant to suggest that already the impact of film societies upon the public has been such as to make a fundamental contribution to the cause of adult education, in so far as this aims to promote aesthetic appreciation and the exercise of the critical faculty.'⁶¹ Significantly in Reeves's account the wider interest in film appreciation within the adult education movement coincided with a clear break from certain tendencies and values associated with the movement in the past. Looking back on the movement's origins in 'the red decade,' he noted that in the space of twenty years, the audience had been transformed from one of 'red ties fringed with aesthetes into a prevailingly middle class assembly.'⁶²

The tradition of politically aligned film societies certainly declined after the war. Undoubtedly this disappearance was in part a consequence of the broader political changes, the coming to power of a labour government and the effect of this on other left political organisations. But there were more specific institutional factors at work too. The Federation of Film Societies, successfully reformed in 1945 under BFI patronage, introduced a new model constitution that ruled out political or religious alignment among their members. There is some evidence that this not only disallowed formal affiliation to political groups but also involved vetting film society programmes. In 1950, members of the Communist Party of Great Britain formed the

⁶⁰ Ibid., no. 51: 77.

⁶¹ Mervyn Reeves, "The Film Societies and Adult Education," *Adult Education: A Quarterly Journal of the British Institute of Adult Education* XXI, no. 4 (1949): 178.

⁶² Ibid.: 176.

New Era Film Society; other branches followed in Ilford and Malden.⁶³ These branches encountered difficulties when they tried to become members of the Federation of Film Societies, which brought certain benefits such as use of the BFI Central Booking Agency. Malden New Era Film Society's application for membership was refused because they 'had only submitted one programme, which seemed to show a political bias.'⁶⁴ Through its membership rules, the Federation institutionalised the movement's decisive shift away from the tradition of alignment with left political groups and, like the WEA, promoted a broader educational project.

The Attraction to Film Society Activism

Cinema reached the height of its popularity in the immediate post-war years amidst an extraordinary boom in leisure activity marking a release from years of grief, boredom and frustration.⁶⁵ As Addison has demonstrated, the post-war economy brought extra spending power to the working class, which was channelled into leisure at a time when other purchases were strictly rationed. Leisure offered compensation from the strictures of rationed everyday life. At the same time, film was still far from being considered a legitimate artistic medium by the dominant cultural establishment or the education system. Cinema provision had not formed a part of the pioneering activities of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) during the war. Nor did it feature in the Arts Council's plans for cultural dissemination, distributing the best art to the most after the war. The fact that there were no official plans to include film in the programme of the Edinburgh Festival is a good indication of the reputation of film among policy makers, even at a time of rhetorical emphasis on cultural diffusion within the logic of welfare provision.⁶⁶ But this was also a transitional period in the ongoing process of

⁶³ Bert Hogenkamp, "The Sunshine of Socialism: The CPGB and Film in the 1950s," in *A Weapon in the Struggle*, ed. Andy Croft (London: Pluto Press, 1998).

⁶⁴ Minutes of the 29th meeting of the Executive Committee of the Federation of Film Societies, July 19th & 20th 1952, BFFS Archive, BFI Special Collections.

⁶⁵ See Paul Addison, *Now the War Is Over* (London: Pimlico, 1995), 114.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of cultural policy and the welfare state see Alan Sinfield, *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997).

legitimation of film, in which approaches to film as an artistic medium were being popularised and disseminated, through the institutionalisation of a film art canon in the National Film Library, the production of film appreciation textbooks and the increasing prevalence of courses on the subject outside of schools in film society sponsored adult education. If cinema was yet to be recognised by the guardians of legitimate culture, it was nevertheless the object of an intensification of effort to claim its legitimacy promoted by volunteer-run societies. In Bourdieu's phrase cinema existed within the sphere of the legitimisable, a status it shared with jazz and photography.⁶⁷

If at this point in time cinema was deemed to lack the respectability and value of other means of cultural expression, to whom did it make sense to confer these attributes onto the medium? For whom did the project of applying the terminology and procedures of aesthetic appreciation to films make sense? Victor Perkins, later a film critic of *Movie* magazine described the composition of the film society which he belonged to as a teenager in the late 40s.

In Exeter, the film society crowd – interesting for instance that none of my school teachers were there. Some of them were people of real culture and strong artistic interest but it didn't occur to them that a film society was something they might go along to and I suppose that that is something representative of English culture at that time. It was relatively freakish people that took cinema seriously. Probably the most important person in my education was my history teacher and he went to the movies ever so occasionally and it was almost always for some literary adaptation. I do remember that he saw *Anatomy of a Murder* but again it was because he had read the book and he was really interested to see what they had made of it. And of course because there were differences from the book he thought the book was better. Whereas nowadays I think it would be hard to find someone who thought the book was superior to the film. I'm just trying to indicate that the audience for the Exeter Film Society was not as it were drawn from the whole pool of people in Exeter who were interested in the arts. But one did meet there - it's one of those interesting convergences - very much people whose other weekly activities might well involve some involvement in the Workers Educational Association, The Quakers were well represented and the

⁶⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 96.

Peace Movement generally was well represented. So I acquired other involvements through my involvement with the Exeter Film Society.⁶⁸

Perkins' description of the 'relatively freakish people that took cinema seriously' in Exeter is echoed by a Mr White, representing Wigan and District Film Society, who wrote in *Film* that the social composition of film societies, based on his experience of three societies, was strongly weighted towards 'the retailing bourgeoisie and the bohemian fringe of every small town.' Societies needed, 'a good injection of working class vitality,' he added.⁶⁹ These two observations of the social strata from which the provincial film society drew its members and activists can be illuminated and developed with further reference to the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

In several studies of taste and aesthetic judgement that drew on extensive empirical data collected in France from the 1960s onwards, Bourdieu advanced the argument that attitudes to art and culture are shaped by their holder's social background and their subsequent educational trajectory.⁷⁰ The people in Exeter that Perkins described as people of real culture, should not, according to Bourdieu, be regarded as inherently more cultivated or refined in their tastes than the broader public who frequented cinemas and other forms of popular entertainment. The hierarchy of the arts, he argues, far from reflecting a universal or transcendent set of aesthetic values corresponds to the present state of symbolic struggles between unequally positioned social groups engaged in asserting their claims with respect to specific artistic and cultural practices. As such the hierarchy of the arts corresponds to a social hierarchy of the consumers of those arts. An appreciation of the most valued

⁶⁸ Interview with the author conducted 2 August 2007. Victor Perkins' Exeter teachers may not have been film society members but Tunbridge Wells Film Society reported in 1959 that their membership questionnaire revealed a 'preponderance of school teachers.' *Film*, September/October 1959, 35. The teaching profession was certainly well represented in the Federation of Film Societies including the first co-editor of *Film* Allan Borshell, a County Durham school teacher involved in both Wearside and Tyneside Film Societies.

⁶⁹ "Challenge to Programmes," *Film*, March/April 1956.

⁷⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965); *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, [1979] 1999); *The Inheritors: French Students and their Relationship to Culture* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979).

and legitimate of art forms implies the possession of competencies, attitudes and dispositions that have been internalised through a long process of familiarisation and can be called upon unconsciously and effortlessly in the process of consumption. Once actualised these dispositions are a marker of one's social status. To explain this process Bourdieu develops the concept of habitus.⁷¹ Within Bourdieu's theoretical framework habitus refers to the process by which the objective conditions of existence for a whole social group, a class or a class faction come to be internalised in a set of subjective dispositions, which then generate the tastes and tacit cultural assumptions that are mobilised across a wide range of different consumption practices. The class habitus is therefore the relatively permanent and durable set of dispositions that one internalises as a result of the position one occupies in the social structure. What characterises these dispositions is that they constitute a largely unconscious set of ideas that determine what actions are reasonable and unreasonable, worthwhile or worthless.

An important element of the habitus is the specific endowment of competencies, capacities and knowledge that Bourdieu, stressing their latent social power as symbolic resources, terms cultural capital. Differences in cultural capital constitute differences between classes. In his discussion of cultural capital, Bourdieu contrasts two modes in which these competencies can be acquired. On one hand the most effortless acquisition of cultural capital occurs as an inter-generational endowment, an inheritance; it is derived from the earliest and most diffuse forms of pedagogical action that take place within the family and yields a deeply felt, largely unconscious familiarity with the schemes of appreciation necessary for the appropriation of legitimate culture.⁷² Alongside this early familial process of more or less unconscious familiarisation Bourdieu contrasts later modes of acquisition of cultural capital through the education system or through more informal and even later channels of self-improvement and learning. He argues that these differences in the means of acquiring cultural capital, specifically between early 'imperceptible learning' in the family enjoyed by the most privileged and 'belated methodical

⁷¹ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 100-101.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 63-85

learning' are at the root of entrenched disputes between charismatic and scholarly approaches to artistic production and consumption.⁷³

The cultural capital one acquires forms an accumulating storehouse of tacit knowledge, interpretative schemes and competencies, together they form a set of symbolic assets that the holder seeks to deploy to their best advantage. Each holder of cultural capital must decide how their competencies might be profitably deployed, what opportunities exist for investing the competencies they have acquired. Bourdieu argues that the disposition to invest one's energies and existing competencies in art forms like cinema that are still undergoing legitimisation is likely to depend on one's relationship to the educational system.⁷⁴ He considers it unlikely that those who have progressed through an elitist university system into the upper strata of professional careers will regard cinema as a sound area in which to invest their accumulated cultural capital. Investment, in the sense of accumulating and deploying knowledge and interest, in a middle ground art like cinema is likely to imply a degree of distance or exclusion from the more prestigious forms of higher education. Two groups are likely to find it profitable to devote their energies to the legitimisation of cinema as an artistic medium. On one hand there are likely to be individuals from groups most privileged in terms of the initial inheritance of cultural capital who therefore possess the security and cultural gravitas to make challenging investments in as yet unrecognised forms of cultural expression. On the other hand Bourdieu suggests that individuals denied the opportunity to inherit or acquire the cultural capital that underlies a mastery of legitimate culture, are more likely to choose instead to simultaneously exploit and develop their competencies by developing a scholarly

⁷³ Ibid., 66. These tensions between the approach of the scholar and the connoisseur's ideology of natural taste can certainly be seen within the film society movement itself. Following a critical appraisal of organised film appreciation activity in film societies in *Film*. Mr Gurney of Dunlop Film Society objected to the 'school-marm-types' and the influence of the 'Puritan tradition that we must always be doing something strenuous or unpleasant in order to qualify for jam in the indefinite tomorrow.' In his view 'the night school should be left to the Local Authority' in favour of simply showing 'intelligent films to intelligent people.' *Film*, March/April 1956, 28.

⁷⁴ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 87.

disposition in relation to a more accessible medium, one in which they already possess knowledge gained through regular cinema-going.⁷⁵

Bourdieu's emphasis on the distinction between early familial and late educational acquisition of cultural capital is especially resonant in relation to Britain during and immediately after the war. For many the conditions of war resulted in an abrupt uprooting from social background that generated new experiences, enabled new forms of social interaction and brought opportunities to learn new competencies and skills. These circumstances of total war, in spite of their extraordinary privations, created diverse forms of social mobility, as the whole population was mobilised. As evacuees, serving military personnel, volunteers in the Land Army and munitions work, hundreds of thousands of individuals travelled outside of their familiar neighbourhoods, encountering parts of Britain and the world and with that social and cultural milieu that they would never have experienced in peacetime. Contemporary commentators observed a swell of interest in music, theatre and film in French and Italian that they attributed to demobilised soldiers returning from the war in Europe.

In 1945, the sociologist J. P. Mayer requested readers of *Picturegoer* magazine to send him their 'motion picture autobiographies.' The replies were incorporated into his study, *British Cinemas and their Audiences*.⁷⁶ As Selfe notes, despite Mayer's theoretical framework, a simplistic conception of cinema's influence on the viewer, this volume contains eloquent first hand accounts of film tastes and preferences. Many of the letters elaborated on their author's preference for particular stars and genres associated with the commercially dominant forms of cinema. Selfe suggestively focuses on a small number of writers who she regards as 'ripe for

⁷⁵ The relative accessibility of cinema to potential film appreciators might also be related to the hierarchy existing within the network of voluntary associations promoting cultural, leisure and artistic activity within any particular area. The film society potentially represented a point of entry into civic life denied by clubs dominated by provincial elites operating subtle and not so subtle forms of exclusion. Gwen Bryanston, who helped to establish Solihull Film Society in the late 1950s with her husband Mario recalled that he was denied membership of the local golf club because he was Jewish.

⁷⁶ J. P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and Their Audiences* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1948).

conversion,' ideal subjects of film appreciation discourse.⁷⁷ One writer, a twenty-five year old farmer, describes a growing dissatisfaction with what the commercial cinema has to offer ('sex and sensation'). He contrasts his viewing habits and preferences before and after active service in the Middle East, and asks 'Has the cinema changed since 1939 or have I?'⁷⁸ A second writer discussed by Selfe, a twenty one year old clerk whose father was a bacon curer, similarly emphasised the impact of his wartime trajectory on his relationship to film. 'Since my joining the forces in 1942, I have also become interested in the technical side of films, not with the interest of a technician but artistically. I can now appreciate that the cinema is most definitely an art.'⁷⁹ Noting the generational shift from skilled manual occupation to white collar work, Selfe summarises that war service provided many individuals with new skills that facilitated their subsequent social mobility. She speculates that it was individuals like these two ex-servicemen who joined the expanding memberships of film societies after the war.

A second form of social uprooting was occurring for some through a reforming formal education system. An interest in film appreciation implied a break from the ordinary perceptions and interests of cinemagoing; a break that brings to mind Richard Hoggart's description of the working class grammar school scholarship student. For Hoggart the selective mobility that the scholarship represented inevitably produced friction between the social origins from which the individual scholar is uprooted and subsequent middle class educational milieu in which they are placed. The 1944 Education Act introduced the tripartite school system of technical schools, secondary modern and grammar schools and abolished the fees that were charged by the latter in favour of the eleven-plus. The eleven-plus boy and girl replaced the scholarship student. Although educational reform increased the numbers of working class children going to grammar school, studies such as that conducted by Floud et al concluded that a form of social selection within the grammar schools was preventing working class children from challenging middle class dominance at the later stages of

⁷⁷ Melanie Selfe, "The Role of Film Societies in the Presentation and Mediation of 'Cultural' Film in Post-War Nottingham" (University of East Anglia, 2007), 50.

⁷⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 51.

schooling and in terms of access to university.⁸⁰ Access to university remained highly selective with profound inequalities in terms of participation according to social class and with a chronic underrepresentation of women. For many of those denied the possibility of a university education, thwarted educational aspirations could be channelled into compensatory forms of self-improvement through adult education and informal educators such as film societies. Alongside the educational reforms of the mid 1940s, this period witnessed a massive expansion in the lower strata of professional and managerial occupations especially in public sector professions like primary and secondary teaching, health care, social work, administration and the civil service. The expansion necessitated recruitment into these expanding professions from outside of the already professionalised and educationally privileged middle class.

A New Cohort of Activists

Personal involvement in film societies varied greatly in intensity, from the most minimal levels of member involvement, payment of subscriptions and attending film shows, to the most committed activists who undertook voluntary organisational roles both within the local society and the national movement through the Federation of Film Societies. To succeed as a national organisation representing this growing movement, the Federation of Film Societies required a new generation of film society activists willing to take on executive committee roles. Drawing on interviews conducted with film society activists involved in the Federation in the late forties and early fifties, I have included brief sketches of personal backgrounds and trajectories of some of this new cohort of activists. These biographical fragments should not be read as simple illustrations of the wider historical themes discussed here. It is the concreteness of these biographies that is especially valuable, and yet the memory of motivations and interests does suggest something of the social and cultural world of the new postwar volunteers.

⁸⁰ J. Floud, A. H. Halsey, and F. M. Martin, *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* (London: 1956). See also Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden, *Education and the Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

In 1949 the Federation of Film Societies responded to a plea for greater support for the 16mm societies by giving them a quota of places on the national executive committee. Goldsmiths College Film Society and Boston Film Society were two of the first 16mm societies to be represented on the committee, both were run by young activists who subsequently made careers in film, James Clark and John Minchinton. Minchinton was enrolled at Goldsmiths College as an evening studies student taking language classes in Russian where he met his future wife Doris. With the help of the head of the evening studies department, John Gulland, a liberal educationalist with a Quaker background, Minchinton started a 16mm film society at the college, screening canonical films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Intolerance*. Both were also members of the New London Film Society started by Olwen Vaughan, which met once a fortnight at the Scala Cinema in Charlotte Street. Describing their working class backgrounds, both John and Doris Minchinton identified the secondary school environment, in which they encountered a majority of middle class children, as a formative influence on cultural attitudes and social mobility. Asked if their parents would have understood their interest in joining a film society, they both answered emphatically not. Doris Minchinton added:

My parents had no cultural background at all. My father was a motor mechanic and my mother, well she had been a char, and she had worked in a hospital but not as a nurse, a ward orderly and so on. She had done service. So there was no background in my family of culture at all.

[How do you think you developed your interest?]

Well I think it was partly because I was one of the lucky ones in those times that went to a grammar school. And I'm sure that my other sister who was two years older than me, she didn't have the same interest in cultural things that I had. In our day, the grammar school, it was very elitist, and of course there were very few scholarships, even though it was an LCC grammar school that I went to, there were very few, I suppose it was not more than a quarter, twenty-five per cent were scholarship children, the rest were paying people and they came from middle class families a lot of them.

[So you were coming into contact with these people.]

That's right, at school. As I say, I think I was very lucky. I mean, my father was well read. He was very intelligent actually. He was adamant that I should go to a grammar school. So I was one of the fortunate ones because I don't think really there were many people off the Downham Estate - I don't know of anybody else who belonged to a film society. There weren't very many people there who were interested in anything more than going dancing or football and things like that. I expect that in the Communist Party actually there were more people who were interested...Because you see the Communist Party was made up very largely of middle class people wasn't it John? [JM: Yes] And they had the same background. In that respect that was, although I didn't join the Communist Party till I was about twenty, then you were mixing with people who gave you these ideas and so on.⁸¹

Both the grammar school and subsequently the Communist Party branch presented opportunities for developing a cultural sensibility fundamentally different to that associated with social background.

Minchinton would make an important contribution to the Federation, editing an index of 16mm films and organising and selecting films during the early years of national viewing sessions. Knowledge and experience acquired through voluntary activism would lead him to a successful career as a self-employed subtitler. The youngest member of the executive committee, its publicity officer and editor of a film festival publication was James Clark. Clark was given a 9.5mm projector by his father, a keen amateur photographer and owner of a large printing firm in Boston, Lincolnshire.⁸² During the war he ran a home cinema in his nursery, giving film shows to other children. Films were ordered from the catalogue of Wallace Heaton and paid for by his father. Later, at Oundle School, Clarke, inspired by Roger Manvell's *Film*, persuaded the headmaster to start a film society. And when he moved back to his hometown of Boston, he started another, operating on a 16mm projector given to him by an uncle out of Methodist hall. At the age of eighteen he joined the executive committee, invited by the Federation secretary Francis Howard, a wartime colleague of his former housemaster. Moving to London, Clarke sought out opportunities to enter the film industry and through a personal contact was given an

⁸¹ Interview with John and Doris Minchinton conducted by the author on 28th November, 2005.

⁸² Interview with James Clark conducted by the author on 13th February, 2006.

interview at Ealing Studios, where he was eventually taken on as a junior in the cutting room. Both Minchinton and Clarke were able to use their experience as film society volunteers as a form of apprenticeship in developing a professional career in cinema. And there were others, William Everson, barely twenty, set up a film society called the 300 Film Club in 1949 and became the secretary of the Federation's first regional group in London.⁸³ Leaving Britain for the United States he made a distinguished career as a film historian and collector. Many other activists were in professions unrelated to film, often clustered in public and welfare professions; Ronald Shields, a regional group representative for many years before briefly taking over as Honorary Secretary in 1963 worked for British Rail, John Turner who edited *Film News* was a local government civil servant, Stanley Crawford, a regular contributor to *Film* and *Film News* was a government meteorologist, Allan Borshell who was the first editor of *Film* was a grammar school teacher.

Behind some activists there was a trajectory of cultural displacement. In its way the film society movement in Britain was a microcosm of the wider fertilisation of cultural life brought about through arrival and settlement of Jewish emigrés immediately before and during the war. Tyneside Film Society activists Heini and Rosamonde (Rommi) Przibram played an important role in the Federation of Film Societies in the 1950s. Heini Przibram was born of an intellectual Austrian family, his grandfather a famous Austrian actor and his father an atomic physicist. Escaping to Britain shortly before the Anschluss, he settled temporarily in Tyneside where his host introduced him to the film society. At university studying Engineering he met his future wife Rommi. Like many of the activists of the Tyneside Film Society, the Przibrams were actively involved in The People's Theatre, an amateur theatre group that had grown out of the socialist society and the Clarion club. Rommi Przibram, the daughter of a successful advertising businessman, recalled how the cultural bearings of her middle class upbringing shifted when she met Heini.

⁸³ The 300 Film Club programmes form part of the William K. Everson Archive at the George Amberg Memorial Film Study Centre, New York University. They can be accessed at <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/wke/>.

I grew up being socially adequate, you know, how to behave in public and knowing a bit about theatre and reading the right newspapers. And of course Heini's background was totally different. On one side it was the artistic background of his grandfather and on the other side it was the scientific background of his father. And when we met he introduced me to a new world. We went to the theatre - we used to go to the theatre up in the Gods on Saturday afternoons, sixpence, climbing six flights of stairs. But it was theatre and it was music and it was film. He introduced me to a new world. And he introduced me to politics. His background had always been socialist in Vienna. And of course my father who always maintained the vote is secret, one always assumed that he was Conservative and as a result when I wanted to join the People's Theatre I wasn't allowed to, *they* were all communist. So it wasn't till I was twenty-one that I could join the People's Theatre. And then I did. By that time of course the war had broken out. We both belonged, Heini and I - we weren't married till '43 - belonged to what was known as the Free Austrian Movement. And they were more or less based in a large Victorian terrace house in one of the suburbs of Newcastle which was known as the International Club.⁸⁴

As the Federation of Film Societies' film supply officer in the 1950s, Heini Przibram developed connections with German film societies traveling to the film festivals organised by the German federation.

Regretting the termination of her education at fourteen, after which she worked as a clerk for the allied forces in occupied Germany, Gwen Bryanston observed, 'a film society represented a chance to learn for those who missed out on university.'⁸⁵ Moving to Solihull from Hampstead, where they had been regulars at the Everyman Cinema, she and her husband Mario, a Polish born, Jewish emigré whose own education was interrupted when he fled his adopted homeland France ahead of the German occupation, started a film society which developed links with Birmingham University's extra-mural studies department running annual film classes.

'Do Everything Yourself': An Ethos of Active Participation

The philanthropically minded and reformist aspects of the film society movement of the interwar years had defined themselves in contrast to the highbrow or dilettante, a figure routinely denounced as relishing the exclusivity of the film

⁸⁴ Interview with Rommi Przibram conducted by the author on 14th September, 2006.

⁸⁵ Interview with Gwen Bryanston conducted by the author on 28th February, 2006

society, in contrast to the more wholesome and responsible commitment to improving the tastes of the general public. The postwar film societies now lowered their gaze, as it were, concerning themselves less with the dilettante than with another figure, the passive viewer. Film societies returned again and again to the contrast between the active, participatory experience of cinema that they sought to create and the passivity that they associated with consumption of entertainment.

Within the film society movement, an ethos of active participation was associated with three important aspects of film society activity: the activity of exhibiting films, the process of selecting what to show and how to show it through more or less democratic means and actively engaging in critical debate and discussion of films. Exhibiting films outside cinemas multiplied the tasks and responsibilities undertaken by activists relating to film exhibition itself. Projectors had to be carefully maintained, make shift projection booths built, tickets printed, programme notes written and duplicated, films booked, halls heated, chairs put out and teas and refreshments made, all on voluntary effort. Adapting a hall for the exhibition of films required a great deal of co-ordinated effort and it is no wonder that when film societies came to write their own histories, commemorating important anniversaries, the ongoing efforts of committees to turn unlikely civic amenities into make-shift cinemas were remembered in great deal. The voluntary work involved in transforming a building's function to accommodate 16mm film projection and putting on a programme of films was a very visible aspect of the experience of attending film shows in the film society context. In an article for the Federation in 1971 Eastbourne Mansell Stimpson of Eastbourne Film Society described his committee's conviction that the informality in the manner of exhibition, including witnessing or taking part in the preparation, enhanced members' sense of involvement.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Mansel Stimpson quoting from his own article in a Federation newsletter in 1971: "For us the informality is part of the involvement, to witness the preparation, perhaps even to take part in it. Members have sometimes been asked to assist in the putting up the screen and in the preparation of coffee and have been pleased to help... The evening is a shared experience, lose that and the society is failing at the very point where it is superior to television or the public cinema." Interview with Mansel Stimpson conducted by the author 22nd November, 2005.

In addition to the active roles of exhibiting, film societies also tended to stress active participation in the democratic running of the organisation. Embedded in democratic organisational models governed by constitutions, members were urged to participate in running the society by standing as committee member, treasurer, secretary, or at least attending their society's annual general meetings and taking part in the decisions taken there. How seriously some film societies took this participatory democratic apparatus can be seen from a stern editorial in the magazine of the South London Film Society in advance of their annual general meeting. The article presented a list of policy matters to be subjected to 'the critical review of the members,' then added, 'It is the responsibility of each individual to think about the points in his or her own way. By doing this the minor example of democracy, which is inherent in the running of the South London Film Society will be upheld.'⁸⁷ The sense that the film society encouraged the democratic participation of its members was another important contrast to the commercial logic of cinema distribution and exhibition.

The third and perhaps most important area that societies stressed in defining active participation emphasised the value of critical discussion and exchange of opinion. A recurrent theme in film society publications of the forties and fifties is an expression of commitment to holding discussion meetings following screenings, offered as a contrast to passive modes of spectatorship where no response is expected of an audience. Responding to one visitor to their society who provocatively stated that discussion had no place in a film society, an activist of the South London Film Society remarked. 'I believe that the film is an art form and in common with the other arts requires active appreciation not just passive attention.'⁸⁸ That active appreciation was ideally manifested in the discussion meetings that followed screenings. An editorial in a new magazine launched by the Film Society of the University College of Hull and subsequently reproduced in the Federation's first magazine *Newsreel* was

⁸⁷ "Comment," *South London Film Society Magazine* 1, no. 7 (1949).

⁸⁸ Michael Essex-Lopestri, "Correspondence," *Ibid.*, no. 6; Michael Essex-Lopestri, "Correspondence," *South London Film Society Magazine* 1949.

forced to question the poor attendance at the discussion meetings hosted by the society.

Do we then over or underestimate the interest of the average filmsoc member? Does he know enough about the cinema to be able to scorn discussion in it, or is his interest in the cinema as an art so passive that his maximum effort is to buy his shilling ticket, sit in the dark, and watch the pretty pictures? We admit that we do not know. We are, however, convinced that the society will only be functioning properly when there are frequent and lively discussions in the films we show.⁸⁹

Their new critical magazine, the editorial concluded, was an attempt to stimulate such discussion. This was echoed by a comment piece in the *South London Film Society Magazine*, 'There should be lectures and discussions...the exhibition of film should be the climax of a discussion meeting or the culmination of a lecture by one who knows what he is talking about.' Other activists such as H.E. Norris of West London Co-operative Film Society were more lukewarm about the value of lectures, 'the expert is too hidebound with preconceived ideas.'⁹⁰ Free and informal discussion was preferred.

How should this movement-wide effort to define and construct an active audience for film be assessed? In her account of the emergence of art cinema in the United States, Wilinsky has persuasively argued that an increasing emphasis on participatory leisure pursuits in the forties and fifties was a response to changes in the cultural hierarchy associated with growing numbers of people identifying themselves as middle class.⁹¹ Within this larger but occupationally differentiated middle class strata, culture and taste preferences became crucial ways for one group to distinguish themselves from others. Not only which films were watched, but how and where they were viewed, were important elements of social and cultural distinction.⁹² Wilinsky

⁸⁹ *Newsreel* no 3 (1949) 7.

⁹⁰ H. E. Norris, "Other Societies," *South London Film Society Magazine* 1, no. 4 (1948).

⁹¹ Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 82.

draws attention to prevalent popular journalistic and academic critiques of middlebrow taste, routinely dismissed for their consumer's passivity. Arguing that the claim to participate actively in leisure was fundamentally part of a move to mark oneself off from the larger middle class, she quotes David Riesman's comment that in the present situation 'any leisure that looks easy is suspect.'⁹³ In Britain too there were substantial increases in the numbers of people in professional and managerial occupations in the postwar years, and the general validity of Wilinsky's analysis for the film society movement can be accepted. Occasionally one finds in film society publications a puritanical insistence on strenuous intellectual application coupled with rather dismissive references to the passive viewer and the 'soft soap and syrup' that 'numbs the critical faculties and turns brains into saturated sponges.'⁹⁴ But such lofty judgements were rare, most film society activists were themselves enthusiastic and regular cinemagoers, and they were generally much more hesitant about making such sweeping and condescending comments. Rather, the tone of many of the magazines that film societies put out during this period continues the long standing principle of constructive engagement with the commercial cinema in the form of sympathetic reviews of good films being shown at the local cinemas. As Selfe has shown in her examination of the shifting terminology that characterised Nottingham Film Society's publicity, insulting the tastes of potential members hardly made sound sense for a film society seeking new recruits.⁹⁵

Whilst I accept Wilinsky's argument about the social changes underlying an increasing emphasis on participatory forms of leisure, I wish to avoid the cultural relativism that this position might license. According to this line of argument judgments concerning what manner of film viewing is desirable, what constitutes active and passive modes of film reception, are merely rationalisations of the consumption practices of different class factions engaged in competitive struggles for dominance. From this perspective the cultural preference for discursively active

⁹³ Ibid., 86.

⁹⁴ Derek Hill, "Film and Reality," *South London Film Society Magazine* 1, no. 5 (1948).

⁹⁵ Melanie Selfe, "The Role of Film Societies in the Presentation and Mediation of 'Cultural' Film in Post-War Nottingham" (University of East Anglia, 2007), 60.

viewers, which seeks to establish distance from the more immediate pleasures and gratifications of ordinary film consumption, is fundamentally an attempt to remake the field of cinema according to values specifically linked to a relatively privileged class or class faction. In my view, however, it would be highly reductive to argue that a particular discourse of value such as the privileging of participation in the exchange of opinion was in any straightforward sense the possession of a particular social group.⁹⁶

I would argue that it is important to see the idealisation of the active viewer within the film society movement as part of an ongoing struggle to create a mode of film reception not assimilated to commercial ends: a desire to construct and promote, within the terms of adult education, a critical relationship with the film medium. The movement's abiding concern to engage the film viewer, to foster their participation, to solicit their opinion and judgement in discussion should be seen as a highly significant historical intervention within the film culture, a practical initiative at the level of exhibition that constitutes a response to a recurrent question posed by generations of filmmakers, theorists and critics addressing the limitations of commercially provided film entertainment, what constitutes an active viewer.

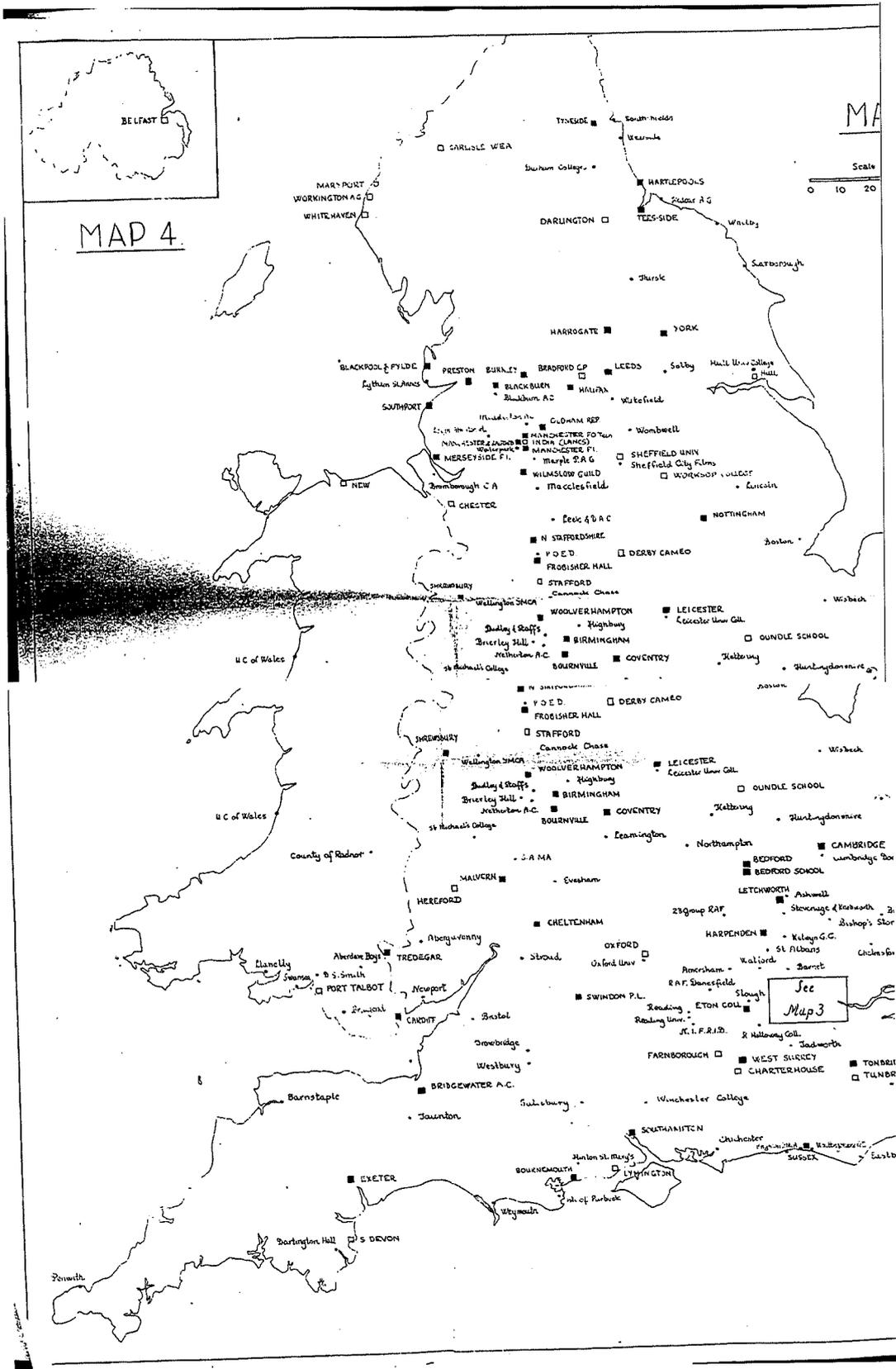
The view was expressed widely in the film society movement that the film show alone, either as a source of personal aesthetic enjoyment or escapist pleasure was in itself insufficient, that it had to lead to the development of the viewer, and that it did so through a learning process actualised through public discussion, the communication of one's responses to others. One key objective of these discussions was towards a better understanding of the film medium's history and diversity as a prerequisite for meeting the challenge of new and unfamiliar forms, but meeting that challenge in ways that emphasised participation rather than didactic instruction. In one sense, the ideal of discussion was part of the organisational inheritance of the film society as a form of voluntary association rooted in the notion of cultural debate and opinion formation. But it was also an ideal that crystallised through the closer

⁹⁶ For a critique of the relativism of Bourdieu's sociology of art see Nicholas Garnham, *Emancipation, the Media and Modernity: Arguments about the Media and Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 149-164.

association with liberal adult education. Here the predominant ideological values were strongly oriented towards student activity and participation as the basis for strengthening the individual's capacity for making rational judgements, with this considered a crucial prerequisite of effective democracy. In particular the emphasis on the active viewer as engaged in an exchange of critical opinion was indebted to the encounter between adult education and mass communication technology, a relationship that crystallised through popular education initiatives in the armed services. Adult educationalists had been concerned to develop methods in which, to paraphrase Brecht, the radio listener or filmgoer was allowed to speak as well as hear and watch.⁹⁷

As voluntary organisations, film societies attempted to promote members' critical interaction as an essential supplement to a film show, in contrast to the passive consumption model of cinema going. If the exhortations of the activists encouraging activity and interaction among their members seemed occasionally puritanical, they were often tempered by a strong dose of pragmatism. Entirely dependent on subscription income, member's expectations could not be easily ignored by even the most educationally minded film society. Membership of a film society implied that one's participation was voluntary rather than obligatory. Unlike the pupil or student in formal education, one chose whether or not to take part. If this meant that discussion activity was often difficult to organise successfully, as indicated by the frustrated complaints of activists, the lack of compulsion, its self-directed nature, gave it a unique educational value.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Raids and Reconstructions: Essays on Politics, Crime and Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 23.



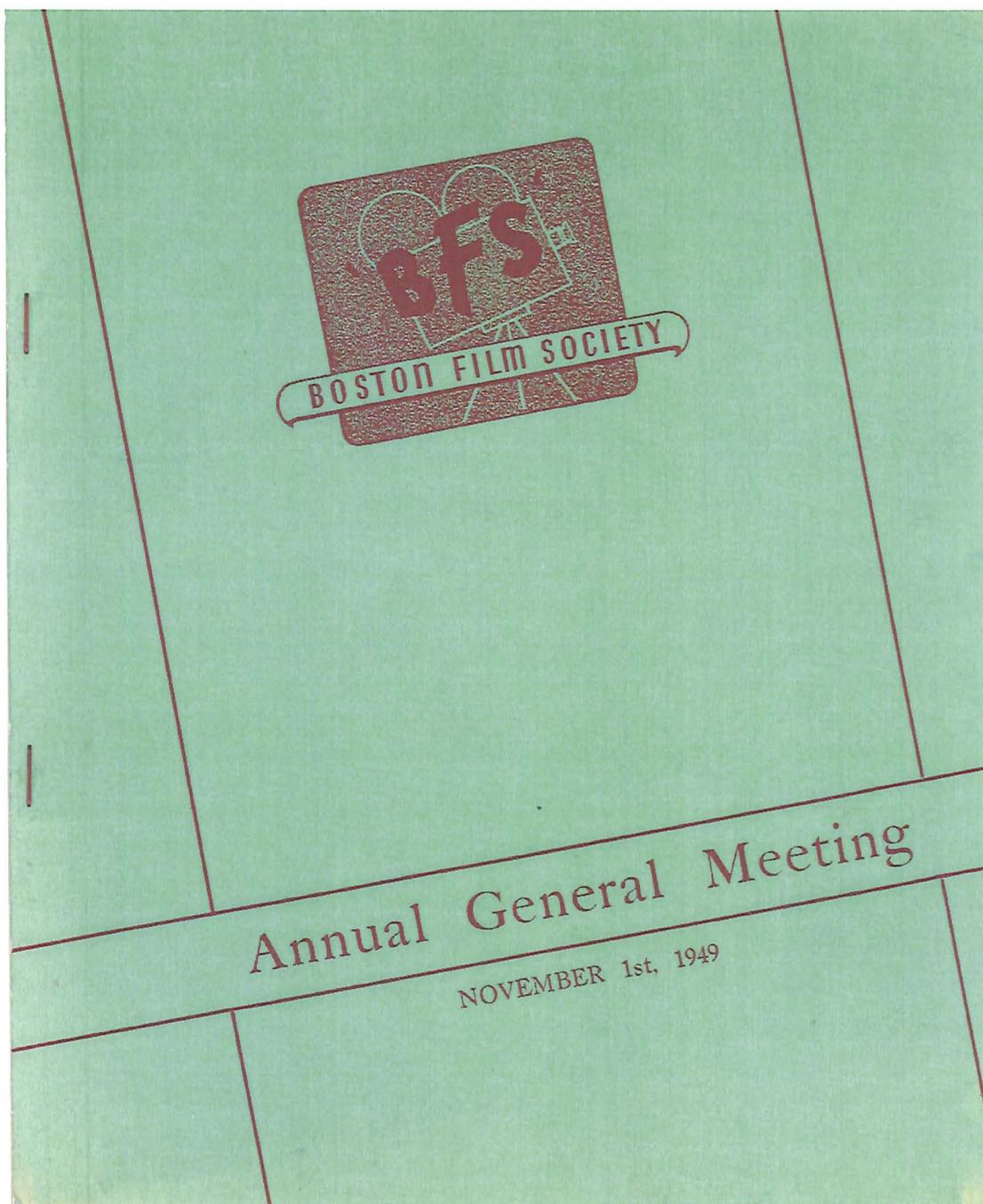


Figure 4: Boston Film Society Annual General Meeting, November 1949.

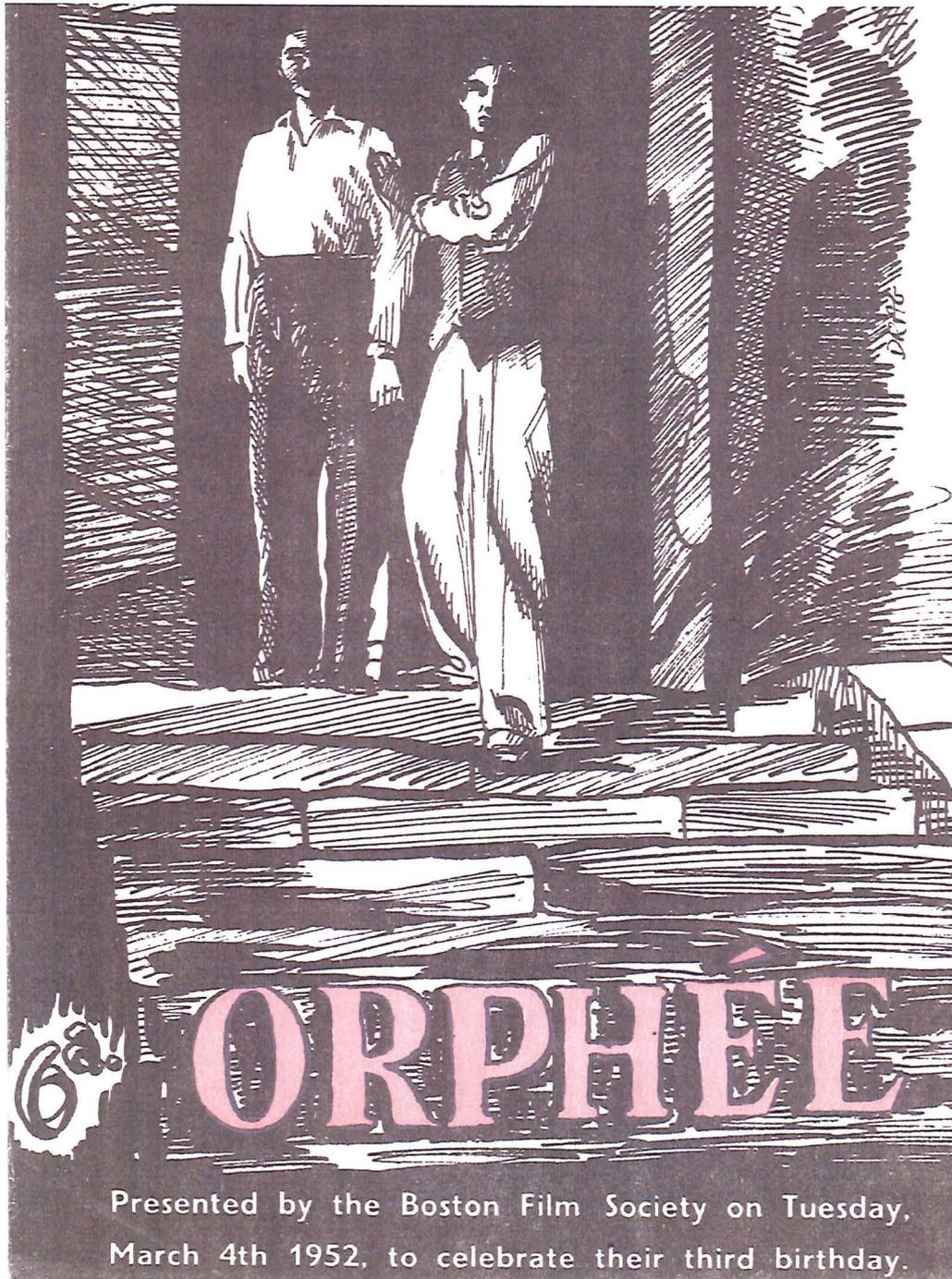


Figure 5: Boston Film Society Programme, March 1952.

Do Everything Yourself. James Clark: "Because I was in the printing business I was able to print these programme notes and eventually I got my friends to draw covers for them. That was drawn by a friend who was an art teacher at school who took the society over from me." Programme from James Clark's collection.



Figure 6: James Clark: “With the help of Roger Manvell’s *Film*, which of course was our Bible at the time.... I went to Arthur Marshall the housemaster and said to him, do you think this is a good idea and he said write a memorandum and I’ll give it to the headmaster.”

Chapter Two

Film Appreciation and the Responsibilities of Cultural Privilege: Roger Manvell's *Film*

For the new generation of activists that became involved in establishing film societies after 1945, one book would be collectively remembered as having a formative influence, Roger Manvell's Pelican paperback *Film*. Costing sixpence and, like other Pelicans, available on newsstands and in branches of Woolworths and W.H Smiths, Manvell's *Film* would, after several reprints, sell approaching half a million copies. At Oundle school in 1948, sixteen-year old James Clark, inspired by *Film*, sought to persuade the new headmaster that, having recently installed a 35mm projector in the great hall, there really ought to be a film society making use of it. He recalls,

With the help of Roger Manvell's *Film*, which of course was our Bible at the time, that Pelican if you remember, I went to Arthur Marshall the housemaster and said to him, do you think this is a good idea and he said write a memorandum and I'll give it to the headmaster. So with the help of Roger Manvell's book, I wrote a rather pretentious memo, since I was only sixteen and I hadn't actually seen that many foreign films myself, but I'd read these books which had given me a thirst for that. And so he presented this memo to the headmaster, and the headmaster said fine, provided it's only the staff and the older boys and not the younger boys, because obviously the idea of showing French films was a little bit saucy he thought.¹

Another film society founder, John Dodds, marked the Eastbourne Film Society's tenth anniversary with an article that looked back to the beginning.

Do you remember how it all started? Personally I think mental telepathy played a part in it. I was reading Manvell's *Film* and the last chapter was entitled Why Not Start a Film Society? Why not I thought and pondered over the idea. A day or two later appeared a letter in one of the local papers from our president saying it was intended to start a film society in Eastbourne and anyone interested was asked to get in touch with him. And so it began in February 1949.²

¹ Interview with James Clark conducted by the author, 13th February 2006.

² John Dodds, *Reminiscence: Some Historical Notes by a Founder Member*. Eastbourne Film Society Programme, 1958-59 recited by Mansel Stimpson during an interview with the author 22 November 2005.

Film furnished its eager readers with a reading list, a glossary (informally titled 'What does that word mean?'), a filmography of 'some of the best work in the general development of the film,' addresses of film libraries and a practical how-to guide for setting up a film society, all in the readily available format of the mass market paperback. Highly readable and at a price any school pupil could afford, Manvell's *Film* was an entirely new kind of publishing venture, a work on the art of film that consciously reached out to a broader social constituency than that addressed by the serious film writing of the thirties. This chapter considers what *Film* reveals to us of the movement that it rose out of and subsequently influenced, a movement quite unlike the one which had been in existence before the war.

Film was not an isolated phenomenon, it was the first of a series of publications in the mid forties written as introductions to the appreciation of film as an art form and to the fundamentals of film analysis. It was followed by a BFI published pamphlet titled *A First Course in Film Appreciation*, written by Birmingham Film Society members Frank Pardoe and Ceinwen Jones, and by Ernest Lindgren's *The Art of Film: An Introduction to Film Appreciation*, widely considered at the time to be the most authoritative text written on the topic to date.³ What was significant about these popular film appreciation books was the way in which they incorporated pre-war film theory. They quoted freely and unapologetically from what they considered were the essential authors on film and aesthetics, Paul Rotha, Rudolf Arnheim, Pudovkin and John Grierson, writings whose canonical status these introductory texts then helped to further consolidate.⁴ Their stated purpose was, as Lindgren wrote, 'that the ideas so familiar to a small group of enthusiasts shall be given the widest possible currency.'⁵ These publications therefore envisaged a reader who was not already a film society activist, but a potential member whose enthusiasm

³Ceinwen Jones and F.E. Pardoe, *A First Course in Film Appreciation* (BFI, 1946); Ernest Lindgren, *The Art of Film: An Introduction to Film Appreciation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950).

⁴Rudolf Arnheim, *Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933); Forsyth Hardy, ed., *Grierson on Documentary* (London: Collins, 1946); V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique* (London: Gollancz, 1929); Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936); Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now* (London: Cape, 1930).

⁵Lindgren, *The Art of Film: An Introduction to Film Appreciation*, vi.

for film might be developed, their taste made more discriminating. Written by authors who were all active teachers of classes on film appreciation, who knew each other personally and who exchanged ideas at summer schools hosted by the BFI, these publications can be thought of as part of a coherent project in film appreciation, the conjoining of the existing educational ideology of artistic appreciation with an ambition to reform the commercial cinema by changing the tastes of the audience.

The method of this chapter involves contrasting a key work of pre-war film theory, Rudolf Arnheim's *Film*, with Manvell's later contribution to film appreciation. Of course Arnheim's book was just one of the texts that Manvell reproduced extracts from in his paperback. In addition to works of film theory such as Arnheim's, Manvell drew on film periodicals, *Sight and Sound*, *Documentary News Letter* and *Kinematograph Weekly* and two edited collections of serious film writing published shortly before the war and intended for a wider readership: Graham Greene's collected film criticism *Garbo and the Nightwatchmen* and the well regarded survey of film culture *Footnotes to the Film*.⁶ The latter included essays from figures such as John Grierson, Cavalcanti and Forsyth Hardy associated with alternative film alongside well-known individuals from the film trade and the literary scene, Elizabeth Bowen, Robert Donat, Alexander Korda and Sidney Bernstein. The emphasis on Arnheim's *Film* in this chapter is not intended to imply that it was the most important source for Manvell's later work. Rather the juxtaposition of these two works separated by just over a decade serves the purpose of bringing the discontinuity between the two periods of serious film writing into sharper focus, it therefore allows us to trace significant shifts in the discourse of appreciation.

Manvell recommended Arnheim's book to his readers as the most comprehensive work on film aesthetics to date and its influence can clearly be perceived in the sections of the later work which concern themselves with cultivating an awareness of the artistic principles specific to the film medium. However, Arnheim's insistence that an awareness of the medium and its potential was a fundamental dimension of aesthetic attention and appreciation did not suit Manvell's

⁶ Alistair Cooke (ed.), *Garbo and the Nightwatchmen* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1937); Charles Davy (ed.), *Footnotes to the Film* (London: Peter Davies Ltd., 1937)

popularising agenda. Despite making space for a discussion of medium specificity, the preoccupation of the film art theorists of the previous decade, Manvell shifts the burden of his attention from awareness of the medium towards the people, events and milieu represented. He proposed a quality of spiritual and intellectual edification as the essence of a universal artistic experience, and regarded this as dependent on the inclusion of dramatic material that is socially relevant. Moreover Arnheim and Manvell hold opposing views of the future prospects of film art. Insisting that film art demanded an attentive and learned appreciation that only a minority possessed the capacity for, Arnheim nevertheless refused to endorse the kind of educational programmes that are conceived as addressing that deficit. For Manvell, the matter of aesthetic education was centrally a question of leadership: those endowed with the privileges of culture bore the responsibility to lead the majority towards an appreciation of enriching film art.

Film Theory in Translation

It has frequently been observed that the emergence of a serious tradition of theoretical and critical writing on film was closely connected to the development of distinctive exhibition networks devoted to audiences interested in film art. Within this alternative mode of exhibition, primarily organised as private clubs or societies, and later repertory cinemas, films made within widely differing production contexts were programmed alongside each other and over time cohered as a canon of European film art.⁷ New periodicals and book length studies, influenced by the programming practices of film societies and specialist exhibitors undertook an exploration of the enduring artistic values of these films, values that made them worth preserving and showing again, a conscious resistance to the fleeting and ephemeral nature of commercial exhibition practice. One common feature uniting the theoretical and critical writing growing out of the film art circuit was a concern to articulate the qualities of an artistic medium that were specific to it alone, from which standards of aesthetic judgement might be derived.

⁷ Martin Stollery, *Alternative Empires: European Modernist Cinemas and Cultures of Imperialism* (University of Exeter Press, 2000), 16-35.

A defining feature of the emergent institutions and practice of film art was the extensive cultural exchange and interaction across national borders between European capitals, centres of modernist art and culture. As Stollery shows, this exchange between metropolitan sites had different dimensions. It was an integral part of the functioning of organisations of specialist exhibition, the circulation of prints being heavily dependent on informal personal contacts. Famously, the organisers of the London Film Society would return from European excursions with an illicit cargo of film prints acquired from contacts in Paris and Berlin. At the same time there was an extensive movement of filmmakers, intellectuals and film society activists across borders. Metropolitan ciné clubs and film societies acted as sites of pilgrimage, forging important connections between filmmakers, theorists and audience. In 1929, the German filmmaker Hans Richter and the Russian Eisenstein were brought to the London Film Society by Ivor Montagu for an avant-garde workshop where they collaborated on a film.⁸ Later that year these three protagonists would be joined by Walter Ruttmann, Béla Balázs, Leon Mousinac and other representatives of the Soviet avant-garde who converged at the Chateau de La Sarraz to discuss the art of cinema; a comical collaborative film was made though subsequently lost.⁹ These physical journeys and the self-consciously cosmopolitan space of influential film periodicals fostered the rapid exchange of ideas that was a feature of the interwar film culture. By the time of the first film appreciation publications, international conflict had long since frozen this flow of prints and personnel and severed the connections between the metropolitan centres of London, Paris, Berlin and Moscow. Film appreciation affirmed the internationalist aspirations of its predecessors, articulating the hope that the cinema might contribute to international understanding, but it did so in a transformed political and social reality.

Face to face encounters at workshops and screenings had facilitated the transnational exchange of ideas, but for these exchanges to acquire a more durable legacy beyond a small but influential group required translation of printed material, a

⁸ John Willett, *The New Sobriety 1917-1933: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).

⁹ Richard Taylor, "Recent Eisenstein Texts," in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, edited Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (London: Routledge, 1993): 64-77.

process subject to the decisions of translators and publishers. Of the three most celebrated Weimar film theorists, Kracauer, Balász and Arnheim, only the latter was translated into English and therefore known to film enthusiasts in Britain prior to the appearance of the cycle of film appreciation textbooks. An English-speaking readership would become acquainted with Balász's writing through the 1952 translation of his *Theory of the Film*.¹⁰ Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* was published in 1947, too late to have made an impact on the film appreciation cycle.¹¹ As the real interactions and exchange across national borders declined, the existence of book length publications in translation became a crucial channel for the transmission of film knowledge. These translations were themselves often the work of influential figures within the film society movement and therefore the result of personal friendships and connections. Pudovkin's writings were translated by Ivor Montagu. The French film historians and fascist sympathisers Bardèche and Brasillach's *History of the Motion Pictures* was translated by the Film Society's Iris Barry and, alongside *The Film Till Now*, was the standard work of film history until the mid forties.¹²

As a self-consciously popularising and pedagogical discourse, film appreciation tended to promote and draw upon writing that was available in English and relatively accessible to a wide readership. Studies that could be described as systematic and comprehensive, from which core principles of film technique could be derived, were favoured over the idiosyncratic and essayistic, perhaps one reason for the preference for Pudovkin's *Film Technique* over Eisenstein's collected essays *The Film Sense*, which appeared in Jay Leyda's translation shortly before *Film* appeared and which Manvell described in his book list as 'of great importance but difficult and sometimes perverse to read.'¹³ And certainly the current prestige of the particular film movements and traditions that had fostered a critical literature was also an important

¹⁰ Béla Balász, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* (New York: Arno Press, 1972).

¹¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004 [1947]).

¹² Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, *The History of the Motion Pictures*, trans. Iris Barry (New York: Arno Press, 1970 [1938]).

¹³ Roger Manvell, *Film*, 1st ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1944), 176.

factor in the availability of the writing. Very little of the writing of the French avant-garde was available in translation. Pudovkin's stature as a film theorist, greatly enhanced by both Manvell and Lindgren, would be impossible to understand without appreciating the continued prestige of Soviet cinema mediated through the influence of the British documentary movement.

Arnheim's *Film*: Aesthetic Appreciation and Medium Awareness

Arnheim's *Film* was written in 1929 shortly after its author had graduated from the Institute of Psychology having trained in Gestalt psychology. The climate for the cinema in Germany in the late 1920s was described in Arnheim's introduction. Barely twenty-five years old, the cinema in Germany he argued, had effectively been placed under martial law, subjected to heavily restrictive censorship quite unlike that prevailing over the theatre. Among the majority of educated adults the cinema's reputation was extremely poor and it was to this constituency that Arnheim addressed his book. It is these educated adults, 'the repositories of the old authentic standards of culture', whose patronage would be essential for film to take its place among the arts. Book lovers and theatre-goers sceptical about film would be helped to develop an understanding of film's artistic claims. Other books with similar concerns reached the German public that year. Hans Richter published a book titled *Filmgegen von heute – Filmfreunde von morgen* in which the creative possibilities of camera movement, editing, photographic technique and untrained acting were illustrated with stills from the celebrated works of film art of the period including, *Mother* (Pudovkin, 1926), *The General Line* (Eisenstein, 1929), *The Man With A Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929), *Ballet Mécanique* (Leger and Murphy, 1924) and *Le Passion de Jean d'Arc*.¹⁴ In the second part of the book Richter attacked contemporary German and American commercial cinema for its phoneyess and crudity, the artificial prettiness of its over-hyped and overused stars and the theatricality of its sets and acting. Richter's aim was to encourage those alienated from commercial cinemas then forming societies, they

¹⁴ Willett, *The New Sobriety 1917-1933: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period*, 148.

would be film's friends of tomorrow. Together they would free cinema from the tyranny of the film industry.¹⁵

Refreshingly, when Arnheim introduced the topic of art he eschewed romantic and expressionist conceptions of artistic creativity, the artist's abnormal sensitivity, the intensity of their feelings or spiritual insight. What he proffered instead was the insight that art has a tangible, material basis in ordinary sensory processes and in the technical possibilities of each artistic media. Art is regarded as a sublimated form of everyday seeing and hearing. What distinguishes the artist is not that they are abnormally perceptive, but rather that they are able to express what they perceive and experience within a specific medium. Sensory perception in reality is not simply a mechanical recording of the objective world but involves a process of creative subjective ordering, an active search for shape and meaning. The process of looking at the world, Arnheim wrote in his later work *Art and Visual Perception*, is 'an interplay between properties supplied by the object and the nature of the observing subject.'¹⁶ From this premise Arnheim argues that graphic art has two primal sources, an impulse to reproduce reality, and an innate feeling for formal qualities of order, harmony and balance. For Arnheim this desire for symmetry and balance has biological roots in our nature as a species dependent on an organic structure. A medium acquires the character of art not through its facility for faithful imitation of nature but when it provides ample means for artistic embellishment, transformation and moulding. Far from desiring to conceal the depictive means employed in order to convince the spectator that it is a lifelike imitation of reality, the distinctive character of a medium should be obvious in the genuine work of art.¹⁷

In exploring the distinctive character of the film medium Arnheim was conscious of the dismissal of the camera as merely a recording machine by contemporaries reluctant to entertain the possibility of film possessing artistic potential. He therefore stresses the various ways in which film deviates from our image of reality and provides ample opportunities for transforming the raw material

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967 [1957]), viii.

¹⁷ Arnheim, *Film*.

of actuality. A good example of this is the contrast Arnheim drew between our perception of space in optical reality with space as it is constructed within the photographic image. For example, he observed that whilst our brain receives an impression of three-dimensional space by processing the views of each of our eyes, the film image is relatively lacking in a sense of depth. To the spectator, the film image is neither two-dimensional nor three-dimensional. In one sense a limitation of the film image with respect to optical reality, this is nevertheless a property with considerable creative potential. The formal qualities of a picture are emphasised as a consequence of the image's relative lack of depth or illusion of real space. Arnheim illustrates this with reference to a shot in Pudovkin's film *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927). In this image the plight of two starving peasants looking for work in the indifferent city is shown through a composition in which a vast statue of the Tsar dominates the foreground of the image and dwarfs the human figures of the peasants who crawl like ants across the city square in the background. Arnheim's point is that much of the expressive power of this shot is a consequence of a lack of spatial depth. If the spectator could fully apprehend the distances between the statue and the peasants, as they could in reality, then the differences in scale of the objects would seem entirely natural and the association between the two objects less strong as they would simply be considered to lie on different planes of action.

Aesthetic experience, Arnheim argues, involves the balanced interplay between the apprehension of the represented object and an appreciation of the formal qualities of the medium employed. He writes, 'Artistic pleasure is a delight in a success of an attempt of a particular kind. This pleasure is not possible when the means are obliterated and only the object is visible.'¹⁸ Where the work of art leads the spectator towards a contemplation of its formal qualities there is a two-fold effect. There is an aesthetic satisfaction derived from the graphic composition, an arrangement of light and shadows, shapes and lines seen as a two dimensional design achieved through the medium of representation. At the same time contemplation of the unusual formal attributes of an object can reveal the object in new and unfamiliar ways, enabling us as spectators to transcend the limitations of ordinary seeing.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45.

Attentiveness to form is therefore the condition of possibility for ‘true observation’, seeing something familiar as new, and understanding its qualities in ways precluded by everyday vision.¹⁹ Arnheim’s aesthetic holds together the pleasures derived from an appreciation of pattern and arrangement and the revelatory or explanatory capacity inherent in attending to the formal attributes of an image of an object. Discussing a shift in the camera’s perspective in Pabst’s *Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929), Arnheim argues that in this instance, the director, in providing two differently composed shots of the same action, has merely provided the spectator with a superficial optical attraction. As much as this is appealing to the eye, it utilises compositional means without revealing anything significant about the objects or action represented, as such it is superfluous and judged artistically weak.²⁰ Narrative film, he implies, relies on formal compositional means being utilised for constructive, interpretative ends. Arnheim stresses the importance of an art work exploring and revealing its own means of representation at the same time as representing reality through those means.

Concerning the social basis of the capacity for artistic creativity and appreciation it appears initially that Arnheim’s concern is to close the distance between ordinary people and artists by stressing their shared experiential and perceptual processes. But just as artistic creativity involves the ability to use the techniques of a medium to solve problems of representation, so then does artistic appreciation involve the pleasures of seeing how a medium has been employed. Arnheim contends that most people are incapable of artistic appreciation, understood as an appreciation of the interplay of reproduction and formal composition. Paradoxically perhaps, although the source of artistic inspiration is identified with the human organism and manifests itself unconsciously through a desire for balance and symmetry, Arnheim asserts that the majority of people have no conscious feeling for art. Artistic appreciation involves a shift in one’s attention from the object to an appraisal and understanding of the peculiarities of form, an awareness of the medium. By contrast the attention and interest of the majority confine themselves to the object itself. Arnheim writes,

¹⁹ Ibid., 54.

²⁰ Ibid., 61.

For the average man today, as three thousand years ago, graphic art still means the reproduction of some object. He only apprehends what the picture is meant to represent, and criticises it according to its resemblance to nature...Up to the present artistic appreciation is confused with the pleasures suggested by works of art. If a man feels a longing for the countryside on seeing a landscape painting, or sensual stirrings on beholding a marble Venus, he thinks that he is proving himself to be a lover of art. Hence it follows that even today mankind in the mass is unconsciously inimical to the development of the arts. It sees in film merely a medium of storytelling and directs his attention wholly to the narrative.²¹

Then later he adds,

And the spectator shows himself to be lacking in proper aesthetic appreciation when he is satisfied to see the picture as purely objective – to be content with recognising that this is the picture of an engine, that of a couple of lovers, and this again of a waiter in a temper. He must now be prepared to turn his attention to the form and to be able to judge how the engine, the lovers, the waiter, are depicted.²²

According to Arnheim, despite the film medium's development of greater means of artistic construction, the inartistic interests of the masses and their ignorance of film technique remains an obstacle to the medium being used for artistic ends. The majority audience solely value what is represented, not the process of representation. At the same time technological development, driven by the commercial imperative to appeal to these masses, is moving in the direction of ever more faithful reproduction, what Arnheim terms 'the triumph of the panopticon ideal over creative art.'²³ The dream of flawless reproduction through technology represents the ultimate defeat of artistic construction within a photographic medium. With ever more powerful technologies of recording, the balance between the subjective, formative dimension of the camera and the objective recording faculty is shifting decisively towards the latter, all artistic creativity is concentrated on what is enacted before the camera, not what is transformed by it.

²¹ Ibid., 43-44.

²² Ibid., 69.

²³ Ibid., 283.

In his concluding remarks Arnheim considers the prospects for film art, dependent as these are on the artistic values of the general public. Aware that his comments on the masses' relationship to artistic appreciation may sound 'arrogant and undemocratic', he argues that this is preferable to the misguided pretence that the 'toiling millions' are 'gasping for and likely to appreciate things of real and high cultural value.'²⁴ If there is an inborn feeling for art this remains undeveloped in the majority who lack the training and background required to understand and respond to art work in any medium. He is highly critical of bourgeois schemes of educating the people in art appreciation which he caustically dismisses as attempts, conscious or otherwise, to divert attention from material discomfort through the spiritual compensations of culture. Through history, Arnheim observes, art works have been created and appreciated widely by the majority rather than the few. However, the great work of recent centuries has tended to demand a longer process of initiation that has limited its scope. Moreover the reality of contemporary class society, and its capitalist entertainment and leisure industries, has further severed the relationship of the majority to art. Arnheim concludes bleakly that 'nowadays art and the proletariat are incompatible.'²⁵ The proletarian's alienated conditions of labour led them to seek the compensatory pleasures of entertainment, to the advantage of the bourgeoisie who benefit from the dissipation of revolutionary energies. Any innate feeling for art was dulled and perverted by the vulgarities of mass culture. Whereas other artistic media could thrive with the patronage of the minority, this was clearly not the case with film, which was expensive to make, and dependent on large audiences in order to cover the costs of production or make a profit. Finally, Arnheim dismissively discounted idealists who reproached the film industry for acting without consideration for art.

Arnheim's concluding thoughts contrast starkly with his introduction which announced the author's intention to instruct and persuade the cultured and the educated whose patronage might help improve the film. By the final chapter Arnheim concludes that the masses control the destiny of film. And yet he refuses to endorse

²⁴ Ibid., 290.

²⁵ Ibid., 292.

educational programmes aimed at raising the cultural level of the masses. Educational practices of that kind failed to address the material disadvantages which actually circumscribed the proletarian's relationship to art in practice. In conclusion Arnheim explicitly states that class divisions will impede the artistic development of film. 'The future of film depends on the future of economics and politics. To predict this does not come within the scope of the present work. What will happen to film depends on what happens to ourselves.'²⁶ The ultimate barrier to aesthetic enjoyment is a scarcity of time and a lack of freedom. Aesthetic experience makes demands of us; it assumes faculties acquired over time, an unequally distributed resource in a class divided society. To create a mass audience for art would require a society organised in a radically different way. Finally, then, there is a tension in Arnheim's text, written in accordance with his conception of the critic's responsibility to articulate what is an artistic use of the film medium based on its unique properties, thus deriving standards and a notion of what film might be. And yet for film to realise this potential would involve a fundamental change in social relations. Having made film's future conditional on changes that are considered to lie beyond the powers of the critic or the educated readership he addresses, the disappearance of class society, Arnheim concludes his text.

Welcoming Arnheim's book as a 'contribution to film aesthetics of outstanding significance,' Paul Rotha in his preface to the English version sought to take the sting out of Arnheim's bleak conclusion that there was no large public for great works of art.²⁷ A contributor to the growing film art movement in Britain as a critic, theorist and member of the Film Society committee, Rotha claimed that the demand for 'good film' had never been as strong. To meet this demand Rotha argued would require a shift away from the industrial conditions of production that prevailed in the film studios towards small units of technicians with independence from executive interference. These were the conditions of film production that Rotha and his colleagues were attempting to create in the form of commercial and State sponsorship of documentary. Rotha also pointed to broader developments in British

²⁶ Ibid., 296.

²⁷ Ibid., xi.

film culture, the formation of a national institute, film groups in public schools and attempts to establish a school of criticism on film art. It was this reformist and activist orientation that Manvell and film appreciation extended.

Manvell's *Film*

It is one of the central contradictions of Arnheim's text that whilst *Film* is undoubtedly an educational work, which aims to promote better understanding of the film medium among an educated public, the author is nevertheless unimpressed by educational schemes aimed at the masses. Aesthetic education aimed at raising the taste of the general public, in Arnheim's pithy conclusion, is a dubious ideological project entailing the illusion of spiritual wealth and the neglect of real impoverishment. In contrast, Roger Manvell's earliest writings showed his singular commitment to the redemptive powers of aesthetic education. Born in Leicester, Manvell was briefly a schoolteacher before he gravitated towards adult education, teaching courses on literature, drama and subsequently film, first at Vaughan College, the extra mural department of University College, Leicester and then at the University of Bristol's extra mural department. Vaughan College was the centre of activity for the Leicester Film Society, an early and vigorous film society which participated in the attempts to create an effective Federation before the war and from which the Federation's first Chair after the war was drawn, John Cottrill, also a tutor at Vaughan College. In his early twenties, roughly the same age as Arnheim when he wrote *Film*, Manvell published a pamphlet on *The Social Value and Influence of Poetry* which drew on lectures given at the college.²⁸

Manvell's youthful and at times florid discussion of the vocation of the artist and poet is influenced by Platonic conceptions of beauty and art. These are founded on an absolute separation of the material life from the spiritual realm of truth, beauty and goodness. Manvell reiterates Plato's assumption of humanity's primal state of wholeness, of 'the fullest contemplation of ultimate knowledge or truth, of beauty, of

²⁸ Roger Manvell, *The Social Value and Influence of Poetry* (Leicester: Edgar Backus, 1933).

goodness' and the subsequent fall from grace, the confinement of mental life within a material body. He writes,

Our minds, thus divinely hereditary, long to return to their native state from which they have fallen. This desire appears to us in the form of strange longings for beauty, strange devotions to truth, strange powers towards goodness, the three ideas we spiritually appreciate without intellectually understanding, necessities of satisfaction laid on us we know not how or whence, except that they belong to a standard of development yet unattained universally by the human species, though manifest strongly in the minds of the few who have developed mentally beyond the mass.²⁹

The artist and the poet are the most evolved amongst us, and in them the capacity to recall and awaken the lost powers of pure contemplation is most developed. By retaining a memory of our primal state and recalling its ideals, the artist is able to perform a social duty of the highest significance, advancing the evolutionary development of humankind.

In Plato's vision of society, a ruling elite, free from the toils of the majority, were believed to possess the capacity for appreciating the higher realms of the spirit. In Manvell's account this fundamental social inequality is expressed as a form of spiritual and mental inequality, the product of a process of evolution, and this provides the warrant for educational intervention. 'Evolution', writes Manvell 'has left us strangely unequal.'³⁰ Eschewing the possibility of an egalitarian evolutionary outcome he adds, 'uniformity of development will never be attained in the human species, but it would be a great day for the world when even the lowest developed could have some apprehension of beauty, and not let his life go uninfluenced by the refinement's of the cultural mind's love for truth and the evolutionary values of ethical goodness.'³¹ The separation of the material and the spiritual in Greek aesthetics and philosophy was founded on an exploitative class order, which the absolute distinction between the realms of material necessity and spiritual freedom served to justify. The most valued pursuits, those concerning the 'ideal' world of

²⁹ Ibid., 6.

³⁰ Ibid., 3.

³¹ Ibid., 20.

truth, goodness and beauty, had their rightful place in the highest strata of society, those furthest removed from the necessity of labour and commerce. In his analysis of bourgeois aesthetics, Marcuse argued that the relationship between necessity and beauty was transformed.³² In the bourgeois epoch, he notes, it is no longer meant to be the case that some individuals are born to necessity and labour and others to enjoyment and leisure. Each individual is an abstract being, a buyer or seller of labour power. As abstract beings they are presumed to participate equally in the values of truth, beauty and goodness. 'By their very nature the truth of philosophical judgement, the goodness of a moral action, the beauty of a work of art should appeal to everyone, be binding upon everyone. Without distinction of sex or birth, regardless of their position in the process of production, individuals must subordinate themselves to cultural values.'³³ In truth the universally valid nature of the idea of beauty premised on the abstract equality of humanity is undermined by the concrete inequality that capitalist production creates. Only a few individuals possess the wealth to secure happiness and freedom. 'Equality does not extend to the conditions to attain the means.'³⁴

In Manvell's account, concrete inequality has been naturalised, transformed into stages of unequal mental and spiritual development in the human species that distinguish the few from the masses. This is accompanied by a quasi-religious conception of humanity's fallen state, with a gifted few having fallen not quite so far as the majority. The gap between a minority, gifted with the faculty of aesthetic contemplation and the universally valid nature of these aesthetic values gives the artist a quasi-religious priestly function guiding the rest of humanity back to an original state of oneness characterised by pure contemplation.

Film represents a considerable shift in tone and in the terms of its analysis of art and society, though as we shall see there is an important underlying continuity in the endorsement of an education in appreciation. With the outbreak of war, Manvell was one of a significant number of film society activists who joined the Ministry of

³² Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press).

³³ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

Information (MOI) as Regional Branch Officers.³⁵ It was whilst working for the MOI arranging non-theatrical screenings of documentary and instructional films in the south-west that Manvell first met Penguin's editor in chief Allen Lane. Manvell proposed a book on the cinema as part of the publisher's Pelican series which Penguin had developed in 1937 to extend their paperback revolution to scholarly works in the natural and social sciences, literature and visual art. The series had developed through the guidance of an advisory panel which included the adult educationalist W.E Williams. Allen Lane's biographer speculates that it was Williams who grasped the significance of the historical moment in which Pelican was developing.³⁶ Williams discerned that there was a huge and growing demand for further education, stimulated by the impending international conflict and domestic crises, that was not being met by the existing options in adult education or the highly specialised University curriculum. Pelicans were thus conceived as a development in adult education, scholarship that was lively and accessible written by specialists for a general readership.

Film's design and conception was consistent with this brief. The initial success of Penguin had been partly achieved through the publisher's emphatic break from the residues of Victorian philanthropy and worthiness that lingered over other publisher's forays into the market of affordable reprints of classic literature. Penguin book design rejected the elaborate and antiquated typography favoured by rivals for a design that aimed to be 'free from all suspicion of being patronising.'³⁷ This was visually conveyed through an instantly recognisable layout of two bands of bright colour at the top and bottom, colour coded for the different genres of literature and non-fiction, and simple bold lettering for the book title against a plain white background. When Manvell and the Penguin production manager discussed incorporating a film still on the book's cover, the author expressed a concern to avoid

³⁵ Others included Tom Hodge, an activist at Merseyside Film Institute Society and John Maddison of the Manchester Film Institute Society.

³⁶ J. E. Morpurgo, *Allen Lane: King Penguin* (Hutchinson: London, 1979), 122-23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

an image from a film that was ‘too “remote,” or “arty and crafty.”’³⁸ Instead he felt that ‘a good, modern British production type of still seems more in keeping with the spirit of the book, and of the times.’³⁹ Film was generously illustrated with a large number of film stills, sixty-four pages in the centre of the book, reproduced to a high standard. On seeing the paste-up of the stills, Manvell told the Penguin team that it ought to sell the book without the text and suggested another Penguin book solely of Russian film stills, a project that wasn’t taken forward.

In *Film*, the ornate and mannered prose of Manvell’s youthful essay on poetry gave way to a more self-consciously informal, idiomatic style, in which the most characteristic figure of speech is the rhetorical question. ‘Where do we go from here?’ Manvell memorably asked at the conclusion of the book. ‘Do we go back to pre-war dope and depression or forward to recreation and actuality...’⁴⁰ On the opening page of the book he included a guide to reviewers and readers, a series of questions that the book will tackle, beginning with ‘Why we go to the pictures and what we get for the money.’ Throughout the book Manvell prominently uses the first person plural, creating an air of collective problem solving and joint responsibility binding author and reader together. Unsurprisingly, Manvell would recall in retrospect that he intended *Film* primarily as a discussion book, and the book’s manner of address easily calls to mind the enthusiastic discussion leader. The strangest appearance in the text of this strategically claimed author-reader collective speaking position occurs at the book’s ‘interval,’ a short section dividing the two parts of the book, the first dealing with film as a new art and the second concerned with the influence of the film on society. This interval was titled ‘An Open Questionnaire from the Author and Reader to the Cinema-Going Public.’ Although this follows the logic of the book’s now familiar use of the plural ‘we’ it inevitably leaves you wondering who exactly is the ‘you’ addressed by the questionnaire, if not the reader co-credited with posing the questions. ‘Author and Reader’ pose a series of questions of this other addressee, interspersed with statements which pitch one kind

³⁸ Letter from Roger Manvell to Mr. Obendorfer, Penguin Books, January 25th 1944. Penguin Books Archive, University of Bristol.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Manvell, *Film*, 166.

of film-going, ephemeral and habitual, against another, selective and critical. Towards the end of these questions, they (author and reader) imagine their cinema-going respondent (male, it would appear) resisting their invitations to adopt a more critical viewing practice such as noting down the names of films and filmmakers. The cinema is simply a place to slip into with a girlfriend and keep warm, 'one film is as good as another provided it has got a kick in it. Provided it has – that is the beginning of selection, of criticism, in the end of better films and keener enjoyment. Which is better than paying like a mug to keep the producers lazy. But if you were doing that you would not be reading our questionnaire.'⁴¹ Happily at this point the distance between 'we' who set the questions and 'you' who answer them is closed; the reader's split personality is resolved. The reader who contributed to 'our' questionnaire and the reader who is being questioned both want fundamentally the same things out of their cinema going as the author.

As with his earlier essay on poetry, Manvell begins with a preliminary distinction between the majority and minority relationship to art. The majority of human beings are distinguished by the simple emotional responses that characterise their preference for dance music and cheap novels. Manvell's earlier work attributed the quality of this response to a stage of evolutionary development attained by the majority. In *Film* the majority are 'culturally under-privileged.'⁴² The complex response of the culturally privileged involves an appreciation of how an artist has used a specific medium to articulate valuable human experience. Echoing Arnheim, Manvell writes that the complex satisfactions that characterise the aesthetic response of the culturally privileged involve a contemplation of form, recognition of the artist's creative resolution to problems derived from the necessary limitations of their specific medium. From this premise Manvell's elaboration of the fundamentals of film art bears many similarities to Arnheim's. The limitations of the film medium constitute the fundamental resources that a film artist exploits to artistic effect. The potential for artistic composition and selection in the framing of a shot and the editing of sequences is contrasted with the misguided attempt to reproduce the chaotic sense

⁴¹ Ibid., 113.

⁴² Ibid., 12.

impressions of life. Thus Manvell concludes, 'It is wrong to make art too life-like: it becomes released from its limitations, and so loses its sense of form and proportion.'⁴³ Again, both Arnheim and Pudovkin's influence can be seen in the condemnation of the 'hurried search for realism' leading to the inclusion of uninteresting and superfluous content in the frame.⁴⁴ Manvell then details some ways in which the reader might judge whether the medium has been exploited competently or brilliantly, distinguishing one from the other according to 'the degree of imaginative interpretation and reconstruction of the action into terms of cinema which the artist can bring to bear.'⁴⁵ The competent worker is above all concerned with the efficient presentation of story, the brilliant artist experiments with the composition of an image beyond conventions at the risk of advancing beyond the comprehension of the mass audience.

The Quality of Recreation

The terms of evaluation that Manvell adopts when writing about film entertainment and its influence on society depart from those developed in his discussion of film art. Returning to the initial distinction between a culturally privileged minority and disadvantaged majority, Manvell now proposed a more inclusive way of thinking about artistic experience. Evidently concerned not to be identified with a strictly minoritarian or highbrow position, to use a term favoured by the author, Manvell now modifies that initial distinction by asserting that good art occurs at all levels of complexity and sophistication. 'Variety is useful for the toughest job in the world,' he adds.⁴⁶ The terms of judgement are intended to be more inclusive, derived from what are presumed to be universal qualities of artistic experience that integrate minority and majority responses. Manvell defines the fundamental feature of all artistic experience as the recreative instinct. All popular works of art are recreative, which is to say 'you feel better for seeing a good film or

⁴³ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 115.

play. Your enjoyment revitalises the spirit, and the flesh is renewed.'⁴⁷ Secondly a work of art must possess a satisfying sense of order, a beginning, middle and end. Manvell says nothing more about this criteria, but it is clear that we have shifted some way from an understanding of artistic experience which is bound up with the contemplation of a work's formal qualities and is premised on awareness of the medium.

Defining good art as recreative, Manvell then proceeds to condemn the majority of films for falling far short of this standard. However, he seems unsure whether to concede that these films nevertheless offer some form of pleasure or enjoyment. Initially he states baldly that, 'It is a fact obvious to a regular cinema goer and review reader that the average audience does not enjoy the average film to the extent of such recreation.'⁴⁸ Having enumerated the appeals of the bulk of Hollywood films, he concludes, 'I do not say that the results are not entertaining. What I submit is that the greater bulk of all this leaves you nowise different from when you went in, except perhaps a bit glummer the morning after. It is a stimulant without recreation: entertainment without relish.'⁴⁹

What appears to be at stake is the kind of stimulation experienced. At the very beginning of the book, Manvell associated certain forms of excitation and response with the culturally underprivileged. The libidinal basis of these excitations is implied by Manvell's reference to emotions 'roused easily and volcanically' by cheap novels and dance music. The culturally underprivileged seek immediate gratifications which the more cultivated have learned to sublimate through their appreciation of artistic form. Perhaps because he wishes to avoid the kind of conclusions reached by Arnheim, specifically that one's capacity for art is shaped by material circumstances, Manvell elects to shift the focus of attention away from the capacities of the majority audience to the structure of the industry. In doing so he implies that the majority audience possesses a recreative instinct that is not being addressed by the current system of production. The reason for this, Manvell suggests, is because of the power

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 116-17.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 120.

of producers and financiers who stifle creative directors. Also responsible are the commercial distribution and exhibition practice, such as double features and block booking, in which supply is based on quantity regardless of quality and depends upon habituated and routinised forms of spectatorship. Despite considering planned production modelled on the nationalised film industries in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Manvell concludes with a demand for social responsibility to be balanced with financial interest. Indeed wresting a sense of progressive enlightened reform from this analysis, Manvell concludes by suggesting that 'the commercial cinema is showing, slowly but definitely, an increasing sense of social responsibility.'⁵⁰

What is the quality of recreation that Manvell considers fundamental to the experience of all genuine art? Introduced in the context of Manvell's critique of entertainment and its appeals, the recreative qualities of art are best understood in terms of two related concerns. The first of these relate to a film's appeal and the viewer's response, it is based on the assumption that the average film invites appeals that are purely bodily and libidinal in contrast to the recreative film that refreshes the spirit and the mind by cultivating a more finely balanced range of emotions and themes. Although this might be thought to favour a more intellectually demanding film experience, the concept of recreation implicitly bears ideas about tasteful behaviour and decorum that, because they are left unexamined, are difficult to pin down. Manvell describes the 'really good film' that appears like a miracle to restore one's confidence in the film industry, the film that has 'everything in it which makes recreation – wit, charm, tolerance, gaiety, sensitive understanding of the smaller human details, love and tenderness and human affection, kindness and gracious living.'⁵¹ The civilised few endure the 'crashing of trumpets and braying of shawms' in the cinema in the hope of the miracle of good films. Recreation implies the virtues of emotional restraint, decorum, poise, harmony, balance and sensitivity. The quality of recreation can be situated in relation to an established inter-war pedagogical movement of artistic appreciation within schools. What this approach to modern

⁵⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁵¹ Ibid., 122.

education stressed was that a training in appreciation, 'loving a subject for its own sake' was fundamentally an emotional training for young people who might otherwise gravitate towards more harmful excitation.⁵² Art appreciation taught young people to be stirred by the right things. The ideals that recreation implies are unmistakably anchored in the taste judgements of the educated middle class, derived from a social taxonomy in which the uncivilised 'other' is the coarse and unrestrained mass. The notion of the recreative instinct is an attempt to give these values general validity and hence authority rather than identifying them as aspects of minority taste.

The second and related set of concerns, oppose the selfishness and egocentrism displayed in the average film at the level of character and plot with the responsibility and social sense of the recreative film. The most disturbing characteristic of the majority of entertainment films for Manvell is their promotion of hedonistic attitudes, their lack of social sense. He writes,

The absence of any social sense from so many films is compensated for by personal, that is individual, glamour and charm...The emphasis on the personal satisfactions (for screen love is normally selfish love since the prizes are so desirable) induces a wrong political emphasis in a period when the world will survive only by collaboration between communities and nations. To sum up cinema at its worst reflects an impoverished hedonism, an appalling absence of cultural background or international understanding, and a dangerous escape from the social problems that only an alert public opinion can lead to a satisfactory stage of solution.⁵³

In contrast to Arnheim, who insisted that the most ubiquitous narratives of entertainment cinema reflected the moral values and class interests of the bourgeoisie, Manvell's critique is a fundamentally moral one as is indicated by his key terms of judgement, selfishness and hedonism. Entertainment cinema's narratives permitted an escape into individualism and an avoidance of the necessary disciplines, duties and sacrifices of work, community and family. This moral critique of the egocentrism indulged in entertainment narrative recognisably belongs to a variety of film writing

⁵² Nancy Catty, ed., *Training in Appreciation: A Study of Modern Educational Theory and Its Applications* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1921).

⁵³ Manvell, *Film*, 139.

whose most notable exponent was John Grierson, whom Manvell claimed as a mentor. *Film* contains a dedication to the man 'who taught me to look at [films].'⁵⁴

If Manvell and Grierson looked at films with a similar set of values and expectations then plausibly this was because they started out intellectually and ethically from related positions. Both men were sons of clergymen, Grierson's a lay preacher, Manvell's a Church of England vicar, and they appear to have shared an early conviction about the fallen state of humanity with respect to a more complete and purer state of being. As we have seen Manvell was interested in a neo-Platonic conception of mankind's alienation from a primal state of pure contemplation of truth, beauty and goodness. Grierson, Aitken has revealed, was influenced by religious ideas about the flawed nature of humankind and the necessity for leadership by an elect derived from Augustinian thought.⁵⁵ This fallen and sinful state was manifested in an innate egocentrism. In addition to the influence of these religious ideas, Grierson was attracted to the English tradition of philosophical idealism and in particular the neo-Hegelian philosopher Bradley. Central to this philosophical tradition was a conception of totality that could acquire both a metaphysical and social referent. In the former the concept of totality was associated with the Hegelian idea of the absolute, a transcendent and harmonious reality, a state of being from which we are alienated through self-consciousness, language and thought. Aitken argues that the idea developed by Bradley that this harmonious universal reality could be intuitively grasped through both religious and aesthetic experience was to be an enduring influence on Grierson. Furthermore, Grierson's conviction was that capitalist modernity fostered a self-serving and excessive individualism that exacerbated humanity's egocentric tendencies and undermined the virtues of collective duty and responsibility. In its more mediated and social form, totality was identified with a progressive evolution towards social cohesion and integration concretely embodied by the state, as the corporate entity which transcends the fragmentation of modern life and resists its excessive individualism manifested in the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁵ Ian Aitken, *Realist Film Theory and Cinema: The Nineteenth-Century Lukacian and Intuitionist Realist Traditions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 142.

destructive impact of laissez-faire capitalism. Art was required to represent the underlying reality of social interdependence and harmony beneath the fragmented and chaotic nature of phenomenal appearance. Artists and educators, possessing the power to see the hidden reality of social interdependence, were accorded the important task of reinforcing social integration and cohesion by communicating an inspiring vision of this social totality to the general public. In this respect Aitken has convincingly argued that Grierson's thinking should be understood within a film aesthetic tradition that seeks to articulate a redemptive role for cinema in resolving the problems of modern life. The need to grasp an image of an underlying social interdependence obscured by a surface reality in which only clashes of interests are visible constitutes the foundation of Grierson's cinematic realism.

Both Manvell and Grierson appear to have retained throughout their intellectual development a firm conviction concerning the obligations of leadership. Early on this involved a belief that those with the power to see the truth of a once experienced wholeness are charged with leading those who are not gifted with this privileged insight. It is unlikely to have been Grierson's influence alone that led Manvell to shift from a preoccupation with a primal experience of harmony towards developing a greater concern for the role of cinema with respect to constructing social unity and cohesion. A broader context of sustained economic and political crises, recession and the rise of fascism ultimately enhanced the authority of documentary ideas and practice within the intellectual film culture, inspiring Manvell and others associated with the film society movement. Petrie has traced Paul Rotha's trajectory from theorist of film aesthetics to documentarist, persuaded that a socially educative function for cinema was the only sensible response to these crises.⁵⁶ Like Grierson, Rotha believed that the struggle being waged for cinema was between a capitalist entertainment that fostered only destructively illusory and individualistic desires and a communications medium that worked in the public interest having secured an alternative basis for production in the institutions of the social democratic state. Like other commentators, Petrie argues that the conception of the social democratic state

⁵⁶ Duncan Petrie, "Paul Rotha and Film Theory," in *A Paul Rotha Reader*, ed. Duncan Petrie and Robert Kruger (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).

as fundamentally virtuous, a beacon of corporate responsibility in the dark disordered world of industrial capitalism, was symptomatic of a deeper failure to articulate a coherent political position.⁵⁷

Manvell's *Film*, it should be noted, devoted a substantial part of its first section on film art to reproducing at length, and often with little additional comment, extracts from the key writings of the British documentary movement. It sought to position documentary as a distinctively national achievement that represented Britain's coming of age in terms of film art. In identifying itself with the documentary movement, *Film* also tended to reproduce its leading theorist's sense of what was most valuable in other film art movements. An excessive interest in the hedonistic desires of individuals was most certainly regarded as the principle flaw of entertainment cinema, but another manifestation of egocentrism was an excessive preoccupation with formal aesthetic experiment or artistic self-expression. Both Grierson and Rotha would frequently rail against the individualism of bourgeois aestheticism, regarding it as a neglect of the artist's public duty of civic education.⁵⁸ As a later convert from aestheticism himself, Rotha's attacks were particularly pungent and zealous. Manvell quoted a section from Rotha's *Documentary Film* which launched an attack on cinema's pretence 'to be an art in itself, with no other ends than its aesthetic virtues, it has slobbered and expired in a sepulchre of symbolism or, worse still, mysticism.'⁵⁹ *Film* reproduces the established view of the Soviet cinema as inspiration and precursor to the British documentary not only because it was the source of montage as artistic technique, but because it was seen as a model of educational aims shaping the development of cinema. Manvell writes approvingly of 'the industry as a whole...planned for state education first and entertainment second.'⁶⁰

However the quality of recreation that Manvell regards as essential to all artistic experience is by no means the exclusive property of documentary non-fiction. Rather the ideal recreative film is one in which the individual characterisation typical

⁵⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁸ See Rotha, *Documentary Film*, 61.

⁵⁹ Rotha quoted in Manvell, *Film*, 93.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 153.

of the narrative feature is finely balanced with interpretation of social institutions or problems. Manvell admires the effectiveness with which feature films as stylistically varied as *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941), *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (Capra, 1936), *Zero de Conduite* (Vigo, 1933), *Á Nous La Liberté* (Clair, 1931) and *Mädchen in Uniform* (Sagan, 1931) have addressed serious social themes and contemporary problems in terms of immediate personal issues and therefore in terms with which large audiences are familiar. This emphasis on films which successfully balance an analytical approach to social themes with the personal destinies of vivid film characters is closer in spirit to an older formulation of Grierson's 'epic cinema,' which he is said to have abandoned when he became convinced that there was little possibility of Hollywood making films of this nature.⁶¹ It should be evident that Manvell's allegiance to realism wasn't naive or simplistic in the sense of being premised on mimetic reproduction. Neither was it prescriptive in terms of a particular depictive style such as the use of actual locations and real people instead of actors. Prefacing his discussion of realism, Manvell cited the philosopher T. E. Hulme who regarded the history of art as an eternal antagonism between formalist and realist impulses, with one or the other predominating in any particular historical epoch. If ours was a fundamentally realistic age, Manvell observed, the realist tendency nevertheless had many facets. Hollywood films, he acknowledged were realist inasmuch as they valued verisimilitude in their surface details and credible characters that acted in consistent and predictable ways. Manvell described the realist's urge to 'see life steadily, see it whole, to analyse society and the functions of mankind', a definition that implies an analytical and interpretative aim with respect to society.⁶² His concept of recreative forms of popular film art involved interweaving contemporary themes with compelling dramatic structures featuring personal dilemmas and problems that would be emotionally resonant to large audiences.

⁶¹ John Grierson, "English Cinema Production and the Naturalistic Tradition," in *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, edited Ian Aitken (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 72-75. See also Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990), 84-85.

⁶² Manvell, *Film*, 72.

Education and Responsibility

Comparing Arnheim's pre-war *Film* with Manvell's wartime study, it is striking that both authors describe a cultural dynamic in which formal innovation introduced by film artists is appropriated by mass-market film production. Arnheim writes, for instance, of the assimilation of 'wild *montage* and skew camera angles *à la Russe*' into quite ordinary films.⁶³ For him, the process of an artistically vivid technique becoming a standardised device within the film industry constitutes banalisation and artistic depreciation. The mass produced film is 'always found on a superseded, and therefore no longer valuable, level as regards media of expression.'⁶⁴ Moreover, any artistic value in a particular formal device is extinguished through the logic of repetition and standardisation that prevails over commercial film production. What was once an artistically creative motif becomes rapidly clichéd and lifeless. Manvell in contrast appears to see only a gradual improvement in the level of expression effected through the same process of assimilation. The above average film of yesterday is the average film of today, he writes. The good artist shows new possibilities of the medium, and the average public is pleasantly surprised, provided the artist doesn't exceed the grasp of mass audience comprehension.⁶⁵

Arnheim, it should be emphasised, does not accept that the masses possess the capacity for artistic appreciation and enjoyment, which he understands as essentially an ability to evaluate and respond to formal means of expression rather than a response to the plot, characters and milieu represented. Unusually this line of argument does not accompany a denigration of the masses as inherently ignorant, coarse or lazy. Even as he stresses the importance of this form of artistic experience, Arnheim acknowledges that it is premised on class privileges denied to the proletariat who will instead seek their compensatory pleasures in capitalist entertainment, ultimately to their disadvantage. Those who have the cultural well being of the masses in mind ought to consider first their material situation and address the condition of proletarianisation. You cannot have a meaningful mass art without first

⁶³ Arnheim, *Film*, 168.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶⁵ Manvell, *Film*, 33.

undermining the class divisions of society. Arnheim is committed to a conception of art that cannot be realised on anything other than a minority basis, yet he professes himself also committed to social change that would banish the conditions within which minority and majority capacities are formed.

Works of popular film appreciation like Manvell's extracted a functional vocabulary for discussing film technique from the preceding generation of theorists who were concerned to define film as artistic form. But film appreciation neutralised the modernist proclivities implicit in the emphasis on medium awareness in artistic creativity and appreciation. Aesthetic experience as a mode of attentiveness to formal construction formed part of the film appreciation account but, at least in Manvell's text, this idea was subordinated to an inclusive notion of art as recreation, a form of enjoyment that was spiritually uplifting and in which personal and public interests were held in balance in the subject matter. And even as it brought the claims of film art associated with the theorists of the thirties to a wider readership, it introduced a substantially different set of concerns. Arnheim had been at pains to stress that an exclusive interest in the story and its characters did not constitute aesthetic appreciation. Manvell, it might be argued, constructed a form of film appreciation that accepted that in popular cinema, audiences 'have a date with the story, not the camera.'⁶⁶

Manvell's liberal reformist vision of the progressive movement towards film art for the people relies on the two key agencies of change dismissed by Arnheim, a socially responsible film industry and the work of critics, educationists and film societies in raising the public's taste. Manvell argued that the cinema's destiny was in the hands of the producers and optimistically observed that they were gradually showing more social responsibility. The future development of film was also being shaped by the growing ranks of critics, educators and film appreciators, who, Manvell cautions, must use the privileges of their education to support the development of a recreative cinema that would address the people rather than concern themselves with esoteric and obscure forms of cinema. With this warning to film societies against

⁶⁶ Ibid., 31.

pursuing aesthetic concerns that would isolate them from the people, Manvell concluded his book.

For art, if it is to found a permanent tradition, must always be integrated with the needs and well-being of the people as a whole. A minority art is a closed art. The evil in the film societies is the precious self-perfection of the consciously superior member. It is too easy an escape from the responsibilities of education to lust after remote expression and recondite technique. The responsibility of being educated is the responsibility of discovering enlightened methods of expression which will make the problems of human institutions and the complexities of human nature more clear to those who take their part in them without cultural advantage. The problem of the educated minority is the problem of the technique of leadership.⁶⁷

The past of the film society movement stands condemned then as precious and superior, socially arrogant. At a time when the film society model was going through a social expansion, Manvell's book envisaged the responsible film society as an instrument of the generally educated, rather than an intellectual or artistic vanguard, as they sought to exercise cultural leadership. Responsibility involved promoting a cinema that could cut a middle path between the egocentrism of artistic experimentation and the seductive individualism of mass cinema's narratives.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 164.

PELICAN BOOKS

ROGER MANVELL

FILM



Figure 7: 'I feel that it will be wrong to have to have too "remote" or "arty and crafty" type of still or film represented there.' Letter from Roger Manvell to H.W. Obendorfer, Penguin Books. Cover of the 1944 edition with a still from Battleship Potemkin.

Chapter Three

The British Film Institute, the Film Archive and Film Society Programming

As the film society movement grew in size and expanded geographically, it also became more variegated. It wasn't unusual for a new 16mm film society to form in a small hall with fewer than fifty members. Established urban societies in Tyneside, Merseyside and Edinburgh, meanwhile, continued to record postwar memberships of over a thousand, sometimes twice that. Different sized memberships implied significant differences in the financial resources available for hiring films and putting together programmes, not to mention wide variation in concentrations of symbolic resources, the pool of available film knowledge and experience that a society could draw on among its active members. As long as they were affiliated with the Federation of Film Societies both the 16mm minnow and the 35mm behemoth were film societies and therefore were held to be in pursuit of common objectives. According to the Federation's guidance on forming a society, a film society should 'enable its members to study the history and art of the film by exhibiting films of cultural, artistic and technical merit, and especially those which, owing to language difficulties or small box-office appeal, are not normally shown in ordinary cinemas.'¹ Elaborating on this the Federation's pamphlet noted that film societies usually concentrate on the following types of programmes: current foreign films, revivals of outstanding films of the past, films illustrating the history of cinema and the development of film art and compilations from films that experimented in the way they present ideas and action.

This chapter explores these aspects of film society programming in relation to the institutions and practices that were in a position to influence the supply of films to the film society exhibitor. In particular it examines the pedagogical influence of the small loan collection the National Film Library put into circulation to encourage film appreciation among film societies, colleges and other educational users. Film society programming is seen as the product of competing modes of cultural authority

¹ *Forming and Running a Film Society*: Federation of Film Societies & British Film Institute, 1950 (2nd Edition): 3.

exercised by differently positioned agencies, publicly funded archives, commercial distributors, critics writing in the national press and local volunteer exhibitors with unevenly distributed material and symbolic resources on which to draw.

In the 1930s a small but growing cluster of cinemas in London's West End were pursuing a policy of importing foreign language films and subtitling them for their English speaking audience. Alongside the London Film Society, these specialist cinemas exercised a significant influence on the programmes of provincial film societies. Looking back at the first hundred shows of Birmingham Film Society, R. C. Knight, the society's Vice Chairman observed of this phase in the society's history, 'We had gathered a membership principally eager to see the brilliant series of works imported, new or almost new, from the Continent by the specialised London cinemas, but which as yet no Midland exhibitor had dared to offer to his public.'² Among the first of these specialist London cinemas was the Academy on Oxford Street which opened in 1931, managed and programmed by Elsie Cohen, a member of the London Film Society with considerable experience of European film production gained as a journalist for the *Kine Weekly*. Cohen had previously experimented with a repertory programme of esteemed silent films for six months at the Windmill Theatre in Soho and this pattern was initially followed at the Academy.³ Before long however the Academy began to import new films from continental Europe gaining a reputation for quality programming, not only among its London audience, but also beyond that among film society activists who could read about films opening at the Academy in the national press. The commercial judgement of the Academy and other specialist

² R. C. Knight, *Flashback: A Hundred Shows of the Birmingham Film Society* (Birmingham: Journal Printing Office), 10-11. Knight's account of the society's 'golden age' in the thirties contains one member's vivid recollection of the sight of Robert Melville, one of the society's founders and later an art critic for the *New Statesman*, introducing a Soviet film with an address on the aesthetics of cutting that was 'incomprehensible to most of the audience yet somehow held them by its obvious sincerity and earnestness.' In the recollection of this member this talk was a revelation, 'I had not known before that Birmingham contained such people.'

³ "Miss Elsie Cohen: Obituaries," *The Times*, 5th February, 1972. E. Coxhead, "Towards a Co-operative Cinema: The Work of the Academy, Oxford Street," in *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, edited James Donald, A. Friedberg & L. Marcus (London: Cassel, 1998 [originally published June, 1933])

cinemas came to be trusted by film societies and guided their selections of feature films.

Tyneside Film Society, for example, in their second season, commencing in the autumn of 1934, programmed seven feature films; three of these had premiered at the Academy over the course of the previous year, *La Maternelle* (Benoit-Levy and Epstein, 1933), *Reka* (Rovensky, 1933) and *Ces Messieurs de la Sante* (Colombier, 1933). The remaining films had been premiered at one or other of the West End cinemas that had followed the path of specialised foreign language programming: *Morgenrot* (Sewell, 1933) was shown in April 1934 at the newly opened Curzon Cinema, *Poil de Carotte* (Duvivier, 1932) was chosen as the film to launch the Rialto's new continental policy in October 1933, *Thunder Over Mexico* (1933), the controversial Upton Sinclair edit of Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico* was shown at the Marble Arch Pavilion. The following year the society showed its members features that had premiered in London at the Forum (*Hej-Rup*, 1934), the Academy (*Der Schimmelreiter*, 1933, *Jazz Comedy*, 1934) and the Curzon (*Unfinished Symphony*, 1934), alongside films such as *Zero de Conduite* (1933), *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934) and *Song of Ceylon* (1934) shown at the London Film Society the previous season.⁴

Reading about these films was one thing, actually booking them another. A 1933 article on the Academy in *Close Up*, suggested, with lofty condescension, that film societies were beholden to Elsie Cohen who was acting as 'a quite unpaid agent and source of supply to these rather bewildered amateurs; she passes on to them her films, supplies them with endless information and advice regarding the securing of films, and listens with amazing patience to all their long and often unreasonable demands.'⁵ The roles of booking agent, distributor and advisor to the provincial film societies was in practice undertaken by the Secretary of the London Film Society. In the absence of a properly functioning Federation of Film Societies, these two bodies appear to have become de facto booking agents and programme advisors.

⁴ For more detailed histories of these cinemas see Allen Eyles and Keith Skone, *London's West End Cinemas*, (Sutton: Premier Bioscope, 1984).

⁵ E. Coxhead, "Towards a Co-operative Cinema: The Work of the Academy, Oxford Street," 298.

Nevertheless despite this assistance film society organisers struggled without a central body wholly dedicated to dealing with a myriad of film renting companies on their behalf. Charles Oakley of the Glasgow Film Society recalled a time in 1931 when efforts to secure a film which had recently had a commercial run at the Rialto in London involved spending half an hour in the Piccadilly Circus office of the German company UFA on the telephone to Berlin. Not long after this the Scottish film societies, mindful of their distance from the London cinemas, employed an agent, James Fairfax-Jones, a founder member of the Southampton Film Society and later manager of the Everyman cinema in Hampstead, to preview and arrange bookings for the Scottish Federation of Film Societies. Negotiating with film renters individually rather than through a dedicated body left film societies vulnerable. Film hire rates fluctuated, companies went bankrupt; Glasgow were jinxed when two films they had booked from Reunion Films became unavailable after a court order winding the organisation up in 1937. It was this situation that the British Film Institute sought to address when it established the Central Booking Agency at the same time as supporting the formation of a Federation of Film Societies for England and Wales in 1945.

The CBA was conceived as a mediating agency between the commercial distributors and the film societies. For a small fee levied on each booking and calculated according to the size of the society, the Agency could relieve a film society booking secretary of the burden of tracking down countless individual distributors and independently arranging terms of hire. The CBA negotiated fixed terms of hire on behalf of the film societies and guaranteed to the film trade that the films were hired by a bona fide society compliant with the conditions set down by the Kinematograph Renters Society, such as the ban on advertising and strict limitations on guest tickets. The CBA helped to stimulate film supply by representing the film society exhibitors as a potential market for commercially minded distributors and an exhibition sector operating in such a way that it need not be regarded as a threat to the trade's commercial interests.

In the postwar years the leading specialist West End cinemas strengthened their operations by establishing their own distribution companies, thus exerting

greater control over their own circuit of film supply: Film Traders was launched by the Academy and GCT by the Curzon's owners General Cinema Theatres. Early on these art cinemas had developed exhibition practices and methods of publicity that were quite at odds with the mainstream exhibitor. Writing for *Close Up*, E. Coxhead had noted the Academy's strategy of regular circulars with detailed information on each new film sent out to their large mailing list. In the forties and fifties the Academy, now run by Austrian emigré George Hoellering, consolidated its reputation for film judgement of the highest standards and liberal sensibilities. A striking feature of the cinema's publicity and of the carefully put together programmes it distributed at each screening, was the prominent place given to film reviews penned by well known, professional critics writing in the quality press.⁶ The bulletins circulated by the Federation of Film Societies to their members informing them of the availability of new films further elevated these same sources of film critical opinion by excerpting reviews by the same pantheon of highly esteemed critics, Dilys Powell (Sunday Times), C. A. Lejeune (The Observer), William Whitebait (New Statesman) and Richard Winnington (News Chronicle). The combined process of selection by the Academy (or one of the West End's other art cinemas) and evaluation by prominent arbiters of film judgement exerted a strong pull on the selection and programming of film societies which leant heavily on the authoritative sanction of the critically backed Film Traders' titles. Academy/Film Traders feature films, booked through the CBA, regularly appeared on the programmes of 35mm film societies from the mid-forties onwards. *Partie de Campagne* (Renoir, 1936), *Nous les Gosses* (Daquin, 1941), *Strange Incident* (Wellman, 1943), *Day of Wrath* (Dreyer, 1943), *Fric Frac* (Lehmann, 1939), *Frenzy* (Sjöberg, 1944), *Les Visiteurs du Soir* (Carné, 1942) and *La Grande Illusion* (Renoir, 1937) were all shown widely among 35mm film societies a year or two after a commercial run at the Academy in the 1940s. Other films circulating widely among the 35mm film societies were supplied by a range of distributors, specialists like GCT (*Four Steps in the Clouds*, 1948) but also occasionally mainstream renters like British Lion who acquired foreign language

⁶ See programmes included in the Academy Cinema Collection, BFI Special Collections.

titles (for example *La Belle et la Bete*, 1946) in exchange deals with European producers. This pattern of regular supply of relatively new West End premiered foreign language features was not replicated within the much smaller 16mm film societies in the forties. Within the mainstream distribution circuit the non-theatrical 16mm sector was always the last phase of distribution, one expected a temporal lag between a West End showing and availability in 16mm. But the evidence suggests that it took some time for the leading distributors of foreign language feature films to see the 16mm film societies as a commercially viable market, significant enough to warrant the additional costs of making reduction prints and subtitling. By 1949 a trickle of Film Traders titles were beginning to appear in the Federation's bulletins of newly available 16mm films, some of the same features (*Fric Frac*, *Nous Les Gosses*, *Poil de Carotte*) that had done the rounds of 35mm societies in the preceding years.⁷ In 1950, the Federation, responding to complaints from 16mm societies, approached a number of distributors directly, passing on lists of titles suggested for reduction by 16mm societies. In the meantime, 16mm film societies were more or less compelled to focus their energies on alternative aspects of film society activity: programmes showing the history of cinema and the development of film art. Pursuing this objective, many 16mm film society programmers looked to the cultural authority of the National Film Library and drew on its catalogue of films for loan.

National Film Library

A persistent criticism of the BFI's early years was that it had achieved little to actually substantiate its claims to authority. The establishment of a national film archive in 1935 was regarded as an opportunity for the Institute to 'live up to the hopes that attended its birth,' two years earlier.⁸ The Film Library's objectives were broad and ambitious, although its means meagre. Set up to preserve films of

⁷ Recently released British and American features whilst available on 16mm supplied by major renting organisations like MGM or GB to the sizeable non-theatrical market in the armed services, hospitals, prisons, commercial mobile cinema operators, but these were beyond the means of most small film societies.

⁸ *Birmingham Post*, 11th July 1935, BFI Archive Box 83, Cuttings 1935-40. BFI Special Collections.

historical, scientific, artistic and educational value, it also aimed to facilitate the circulation of educational films to schools and other approved groups. Even commentators less than impressed with the Institute's record in other areas, regarded the library plan as an opportunity to 'justify its existence,' although questions were raised concerning the practicability of the plans to be both a reference and circulating library.⁹ Early on, Ernest Lindgren, who was appointed the first curator of the National Film Library, formulated the principle that no print received for preservation should be subjected to the risk of wear and tear involved in projection; for films intended for preservation to be loaned, they would have to be reprinted.¹⁰ The library's loan section was however conceived from the outset with educational and instructional films in mind; films primarily intended for classroom use with titles like *Rice Cultivation*, a film edited by the BFI educational committee and *Winter Sport in Austria*, donated by the Austrian State Travel Bureau, were early acquisitions.

In 1941, the National Film Library announced a major re-organisation of the loan section.¹¹ From now on it would deal solely with reprints from the preservation collection, selected films chosen to illustrate the history of cinema and highlighting the development of film technique. The assumption being that a discriminating attitude and response to film depended on a full acquaintance with the underlying principles of technique and the best works of the past, which provide the standard for informed criticism. The NFL catalogue was re-launched and advertised as a resource for film appreciation. The re-organisation of the NFL clearly responded to a growing demand for material that could be used to teach film appreciation, in a variety of both formal and informal educational settings. Prioritisation of the loan section around reprints of selected films was therefore accompanied by the creation of study extracts to illustrate particular film techniques. Composite films were commissioned and added to the collection; a survey of documentary called *Film and Reality* (1942) by Cavalcanti, and a history of animation called *Drawings That Walk and Talk* (1938) by Marie Seton, were early examples. Later, a series of shorts entitled *The Critic and the*

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ E. H. Lindgren, "A National Film Library for Great Britain," *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 14 (1935): 67.

¹¹ "New NFL Policy," *Sight and Sound* 10, no. 37 (1941).

Film (1949), each featuring a talk by prominent authorities such as Dilys Powell of *The Sunday Times* and Jympson Harmon of *Kine Weekly*, were also commissioned.

The catalogue itself was re-organised chronologically into four sections, exploring the development of film technique in relation to changes deemed crucial to the history of the film industry and film culture generally. The first section, "The Primitives" included a small number of composite films, illustrating the beginnings of cinema. The second, headed the "One Reel Period", emphasised innovation in cinematic storytelling prefiguring later developments in editing. The third was headed "Silent Films" and contained the titles most closely identified with the film appreciation canon. Here the text described the modern feature film as reaching full maturity with the *Birth of a Nation* (Griffiths, 1915) and *Quo Vadis?* (Guazzoni, 1912). The flourishing of new artistic consciousness embodied in the national film traditions of Sweden, France, Germany and Soviet Russia was highlighted, as was their decline, due to competition from the United States of America. The montage tradition in silent Soviet cinema was also singled out. The final section included "Sound Films Since 1928". In contextualising this period, emphasis was given to the growth of minority film culture, and the development of a new spirit of film criticism, both of which were considered to have prepared the way for the documentary film in Britain and America.

The heart of the loan collection was the twenty or so films that made up the silent film section, and a dozen more sound films. Prominent among these were works that had made a major impact on the intellectual film culture of the 1920s and 1930s. In many cases, these had received a British premiere at The Film Society, before becoming staples of provincial film society programmes. The list was dominated by films from Germany, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Wiene, 1919), *Warning Shadows* (Robison, 1923), *Waxworks* (Birinsky and Leni, 1924), *The Last Laugh* (Murnau, 1924), *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927) and *Berlin* (Ruttman, 1927). From Soviet Russia came *Battleship Potemkin*, *Mother*, *The End of St. Petersburg*, *The General Line*, *The Ghost that Never Returns* (Room, 1929), *New Babylon* (Kozintsev and Trauberg, 1929) and *Turksib* (Turin, 1929). Identifying these films as classics, and implying that they represented landmarks of film experiment, the narrative of

film history developed by the loan catalogue was recognisably indebted to the lineage developed in Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now*.¹² Traditions centring on theatrical performance were rejected, and the true artistic potential of the cinema was identified with more visually expressive aspects of the medium, and crucially with the editing techniques practiced by the Soviet filmmakers. The conception of film appreciation that the loan section supported was thus concerned with the structured, chronological study of a limited selection of films considered pivotal to aesthetic film history, a definition supplemented via standardised programme notes. Over time, however, the holdings of the loan collection slowly diversified. During the war, the NFL took over responsibility for the collection of The Film Society, and a small number of experimental films were reprinted and added to the loan section. In general though, additions to the loan catalogue were more of a trickle than a flood. Both the educational priorities and financial constraints of the NFL tended to reinforce an effective and austere process of canon-formation centred on the European silent cinema.¹³

Classics at the Film Societies

Even a casual perusal of the various magazines that publicised film society programmes nationally, *Documentary News Letter*, *16 Mil. Film User*, *Sight and Sound*, indicates how widely the NFL's film appreciation canon circulated among the newly formed 16mm film societies after the war. On this evidence it seems doubtful that there was a single film society in the country that didn't show Rene Clair's *The Italian Straw Hat* (1927) or *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* or *Battleship Potemkin* at least once between 1945 and 1950. When the National Film Theatre (NFT) began regular screenings in the Telekinema after the Festival of Britain, these same films

¹² Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now* (London: Cape, 1930).

¹³ A comparison of the first *Sight and Sound* Critics' Top Ten Poll in 1952 with the second in 1962 suggests that the dominant role of archives in the construction of a film canon, centred on the preservation of silent and early sound films, was gradually being supplanted by the international film festival and film critics. Of course the critics' poll itself was contributing to the process of canon formation. For a discussion of the various influences on canon formation see Peter Wollen, "The Canon," in *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film* (London: Verso, 2002)

were programmed as part of a popular history of cinema series screened on a yearly rotation throughout the 1950s. By the time the National Film Library films were shown in the context of this regular annual series at the NFT, we can assume that many of the titles would have been seen by a sizeable proportion of the current 40,000-50,000 members of the film societies. Such was the ubiquity of these titles that it attracted satirical comment in a poem originally published in *Punch* and reprinted in *Film*, the magazine of the Federation of Film Societies.¹⁴

It's the sixth time I've seen *Caligari*;
I've boarded *Potemkin* before;
Birth of a Nation's a long operation,
But must I be mid-wife once more?
Intolerance makes me intolerant,
Tuksib is a tedious train –
I grant you that *Greed* is impressive, but need
I sit through the whole thing again?
I've seen quite enough of the savage
(*Tabu* and *Moana* and such),
And though Maxim Gorki's a theme for a talkie,
A trilogy is frankly too much.
To Pabst I address panegyrics
And Eisenstein's praises I sang –
But now I have *no* time for Erich von Stroheim,
And little for Lubitsch and Lang.

Anthony Brode's poem pokes knowing and affectionate fun at the 'ranks of the devout' gathered at the film society on Sunday afternoon. Unable to share the limitless enthusiasm for reverential, repeated viewings of the canon of silent classics which characterises fellow club members, the poet confesses, 'Even the tenth time they find it exciting – nobody's bored, the exception is me.' The recurrence of a relatively small number of silent films among the programmes of the postwar film societies certainly evokes Brode's satirical sketch of film society programming austerity and earnest devotion.

From the point at which it was re-organised, the BFI reported year on year increases in demand for the films of the NFL loan section. The noticeable turn to

¹⁴ Anthony Brode, "Sunday Observance," *Film*, March-April 1956.

historical programmes in the film society movement was, however, influenced by several factors, including the limited availability of suitable contemporary features. Inevitably the war had an impact on the supply of contemporary films from the continent. The outbreak of hostilities disrupted film society activity considerably, with a number of prominent societies suspending activities entirely. Those that continued operating faced a difficult time; dwindling stocks of suitable films tested booking and programming skills to the limit. Film shortages had in fact been a problem within the film society movement for several years, as traditional sources of films such as Germany, Russia, and to a lesser extent Italy, dried up, indexing the wider political crisis of the 1930s. However with the fall of France, the importation of new films from the continent ceased altogether. Anticipating the effect of this on struggling film societies, Scottish activist Forsyth Hardy wrote a characteristically upbeat piece for *Sight and Sound*, that aimed to bolster morale whilst dispensing creative booking and programming advice. Addressing the film supply problem, Hardy drew attention to the growing loan section of the NFL as an important source of material. With resource and initiative, Hardy argued, 'it should not prove difficult to maintain the tradition of the movement.'¹⁵

Lack of feature film availability continued to be an issue for several years after the war for the rapidly growing number of film societies operating with 16mm projectors. Specialist distributors who made such a big impact on film supply to the film societies in the 1950s such as Contemporary had not yet entered the market. By contrast, many of the classics of the National Film Library were only available, or could only be properly projected, on 16mm. Consequently a divergence is noticeable in the programmes of film societies in the immediate post-war period, with current features largely restricted to the 35mm societies, and 16mm societies giving much of their available feature programming to the classics from the library collection.

The presence of the Library's classics on film society programmes, and the rising numbers of people joining film societies to watch them should also be seen in the context of broader social and cultural changes outlined in chapter one. The period

¹⁵ Forsyth Hardy, "An Open Letter to Film Societies," *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1941, 29.

after the war was notable for a surge of interest in adult education and a willingness to popularise educational provision to reach new learners in new ways. In this cultural climate, film societies inevitably emphasised their educational responsibilities. In 1946 thanks to lobbying from the BFI and the newly created Federation of Film Societies, film societies were ruled exempt from payment of entertainment tax, on the grounds that their activities were in part educational. For several years, invoking the entertainment tax remission became a favourite way for activists to prick the movement's conscience, and remind their colleagues of their educational vocation. Forsyth Hardy, to take one example from many, wrote in the magazine of the Scottish Federation of Film Societies that when film societies did little more than repeat the programmes of the specialised cinemas of the West End 'their claim to remission of entertainment tax was decidedly meagre.'¹⁶ Within a film society, a reference to the tax exemption, like the reminder about the society's constitution, would often accompany insistence that the film society's purpose was to educate rather than entertain. Films deemed 'classics' by no less an authority than the NFL were obviously well suited to a film society's efforts to introduce seriousness of purpose and educational value into its programming. In fact, because they were 'classics' and had been valued as landmarks in film history, they could be regarded as serious without being highbrow, educational without being elitist.

To some extent, the idea that the film society was responsible for exhibiting the film appreciation canon could be deployed to deflect the criticisms of members about the programme. An example of this can be seen in the case of the South London Film Society (SLFS), a 16mm group that met in Camberwell. In 1948, not long after the society's formation, an editorial on policy in the society's magazine stated their commitment to the film appreciation case succinctly:

The ideal aim of the present day societies can be summed up in three words 'education in appreciation'...without some understanding of the artistic and technical background of any production an audience is not able to derive full

¹⁶ Hardy, quoted in "Editorial," *Bulletin: Federation of Film Societies* (1949): 3.

benefit from seeing it. Members of a film society need guidance and education. We use the latter word, ugly and pretentious as it may seem, without qualm.¹⁷

In subsequent writings, society activists explained that in addition to organising lectures and discussions, it was vital for educational reasons that the programming was approached in a structured and systematic fashion. Accordingly, they proposed a season composed of three programming strands, the German classics, the Russian classics and documentary. By the end of the season, the society's activists faced a minor revolt from the membership, which erupted on the letters pages of the magazine. Criticism of the programme took the form of a plea for films that were less gloomy. A Mrs Hodges wrote: 'We have had so much gloom and misery in the last ten years, please let us be cheered up when we go to the cinema.'¹⁸ A fellow member, Stanley Dinham concurred:

I would like to see a film of a light nature occasionally as a curtain raiser... Now is the time to enrol members and extend a policy of 'laugh while you learn'. Later when the position of the society is secure, the laughter can be dropped if it is thought incompatible with the constitution.¹⁹

The response to these calls for brighter programmes artfully deflected the matter onto the textual properties of the classics of the NFL themselves. Such films were gloomy because this was the nature of the great film art of the 1920s and 1930s. Regrettably, they noted, the lighter French film classics of the period were as yet unavailable, adding archly, 'Until the National Film Library deems it fit to extend its lists, film societies must study film as an art form and feel the more miserable for it.'²⁰ Anthony Brode was evidently not alone in his limited tolerance of the 'great film art' of the past.

Resistance to packing the film society programme with the silent classics and 'the great film art of the 1920s and 30s' could also take a more sophisticated form than the simple request for more cheerful programmes. One strand of opinion within

¹⁷ *SLFS Magazine* (1948): 1 no. 1, 3.

¹⁸ *SLFS Magazine*, (1948) 1, no. 5, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁰ *SLFS Magazine*, (1948) 1, no. 5, 4.

the film societies argued that the movement was in danger of overvaluing the art of the past, and doing so without regard to the nature of the film medium, in which technological innovation was an essential part of artistic development. According to such a view, the work of the past had a lesser claim for the attention of the student of film appreciation than was the case for the appreciation of an art form like literature or painting. An article in the Scottish film magazine *Film Forum* stated baldly that the reverential programming of old films was 'a stupid craze which is being fostered not only by the eccentric poseurs among film society members but, more dangerously, by leaders of the film appreciation movement.' Because films rapidly appeared dated due to technological change, the writer concluded, 'It seems the height of folly...to try to develop, especially in young people, an "appreciation" of cinema by showing relics of the silent screen.... Let's stand for today and tomorrow, not for yesterday.'²¹ Unlike literature, where it was widely believed that the standards of the past needed to be defended against the decline of the present, the films of the past had to negotiate audience expectations formed in relation to later periods of production and exhibition technology. This strain of technophile aversion to cinema's past should however be set against the long afterlife of silent films on 9.5mm, a gauge used predominantly by home enthusiasts but also occasionally forming a part of film society programming. 9.5mm versions of silent films could be borrowed from chemists and photographic dealers and many titles were available in this format that were unavailable in any other. Occasionally an enthusiast of 9.5mm, with their own projector, would attempt to promote the gauge for film society use, holding a special 9.5mm evening at their film society and writing articles arguing that here was an inexpensive way for a society to broaden its viewing horizons. Also writing in *Film Forum*, David Gunston enthused over a 'considerable body of films of that endlessly fascinating decade [1920-30], chiefly French and German, which can be seen and which no far-ranging society can afford to reject.'²²

Whether it was because of a desire to align themselves with the authoritative curation of the National Film Library or inexperience and lack of available

²¹ "Looking Backward Won't Get Us Forward," *Film Forum* 12, no. 1 (1957).

²² David Gunston, "The Other Gauge," *Ibid.*

information in the matter of booking films, there were many small 16mm film societies that reproduced the film appreciation canon established by the archive's circulation policy. However, there were also film societies run by knowledgeable enthusiasts where the viewing horizons were very much wider. One such society was the 300 Film Club which exhibited at the Imperial Institute in London and was run by William Everson, then in his early twenties and working as a theatre manager for the Monseigneur News Theatres. In contrast with a group such as the North London Film Society which in the late 40s maintained a very strict rotation of *Caligari*, *Potemkin* and the like for several successive years, the 300 Film Club, named after the number of seats in the Institute's cinema, featured programming of great variety and initiative, foreshadowing Everson's future career as a film historian and author of titles on cinema history such as *American Silent Film* and *The Art of W.C Fields*. In its 1949 to 1950 season Everson's 300 Film Club showed Cocteau's 1930 surrealist film *Le Sang d'un Poète* in a programme with Chaplin's 1918 *Shoulder Arms*. Two short documentaries completed the evening's schedule, *Drug Addict*, a National Film Board of Canada production banned in the States and Luciano Emmer's short art film *La Leggenda di Sant'Orsola* (1948). Earlier in the season Everson had programmed *Doctor Jack* (1924), a Harold Lloyd feature introduced in programme notes as the first screening in London for fifteen years, alongside three documentaries, including *A Yank Comes Back* from the Crown Film Unit and an ethnographic film in the spirit of Epstein's Brittany films called *Les Goemons* (1947) made by the producer of Rouquier's *Farrebique*, about islanders off Cape Finistere. All the programme notes were written by Everson himself.

Knowledgeable activists like Everson were able to draw on an eclectic and wide range of film libraries, including some set up by enthusiastic collectors of old feature films such as Watson and specialists in Hollywood revivals like Ron Harris. If they had access to publications like *16mil Film User*, they were also able to read reviews of newly available 16mm titles which carried the name and address of the film renter or library where they could be obtained and the price of hire. The spread of 16mm fostered a wave of interest in booking films directly from renters rather than paying for the services of the BFI's booking agency, among a dedicated minority,

extending the film society ethos of activism and self-determination to the actual booking of the programme. A hike in charges for the Central Booking Agency in 1949, part of an attempt by the BFI to make the agency pay for itself, converted more 16mm users to booking their programme directly from specialist distributors and libraries, and inflamed discontent among film society activists. An influential group of activists now began to press for reform and development of the Federation, stressing the need for an organisation less bound up with the BFI's booking agency and more interested in facilitating the substantial growth of small scale voluntary societies, by circulating information that could help them navigate a non-theatrical 16mm film distribution sector that was also changing fast. In a heated exchange about BFI's Central Booking Agency conducted in the correspondence pages of *Film User*, Wilfred Bedford, a colleague of William Everson's in the London Regional Group of the Federation took great satisfaction in pointing out that a film recently added to the National Film Library catalogue, *Grass* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1925), could be obtained more cheaply from a range of small specialist film libraries, Eachus Bros, Wallace Heaton, Kirkham Film Service and R. W. Proffitt.²³

Programming for a Diverse Medium

Although film society programmes were shaped by two culturally powerful institutions, specialist commercial West End exhibitors and the national film archive it would be unwise to discount the distinctive modes of cultural authority that could be exercised by the non-professional exhibitor and was implicit in their programming practices. In a recent study of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Film Library, Haidee Wasson has traced the efforts of the organisation to create an audience for the films it collected.²⁴ Wasson describes a US film society movement located predominantly within institutions of higher education, coming into existence in conjunction with the MoMA Film Library, and more or less exclusively fed by its programmes. She goes as far as to suggest that the MoMA film programmes and

²³ *Film User*, (June, 1950), 345.

²⁴ Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

accompanying film notes created the conditions in which such a movement was even possible in the United States. For Wasson, the MoMA film programmes promulgated a shift from ideas and practices of film study that were locally specific and eclectic to:

A nationally organised, highly co-ordinated system that could be run with regularity and reliability. Film Library programs offered the advantage of expert curation, steady film supply, and authoritative sanction: they were based on standard sets of films and also on regulated methods for analysis around which a curriculum could be established and maintained.²⁵

In the British context, despite the extraordinary visibility of the NFL titles within the film society movement testifying to their appeal, it would be difficult to argue that the Institute's impact was so generative or comprehensive, not least because it was dealing with a mature movement with distinctive traditions of its own.

Like MoMA, the NFL strongly recommended that its users book complete programmes, and schedule their film shows to exemplify sequences which respected the historical categories of the catalogue. Forewords in successive editions of the loan catalogue through the 1940s, introduced the films as a collection 'illustrating the development and technique of the film as a medium of entertainment and expression,' before advising:

If these films are shown singly or as items in a miscellaneous programme their value will in most cases not be fully realised and their purpose may even be misunderstood. It is therefore strongly recommended that they be shown in programmes or in sequences arranged to illustrate developments in film technique. To facilitate this, brief historical notes have been included in the catalogue and the films themselves are supplied with short introductory titles.²⁶

Advice on how to programme and suggestions on supplementary reading could also be provided by the curator on request. The library catalogue's concise film historical notes were certainly reproduced in film society programmes, along with excerpts from sources such as Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* and Lewis Jacobs' *The Rise of*

²⁵ Ibid., 164.

²⁶ *National Film Library Catalogue* (1948) 1. BFI Archive Box 2, BFI Special Collections.

the American Film.²⁷ But was the recommendation to programme in chronological sequences taken up in the film societies? Certainly many of the new film appreciation courses offered jointly by film societies with adult educators such as the WEA, would have worked with the Film Library's categories and developmental sequence. There were also instances where a film society, often newly formed, reported showing a complete sequence of Film Library films, from the beginnings of cinema to the sound films in the collection. But in terms of the broader tendencies of film society exhibition practice, it is unlikely that the curator's recommendation to show the library's titles in film historical sequences would have been widely followed. Encouragement to programme so as to illustrate the chronological development of film technique conflicted with at least two interrelated, yet quite distinct, priorities for the film society exhibitor, which informed the arrangement of individual programmes and the composition of entire seasons, namely variety and balance.

One tendency in film society programming was to consciously emphasise the diversity of potential uses of the medium, and the range of possible film experiences. The pioneer of this approach was the original (London) Film Society, where presenting a variety of film technique, demonstrating the breadth of possibilities for the medium, was itself framed as a pedagogical aim.²⁸ We know from a recent study and interview that a similar programming practice was also pursued at New York's 'Cinema 16.'²⁹ Organiser Amos Vogel self-consciously aimed for juxtapositions of film style and practice both within an evening's programme and across a season as a whole. This created presentations where in Scott MacDonald's view:

One form of film collided with another in such a way as to create maximum thought - and perhaps action - on the part of the audience, not simply about individual films but about film itself and about the social and political implications of its conventional (or unconventional) uses.³⁰

²⁷ Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939).

²⁸ Jamie Sexton, *Alternative Film Culture in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008).

²⁹ Scott MacDonald, *Cinema 16: Documents toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

MacDonald's characterisation of the programming practice of New York's Cinema 16 highlights what is important about this approach; juxtaposing highly idiosyncratic uses of film, it aims at stimulating an open-ended interrogation of the nature of cinema by the viewer. Such an approach differs markedly from the more didactic, developmental and chronological style of programming recommended by the NFL, in which a film history canon is presented to an audience that are discouraged from questioning the received judgements. Confirming that a strategy of provocation was an established tradition within the film society movement, Basil Wright observed that 'the most important job of a film society is to make people feel strongly about the motion picture. Therefore the more unusual and controversial its programmes are, the better.'³¹ This value placed on programming the controversial and the unusual, rather than the received canon, relates to an emphasis placed on the importance of the critical act of forming an opinion about works for which one does not possess a ready made response. It is conceivable that this stress on the individual viewer's critical choice was informed by the approach to literary criticism associated with I. A. Richards. Several of the figures involved with the Film Society, including Montagu and Wright, studied at Cambridge at a time when his pioneering experiments in teaching close analysis of literary texts without revealing the authors or the critical reputation of the work in question were receiving considerable attention far beyond the study of English literature. In *Practical Criticism*, Richards argued that whilst 'acquiescent immersion' in good poetry had some value, 'the greater values can only be gained by making poetry the occasion for the momentous decisions of the will.'³² Behind Richards' teaching experiments was a belief that the reader's critical competence was better developed through direct engagement with literary texts rather than the studious assimilation of a critical consensus. Similarly, the programming practice that Amos Vogel developed at Cinema 16, influenced as it was by the London Film Society, emphasised the viewer's act of judgement, unaided by clearly signposted aesthetic categories.

³¹ Basil Wright, "Scottish Federation 21st Anniversary," *Film Forum* 12, no. 4 (1958): 4.

³² I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1929), 305.

Enshrined in the typical film society constitution was the pedagogical ideal of encouraging the broadest appreciation of film 'as an art, as information and education.' This fostered a sense of responsibility towards all forms of motion pictures within the movement. Over time this breadth of interest would diminish, partly due to the routine appearance on television of certain short formats that were previously only available through cinema: documentary, instructional films and animation in particular. From our present perspective we can agree with MacDonald that the most compelling film society programming of the 40s and 50s brought films together in a way that would become increasingly rare with the differentiation of moving image exhibition into art cinema, domestic television and art gallery, each with their distinct audience.³³

This self-defined responsibility to promote film in its variety can be seen at work in the national viewing sessions, an annual weekend of film previewing run by the Federation and the Central Booking Agency of the BFI for film representatives. Started in 1947, the early years of the viewing sessions were notable for the limited choice of films available to 16mm societies. But as new specialist distributors formed to supply the film societies in the early fifties, the viewing sessions expanded. The inclusion of a broad range of uses of the medium and the balance of interest between features and shorter format film underpinned the extraordinarily broad selection policy undertaken by the Federation's volunteers and by the CBA staff for the national viewing sessions of the 1950s. Take for example the 1951 national viewing sessions for 16mm film societies. Among the films introduced to film society representatives were four films by Maya Deren, *At Land* (1944), *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945-46) and *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (1945), *The Petrified Dog* (1948) by Sidney Petersen, Paul Strand and Leo Humik's campaigning Civil Rights documentary *Native Land* (1938-1942), banned in the USA at the time, Roberto Rossellini's *The Miracle* (1947-48), two films by Ernst Lubitsch, *Ninotchka* (1939) and *To Be or Not To Be* (1942), Cecil B. De Mille's *Union Pacific* (1939), Norman McLaren's *Dots and Loops*

³³ MacDonald, *Cinema 16: Documents toward a History of the Film Society*.

(1948-49), Eisenstein's *October* (1928), the Keystone Cops in *Keystone Hotel* (1935), Jean Painlevé's surreal experiment in filming sea creatures, *L'Hippocampe* (1934) and a film about aquatic life by Jacques Cousteau. This extraordinary weekend testifies to a commitment to promoting the broadest conception of the medium, featuring films made within all conceivable production contexts.

In its first decade the national viewing sessions was an agency through which the wave of post-war experimental work by American filmmakers found an audience. The filmmakers featured included James Broughton, Charles and Ray Eames, Maya Deren, Frank Stauffacher, Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Willard Maas, Lionel Rogosin and Shirley Clarke. Films by Brakhage and Maas and other members of the Gryphon group were distributed within the film society movement by the Grasshopper Film Group, a London based film society of amateur filmmakers through Contemporary Films. Others, such as Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger's films were acquired by the BFI after attracting critical interest at the Edinburgh Film Festival and promoted through the viewing sessions. Other filmmakers brought to the viewing sessions following Edinburgh success with documentary films were Bert Haanstra, Alain Resnais, Georges Franju, Henri Storck and Joris Ivens. Complementing the promotion of experimental works, the viewing sessions sought to contribute to an understanding of film history. A significant number of revivals from Hollywood's past were featured from King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929) and William Wyler's *Jezebel* (1938) to Rouben Mamoulian's *City Streets* (1931). Some of these titles were available as a consequence of NFT seasons following which distributors made prints available for 16mm distribution. Finally a noticeable feature of the viewing sessions was a sustained interest in all forms of animation. Familiar cartoon characters such as Tom and Jerry, Porky Pig and Bugs Bunny from Hanna Barbera and Warner Brothers, appeared regularly alongside work by John Hubley (films for UPA with the characters Mr Magoo and Gerard McBoing Boing) and Norman McLaren, both of whom were much admired as experimental animators, Halas and Batchelor, and Czech puppeteers such as Jiri Trnka, and from the archives early examples of Disney's Silly Symphonies, Oscar Fischinger's abstract films and puppetry from the studios of George Pal. All varieties of cinema marginal to

dominant commercial exhibition were assembled at the viewing sessions and all modes of film production represented.

The emphasis on breadth and contrast is brought to mind when looking at some of the imaginative and adroit programming undertaken from the mid- to late-1940s in established film societies like those of Manchester, Edinburgh, Norwich and Tyneside. In this context, it is interesting to note an article on programme building which appeared in *Documentary Newsletter* in 1940, probably written by Norman Wilson of the Edinburgh Film Guild.³⁴ The article describes the key to success as the presentation of fresh and unorthodox material. An astute film society committee should be fully informed about film material available, and become avid collectors of as wide a range of film catalogues as possible. Its author observes that many societies possess such expertise: 'At the present juncture most established societies have been busily collecting data for years, can locate almost every film in the country, and can estimate the value of each one', before suggesting that:

Once all sources of information have been properly tapped, the programme builder will find a wide choice of subjects. Films of sociological or psychological value, continental films of outstanding merit, fantasies, satires; surrealist, abstract, cartoon, puppet and silhouette film; documentaries; experimental films involving new applications in colour or sound technique; and certain outstanding scientific, biological, economic and diagrammatic films.³⁵

The article then urged schedulers to consider the possibilities inherent in constructing programmes that created suggestive contrast, and provocative comparison within and between various categories such as nation, director, social theme or technique. Esoteric contrasts should also be considered such as running Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934) with a Marx Brothers film. We can see this approach to programme building at work in the Edinburgh Film Guild; their 1945 season, for example, is striking for the variety of films across the season, and breadth in terms of genres and modes of film practice represented, illustrating the diverse logics bringing films together on a programme. Joris Ivens' *New Earth* (1934) alongside *La Kermesse Heroique* (Feyder,

³⁴ "Programme Building," *Documentary News Letter* 1, no. 6 (June, 1940).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

1935) in an all Dutch programme; Jill Craigie's documentary on modern art, *Out Of Chaos* (1944) with *The Forgotten Village* (1941), a Mexican set film scripted by John Steinbeck; an evening of films from the National Film Board of Canada ranging from documentary to experimental animation; the Soviet feature *Baltic Deputy* (Keifits and Zarkhi, 1937) shown with a selection of Mack Sennett shorts. What was achieved at Edinburgh was consistently creative and resourceful programming for large audiences, membership lists often had to be closed at two and a half thousand.

What ought to be stressed here is that established societies in particular represented reservoirs of accumulated expertise in film availability and real skill in programming. It was expected of an experienced film society booking secretary that he or she would maintain files of film library catalogues, familiarising themselves with the lists of countless film libraries operated by manufacturers, distributive organisations, travel bureaux, royal societies and foreign embassies. No self-respecting booking secretary would have been satisfied working solely from the lists of the NFL or from the catalogues of recent releases offered by distributors like Film Traders. Clearly both the foreign language features that had previously been shown in London and the Film Library's film appreciation canon often had to sit alongside a very broad range of non-feature filmmaking, experimental, documentary, scientific and educational films. In particular the film society movement retained a strong allegiance to the principles of a documentary cinema, which regarded itself as using film to engage the citizen in similar matters of public concern. Following a period of terrible international conflict, these links were renewed as they articulated desires for international peace and understanding.

The programming practices of many post-war film societies demonstrated an understanding of the multiple use-values of film. Where these possibilities were juxtaposed intelligently in the programming, they raised pertinent questions about alternative film practices, stimulating debates about taste and value within a non-commercial exhibition context. As research presented here suggests, the attitudes to film and education cultivated in the societies sector in the immediate post-war years were resistant to the highly selective, hierarchical thrust of film art canon-formation constructed through the NFL.

The Balanced Season

The second principle informing film society exhibition practice was the idea of balance, in terms of both the balanced programme and the balanced season. The virtues of balance are enshrined in the exhibitors' wisdom that you can't please all the people all of the time, but by producing a balanced programme and season you can still please everyone some of the time.³⁶ The film society movement's self-image was to some extent that of an educator, cultivating film taste and using film to enrich personal and national life. The postwar spread of the film society into smaller population centres through 16mm projection brought new pressures. Society organisers developed a new sense of themselves as exhibitors, and in this capacity clearly had to be entrepreneurial, selling a season to a potential membership they knew to be more wary of overly explicit appeals to artistic or educational values. If they failed in this task, their societies, without the cushion of public funds to sustain their activities during lean times, faced potential dissolution. So although the movement of the 1940s occasionally exhibited a purist streak, manifested in a vocal 'we're not here to enjoy ourselves' rhetoric of education over entertainment, many of the movement's activists were more keenly aware that their educational fervour was not shared by all their members. Clearly people joined a film society and attended its screenings for a wide variety of reasons, as one editorial in a Federation of Film Societies publication reflected:

We shall always attract the client who 'likes to go on Sunday afternoons', the few remaining French film snobs (and incidentally the linguists who don't care a fig for montage); but in amongst them are the future directors, critics and heads of our University schools of cinematography.³⁷

The handbook *Forming and Running a Film Society*, produced by the BFI and the Federation, carried advice for would-be film society exhibitors informed by an understanding of the now very different expectations and interests audience-members

³⁶ G. Cockshott, "Part Two: An Informal Essay," in *Forming and Running a Film Society* (Federation of Film Societies & British Film Institute, 1950), 27.

³⁷ "Editorial," 4.

brought to their viewing of film.³⁸ The booklet concluded with an essay offering practical advice and defining film society good sense, written by Gerald Cockshott, a veteran film society organiser. Cockshott now advised caution in relation to the use of the words 'educational' and 'artistic' in the advance publicity of a new society. For many people, he noted, the latter 'conjures up a vision of flaming shirts, bizarre ties and sandals.'³⁹ Avoid a preliminary meeting, he suggested, as 'the sight of a few beards and corduroy trousers may be enough to send a proportion of your potential audience away damning you once and for all as arty.'⁴⁰ Also to be avoided was letting the society's ardent communist take charge of the programme. Pleasing everyone some of the time involved striking a balance across the season, 'drama with comedy, French sophistication with Russian naiveté.'⁴¹ If the feature is a sombre drama, book a funny supporting short. The values associated with the concepts of variety and balance are explicit here: variety can be framed as an educational imperative, promoting the discovery of unusual films in provocative arrangements. Balance on the other hand becomes an aspect of the programmer's art that conjures up not cinematic expression and its diversity, but rather the tastes and interests of the film society membership. Achieving balance across the season meant anticipating these tastes, and attempting to accommodate them within a series of films, programming comedy and drama, anticipating laughter and reflection, instruction and emotional release.

To return to the South London Film Society and the revolt of its members against the glum classics that filled their programme. After attempting to 'break the brittle ice of the rudiments of film appreciation' through the kind of sequenced programming of the canon favoured by the NFL,⁴² the society faced falling membership, and a financial loss on every screening. Revised aims in booking films for the new season were announced, and 'brighter presentations' promised, though

³⁸ Cockshott, "Part Two: An Informal Essay."

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴² *SLFS Magazine*, 1948, (1:2), 2.

still accompanied by a fair proportion of the classic masterpieces.⁴³ Making the season more attractive in this way shouldn't cause serious complaint it was argued, 'a mixed diet never did anyone any harm so long as there is plenty of it.'⁴⁴ A different more imprecise sense of educational purpose was now being mooted; study involved accepting films 'in the proper spirit and with the genuine intention of learning.'⁴⁵ Such exchanges demonstrated how far the burden of demonstrating educational purpose had shifted from the film society struggling to make ends meet, to the disposition of its members.

The films selected by the National Film Library for inclusion within its loan collection were a staple of the film society programme in the forties and fifties. Close examination of programming practice suggests that the film societies assimilated, modified and supplemented the NFL's film appreciation canon. It was certainly the case that new and inexperienced societies, particularly those with connections to formal education, reproduced the library's film historical programming sequence, relying on the archive's expertise and 'authoritative sanction.' Other film societies had long established their own forms of cultural authority, manifested in programming expertise that worked through the specific possibilities inherent in a programme that typically included multiple items of film material in varying combinations of contrast and similarity of theme, genre, style and tone. Chronological sequencing also reduced the creative potential for programming across the season as a whole. The season was intrinsic to film society exhibition and a fundamental difference from most commercial exhibitors, members bought admission to all films in a season rather than choosing individual titles. The season was therefore regarded by film society activists as a vital means of balancing the various demands and expectations made on a film society by the diverse interests of their membership. The often articulated film society ideal of the balanced season was a way of trying to hold together their roles as amateur exhibitors, that correlated to a necessarily audience

⁴³ *SLFS Magazine*, 1949, (2:1), 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵ *SLFS Magazine*, 1949, (2:2), 15.

oriented sensibility and voluntary educators with avowed responsibilities towards the medium and its artistic and educational uses.

Chapter Four

Making the World Our Home: Affirmative Internationalism and the Film Societies

This chapter explores the close relationship between the film society movement and a range of newly formed postwar institutions with avowedly internationalist commitments. With the aim of identifying the modes and expressions of internationalism that had greatest currency within the film society movement, the chapter focuses on the Edinburgh International Film Festival, a creation of the film society movement, the new international agencies sponsoring documentary production such as UNESCO and staunchly internationalist film distributors like Contemporary Films that entered the non-theatrical market in Britain in the early fifties.

Strictly speaking the international film festival predates the war, Venice and Moscow festivals were started in 1932 and 1935 respectively; the former an innovation of Mussolini's fascist state, the latter supported by Stalin. Following the end of conflict, however, international film festivals were revived and new events inaugurated across Europe. Over the coming decades, the international festival would develop into an authoritative site of artistic discovery, crucial to the global circulation of films within networks of art cinemas and cinematheques as several commentators have observed. My concern is to foreground the heterogeneity of the international film festival at this particular moment, allowing us to glimpse an alternative history of the institution. This alternative history considers the way in which the Edinburgh Film Festival was created by a film society with educational objectives in mind, public education concerning a specific form of cinema, documentary. Edinburgh also figures here as promoting the internationalisation of documentary practice. An important aspect of this was the application of documentary ideas on new terrain, that of development. Development themes represent the renewal of the social purpose of documentary and their internationalisation.

The central part of the chapter strategically juxtaposes two documentary films: *World Without End* (1953), made by Basil Wright and Paul Rotha and *Song of*

the Rivers (1954) by Joris Ivens. In juxtaposing these two films, not only is the vision of the individual filmmakers contrasted but also the new international organisations that sponsored the films, UNESCO for *World Without End* and the World Federation of Trade Unions for *Song of the Rivers*. Cinema, it had long been felt, had a unique role to play in developing understanding between peoples and nations. In the aftermath of catastrophic international conflict this vocation for cinema was renewed and institutionalised. UNESCO and the World Federation of Trade Unions were among the new institutions that sought to channel the powers of cinema for constructing a sense of international and global community. Praised at the time for its inspiring vision of universal humanity, *World Without End*, a film rarely seen or discussed now, provides a way to understand the conjunction of film and internationalist sentiments to which the Edinburgh Film Festival and the film society movement were most receptive. Where *World Without End* was celebrated within British film culture, Ivens's film *Song of the Rivers*, which sought to inspire unity between the colonised oppressed and the international proletariat, proved less acceptable.

In the final section I look at the work of one of the film society movement's allied organisations, Contemporary Films, distributors of foreign language films in Britain since 1951. Motivated by a desire to challenge the insularity of English culture and the residues of imperial superiority Contemporary offered the most internationally diverse film library available to film societies and specialist cinemas. Contemporary's work was characterised by an inclusive selection policy that pursued films that could be defined as socially progressive, alongside artistically valued films identified with authorial self-expression. They actively sought the partnership of film societies in pursuing a policy of building audiences for new territories of cinema.

Edinburgh as an Alternative Film Festival

A festival of the arts in Edinburgh was planned during the dark days of the war as a form of uplift and spiritual nourishment as Britain set about rebuilding bombed out cities. The idea was to create a festival to 'feed the spirit of a people

exhausted by war.’¹ More than a festival city, Edinburgh, according to one account in *The Daily Mail* was ‘a Jerusalem of the Arts’ to millions around the world. It was ‘a symbol of the finer aspects of human endeavour...To a civilisation still oppressed by gigantic uncertainties, the Festival offers its liberal draught of culture and reminds us that man’s need to satisfy his craving may yet prove his surest claim to survival.’²

Limiting the scope of the festival to the traditional arts, the organisers made no provision for a film programme. It was left to the voluntary film society movement to address this oversight and organise the first international festival of documentary films in 1947. Said to be the third oldest film festival in the world after Venice and Cannes, Edinburgh’s initial organisational basis and the festival’s stated cultural objectives, values and policy differed significantly from its continental precursors. Unlike the Venice and Cannes festivals, the Edinburgh Film Festival attracted no subsidy from central or municipal government funds. In this respect it also differed from the main music and arts festival, supported as that was by funding from the new Arts Council of Great Britain, the British Council and the Corporation of the City of Edinburgh. The film festival was initiated and organised by a film society, albeit one of the largest and most successful film societies in the country, the Edinburgh Film Guild (EFG). During its first eight years the Edinburgh International Film Festival was funded almost exclusively from the reserves of the film society, the festival’s initial losses were paid from the subscriptions of the film society’s membership.

The organisation of the festival was undertaken by the Film Guild with assistance from an advisory committee composed of leading figures in the field of documentary and educational film: producers Basil Wright, Edgar Anstey, John Grierson; individuals from the Scottish and English film society movement and representatives from the Scottish film trade. Norman Wilson and Forsyth Hardy of the Film Guild were respectively Chair and Honorary Secretary of the Committee. Like the New London Film Society, whose regular repertory screenings in London of

¹ Irene A. Wright and Floyde E. Brooker, "6th International Edinburgh Film Festival: A Report," (US Department of State, 1952), 1.

² *The Daily Mail*, August 18, 1952, quoted in *Ibid.*

films of historical importance from the archives of the Museum of Modern Art showed up a lack of enterprise at the British Film Institute, the Edinburgh International Film Festival is a striking example of voluntary organisation taking the lead in the face of disinterest from state funded cultural and arts bodies. The state's relationship to the arts was undergoing changes, the creation of the new Arts Council being the most visible instance but there was as yet little official recognition of cinema's value. The Edinburgh Film Festival deserves to be remembered as one of the most impressive achievements of the film society movement and one of its most enduring legacies. That said the present incarnation of the festival is unrecognisable from the festival of the late 40s and 50s. The festival's founders at the Edinburgh Film Guild would have great difficulty recognising the festival they were involved in creating as the progenitor of today's event, which the current director was recently eager to re-brand as offbeat and quirky, 'the Sundance of Europe.'

From the beginning the Edinburgh Film Festival set out to be different to the existing festivals, Venice and Cannes. The organisers felt the need to avoid replicating the continental competitive festival, where prizes were awarded for achievement in film art, offering instead a comprehensive international survey of a particular form of cinema, documentary. The first festival programme announced, 'the aim of these film performances is two fold: 1) to present for the first time a world view of documentary achievement by showing examples of the best realist production from many countries; and 2) to create an opportunity for the reconsideration and re-assessment of the principles and methods of the documentary movement.'³ In general international film festivals as postwar cultural institutions came to assume an increasingly authoritative role in conferring artistic legitimacy on works and directors through prizes and awards, a process also bound up with assessments of commercial potential within the fast growing specialist art cinema market.⁴ As a non-competitive festival Edinburgh established a greater distance from operations bound up with establishment of artistic reputation, what Bourdieu referring to the literary field calls

³ "Introduction," *Documentary 47* (1947): 1.

⁴ Steve Neale, "Art Cinema as Institution," *Screen 22*, no. 1 (1981): 35.

the 'capital of consecration.'⁵ As an alternative to this emergent idea of a festival as the maker of names, Edinburgh elected to make a case for a particular conception of the film medium and to do so declared a commitment to generating knowledge, to intellectual enquiry and public dissemination around the present and future vitality of the documentary film. And where the two major continental festivals, Cannes in particular, quickly became associated in the public imagination with glamorous appearances from stars and celebrities, Edinburgh proudly cultivated a more serious, ascetic tone and style with no sense that this was merely forced upon them by financial circumstance. As John Grierson expressed it in a characteristically forceful polemic, Edinburgh stood apart from the 'ugly commercial barbarism of its rivals' which were set pieces 'heavy with the idiot burden of Grand Prix one dare not fail to get.'⁶

A sense of the institution of the film festival as more inchoate and contested during its formative postwar years can be gained from the reports and correspondence in *Sight and Sound*. As the number of festivals grew and *Sight and Sound* began a regular round up of their activities, the magazine's correspondents entertained doubts about whether there were enough films of the highest standards to merit the proliferation. The correspondent covering Venice during a particularly lean year, remarked that 'so few worthy features are being made, the future of the independent festival must be seriously considered.'⁷ Another correspondent, similarly concerned with the festival's commitment to maintaining the highest artistic standards, bemoaned the proliferation of what he termed 'mushroom festivals' in Eastern Europe, showing few films of artistic originality.⁸ Defenders of these new festivals responded in subsequent correspondence columns by implicitly attempting to shift the understanding of what a festival is, diminishing the emphasis on rewarding the very best films in favour of a focus on festivals as an opportunity for public engagement

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 148.

⁶ John Grierson, "The Edinburgh Festival: A Gambit Not So New," *Film Forum* 8, no. 1 (1952): 3.

⁷ James Beveridge et al., "Festivals: A Summing Up," *Sight and Sound* 18, no. 71 (1949): 24.

⁸ Ibid.

with cinema, with debate and discussion as central objectives. It was characteristic of the historical moment that the conflicting positions on the role of the international film festival should be read through cold war sensitivities. In an aside about the growth of 'mushroom festivals' and the threat to quality festival programming, *Sight and Sound* briskly dispensed with the Marianske-Lazne festival by describing it as 'a field day for the left.'⁹ An aggrieved correspondent in the next issue argued that Marianske-Lazne was distinctive as a place where free and keen discussion took place in which anyone could participate. He requested that *Sight and Sound* withdraw 'the unkind and unjust term of "mushroom festivals"' and questioned the absence of any report on a series of 'mass film festivals' held in towns and cities around Czechoslovakia in which the festival juries were composed of labourers.¹⁰ In response *Sight and Sound* reiterated that 'one judges the level of a film festival by the quality of the films shown there.' Concerning the 'mass film festivals' excepting for the fact that they were judged by labourers no other information had been supplied and therefore, the editor noted, it was 'difficult to know how they might surpass the other [festivals] mentioned.'¹¹ Last word on the matter went to Christopher Brunel, son of filmmaker Adrian, and a Communist member of the Association of Cine Technicians, who wrote, 'Sir, *Sight and Sound* judges the levels of film festivals solely by the quality of films shown. But what is a film without an audience. A film festival designed as a high-class publicity drive cum connoisseur's bean-feast, of course, has its values – often purely financial.'¹² Detecting a snobbish tone to the magazine's reference to festivals judged by labourers, Brunel affirmed that what should be valued about these little known festivals was precisely that juries were representative of 'real-life audiences.'

Edinburgh Film Festival's policy of selecting and surveying the state of documentary was far from arbitrary. Forsyth Hardy and Norman Wilson had close personal ties to the filmmakers in the movement, John Grierson and Basil Wright in

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jules De Leeuwe, "Correspondence: Mushroom Festivals," Ibid., April 1950, 95.

¹¹ Editors Note, Ibid.

¹² Christopher Brunel, "Correspondence: Mushroom Festivals," *Sight and Sound*, June 1950, 183.

particular. Together, Hardy, then a journalist, and Wilson, a publisher, had edited *Cinema Quarterly* in the early thirties, an important forum for the theorist filmmakers of the documentary movement with a large film society readership. In a commemorative publication for the Film Guild's twenty-first season, Wilson recalled the Guild's second season when a dozen lectures were given, including one by John Grierson 'a source of inspiration to us from the beginning.'¹³ The same publication included anniversary accolades from film industry personnel including Grierson himself who compared the Film Guild to the pre-war London Film Society. It was the former that had gone furthest in appreciating 'the infinite variety of a film society's obligations to all categories of the medium. So while *Close Up* came out of the South, it was *Cinema Quarterly* that came logically from Edinburgh and the North – and from Edinburgh too the annual documentary festival.'¹⁴ Both Wilson and Hardy were sometimes inclined to put this affinity of Scottish film culture for documentary down to a certain sobriety in the Scots temperament. Scotland's national contribution to the cinema had been in the field of documentary, Hardy suggested, because of a tradition of 'building art out of the ordinary' discernible in the poetry of Burns, the novels of Walter Scott and 'the infinite common sense of Hume the philosopher.'¹⁵

The appeal of the documentary attitude to Scots film activists is better understood as arising from deep dissatisfaction with the trivialised representations of Scotland on screen. As a film journalist on *The Scotsman*, Hardy had written that the Scot on screen was invariably an absurd comic creation in films made in London, 'the real Scottish character had gone unrecorded.'¹⁶ Understandably the documentary idea was regarded a promising means to challenge the stereotypes of Scottish experience identified with fiction films produced in Hollywood and London. The documentary concern with the actuality image was stressed by the activists of Scottish film culture

¹³ *Twenty-One Years of Cinema*, (Edinburgh: Film House, 1951), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵ Forsyth Hardy, "The Edinburgh Film Festival," *Hollywood Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1950): 34.

¹⁶ Quoted in "An Interview with Forsyth Hardy," in *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Cinema and Television*, ed. Colin McArthur (London: BFI, 1982), 74.

not because of national temperament but because it seemed to promise an alternative to the romanticised images of the Scots in dominant feature cinema.

The convergence of values between the documentarists and Scottish activists of the Film Guild can also be seen in a seriousness of tone with which each described their activities. A shared rhetoric underpins the writings of the documentary movement and the Scots film societies, one which emphasises the virtues of purposive action, hard work, strenuous effort and above all public service. Looking back at the Film Guild's impressive record of achievement, Wilson would often stress that this was not due to any privileged position or handouts, but rather to hard work alone and the refusal to make concessions to popular appeal. The Film Guild exemplified the film society movement's commitment to make film exhibition part of a broader educational practice with an annual programme of lectures from filmmakers and a regular study group. The study group was so successful that at one stage several hundred people were reported to be attending a series of weekday evening groups on the theme of film technique. Emerging from the war with healthy reserves thanks to a large membership and prudently managed finances, the Film Guild moved into their own premises Film House, complete with a purpose built cinema, in 1946. The emphasis on educational activity such as the prominent use of lectures alongside screenings, on circulating authoritative original programme notes, were all established Film Guild practice that were incorporated into the festival.

Edinburgh's Documentary Debates

It was this tradition of education that defined the initial period of the Festival, lasting from 1947 to roughly 1954, and retained a residual influence later. The festival's educational role had two aspects, firstly educating the public about documentary film and secondly stimulating debate among filmmakers and producers about the future of documentary around the world. The notion of documentary, first expounded by Grierson and his colleagues before the war, drew together a number of disparate ideas about the film medium and its potential role as a form of mass communication. Situating Grierson's theory of the documentary film alongside Bazin and Kracauer within the broader tradition of realist film theory, Aitken has argued

that what underpinned the original documentary idea was a belief in the superiority of intuitive experience over rational analysis as a means of promoting understanding of complex social phenomena.¹⁷ The purpose of the documentary film was to instil in its viewers an intuitively experienced understanding of the generative forces active in society, helping to strengthen the ties of citizenship by doing so. Grierson's ideas about social reality and aesthetic experience were shaped by an idealist tradition that regarded unity and harmony as paramount. The state was regarded benignly as a force restraining the sectarian and individualistic tendencies within society in the interests of that social unity and harmony. Mass communicators had an important function as contemporary civic educators communicating to citizens, creating opportunities to experience an underlying interdependence within society in a dramatic and imaginative form.

Grierson's conviction was that the documentary film was effective because it used both the actuality image which, unlike the studio produced image, registered the phenomenological surface of empirical reality, and the synthesising potential of editing to reveal the abstract truths that constituted the real. As Aitken has observed, a more instrumental and didactic approach, and correspondingly a more limited, functionalist understanding of civic education and public relations came to increasingly dominate documentary practice, displacing the visually sophisticated films concerned with conveying this poetic sense of unity. It was precisely the consolidation of this trend after the war that constituted a sustained topic of debate in the first five years of the festival.

By 1947 the expansion of documentary filmmaking was accompanied by a pervasive sense of decline and crisis amongst the pioneers of the movement. In the post-war years broad acceptance of the role of film in public relations led to a huge expansion of documentary personnel working under industrial and corporate sponsorship creating instructional films. Meanwhile, the Labour government, facing severe economic challenges and budgetary constraints, reduced the money available for public relations film production. These circumstances created the conditions in

¹⁷ Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 163.

which instructional and training films would predominate. But there was a deeper problem. Documentary was at its most vivid and energetic when mobilised around themes of progressive social reform in the inter-war years and social unity in the face of national danger during the war. A reformist Labour government now set about creating the institutions of social welfare, giving substance to the social democratic vision that animated the original documentary movement. According to Edgar Anstey, the old sociological themes of the thirties became irrelevant and cliché ridden.¹⁸ The welfare state had usurped the topics of reform that preoccupied the thirties.

British documentary's loss of creative purpose was a constant preoccupation in the festival's written output and debates. All the prominent contributors to the debate agreed that documentaries had become technically proficient but overwhelmingly didactic with the rise to prominence of the instructional film. These films had limited aesthetic ambition and therefore also lacked the larger ambition of public enlightenment associated with the earlier movement. The attempt to critically grasp how this could have come about focused naturally enough on the relationship between the film artist and the system of sponsorship built up around the documentary and instructional film. Basil Wright, for example, reminded his readers of the centrality of artistic transformation at the heart of the documentary tradition. Public enlightenment meant nothing without the imaginative visual interpretation of the film artist. The documentary film, Wright argued, was not about education understood in terms of verbally delivered facts and information, but revelation through the affective power of the image. All too often however the artist filmmakers found themselves working for patrons, government departments, corporations and municipalities who couldn't see beyond the 'machinery of information.'¹⁹

Grierson's take on the artist/sponsor relation was of course thoroughly committed to the virtues of public sponsorship in spite of the difficulties entailed. Talk of rediscovering artistic independence by working outside government

¹⁸ Jack Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Basil Wright, "World Documentary," *Documentary* 48 (1948): 4.

patronage was described as suicidal and unrealistic. Grierson argued that the problems of documentary ultimately 'went to the heart of the historical moment.'²⁰ Neither sponsors in government nor filmmakers were able to determine where the public will lay. And he called for an inquiry to consider what use might be made of the documentary film in strengthening national spirit, building the national economy at home and in the colonies and in addressing new themes such as Britain's membership in the United Nations.²¹

Whilst published articles and conferences debated the threat to the sponsored Griersonian documentary, the festival set about its expansive survey of documentary around the world undeterred. Judging by their selection, the festival organisers worked with an understanding of documentary that was deliberately broad; the first festival premiered Rossellini's *Paisa* (1946), which featured fictionalised stories of the liberation of Italy, to great critical acclaim. The documentary method was a term stretched to include feature films that were beginning to explore new forms of cinematic space by filming in actual locations rather than studio sets. It also included features that utilised narrative form in conjunction with an expository or instructional impulse or others in which real events were dramatically re-enacted in ways intended to remain faithful to their reality. After the second festival Norman Wilson admitted that casting the net so widely meant the large numbers of people seeing their first documentaries at the festival might nevertheless have a rather confused idea about what the term meant. Compounding the malaise surrounding the sponsored documentary was the seemingly unavoidable fact that neither Rossellini's films nor those of the critically acclaimed French documentary filmmakers Georges Rouquier or Georges Franju (or the majority of features at the Festival for that matter) were made within the rubric of sponsored public information. Franju wrote a short piece in the Festival programme emphasising the financially impoverished yet creatively independent position of his generation of French documentarists. As if in response Grierson wrote that the French and Italian realist films, in their concern with the bucolic and picaresque, were a retreat from the great promise of documentary as

²⁰ John Grierson, "A Time for Enquiry," *Documentary* 47 (1947): 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 6-7.

public art, building the new world that was socialist, metropolitan and international.²² Basil Wright seemed to acknowledge the staleness of documentary aesthetics in comparison with the bold impact of *Paisa*. *Paisa*, he wrote, 'may well prove to be the climax of all documentary development but also an influence on all types of film production as profound and far-reaching as that of *Potemkin*. *Paisa* may justifiably claim to make the average documentary film look like something out of a candy-store.'²³ Rossellini's film, Wright recognised, broke free from the tendency of the British documentary towards what Dai Vaughan has referred to as Platonic imagery.²⁴ Vaughan has argued that the combination of a certain technology (35mm, non-synchronised sound), liberal reformist purpose and institutional sponsorship overdetermined the creation of archetypal imagery, images bearing a quality of statistical generalisation, stripped of idiosyncrasy. The limitations of documentary archetypalism lay in its inability to renew perceptions of the world, its presentation of the self-evident and the already known and its flat, caricatured treatment of negative aspects of reality.²⁵

For the festival's fourth year changes of policy were announced, an expansion in the selection criteria to include film's that were 'documentary, realist and experimental.' The festival report suggested that this was done 'to avoid misunderstanding' around the term documentary.²⁶ The new criteria, realist, documentary and experimental, Wilson wrote in 1952, was wide enough to include 'almost anything except the routine studio entertainment film – provided always that it has the essential value of authenticity.' Echoing Basil Wright he added, 'What we seek above all is the quality of revelation.'²⁷ In other words what was sought were films that renewed people's perception of the world they lived in.

The festival retained its commitment to establishing a global perspective of its field. Aside from the large numbers of films submitted by the US Information

²² John Grierson, "The Larger Issue," *Documentary* 50 (1950): 3.

²³ Basil Wright, "Paisa," *Documentary* 47 (1947): 18.

²⁴ Dai Vaughan, *Portrait of an Invisible Man* (London: BFI Publishing, 1983), 39-42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁶ Norman Wilson, "Finale," *Film Festival: Sixth International Edinburgh Film Festival Weekly Programme*, September 7 1952, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Department and Britain's Central Office of Information and the Colonial Film Units, the largest number of short documentary films came from three main regions: Czechoslovakia, Poland and Yugoslavia, where the film industries had been newly nationalised; Scandinavia, where documentary was growing with state support in Denmark; and the Commonwealth Dominions, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, each of which had created National Film Boards largely concerned with the production of public information films for non-theatrical audiences along lines suggested by the British movement. As might be expected, the numbers of nations with films represented at the festival grew. In 1952, 215 films were selected from 29 countries. Only 17 of these were features. Programming the shorter films involved a number of strategies. National programmes were rare, most often films would be grouped together either by generic categories such as Scientific, Educational, Art or Experimental films or in themed programmes with titles such as Birds, Beasts and Fishes, Places and People, Countries and Peoples. In this instance each themed programme could function as an international survey of the topic in question. One visitor to the Festival commenting on this strategy of programming wrote, 'To the viewer the cross-weaving of values, of responses of living, subtly recalls a deeper truth: all people, Greek or Eskimo, Argentine or Bakiga, may enjoy each other when they discover through their differences the simple, essential feelings they share as members of the human race.'²⁸ However, the same critic also observed that judging by the films screened no country in the world has the monopoly of bad films and the fact that some films had been accepted for the Festival could only be explained by international goodwill or the desire to encourage young film industries.

Not everyone approached the festival with the same feelings of international goodwill or an appreciation of the educational tone of many of the festival programmes. An outspoken critic of the festival, journalist Fred Majdalany wrote in *Time and Tide*, 'We all know that the sermon is an art form highly esteemed in Scotland. This probably explains the hitherto pitiless attitude of the Edinburgh Film Festival towards its audience.'²⁹ The same critic writing in *The Daily Mail* protested

²⁸ Helen Grayson, "Edinburgh Festival Notes," *Saturday Review*, August 16 1954.

²⁹ Fred Majdalany, "Films," *Time and Tide*, 4th September 1954.

that 'So long as a film was about disease, the United Nations, or quaint national customs, it seemed pretty sure to be chosen regardless of its true merits.'³⁰ Majdalany bristled at 'Doctor Edinburgh's' dose of improving medicine, the innumerable films of the kind that were 'scientific, Ministry-commissioned and what-we're-doing-to-modernise-fishing-methods-in-Bongo-Bongo.'³¹

The character of the festival was set to change under pressure of these criticisms that articulated a desire for Edinburgh to possess a greater element of showmanship with films that would draw a larger public. The realist, documentary, experimental policy was dropped in favour of the much looser description, The Living Cinema. The reason for this, Wilson explained, was that the film trade had needed to be convinced that 'the solid geometry of a film star would receive as much consideration [by the Festival] as a problem in Mathematics.'³² The Living Cinema recognised 'films from whatever source and in whatever category which gave a new stimulus to the art. What that might be is impossible to define though it can be felt and recognised immediately it is seen.' As Colin McArthur has observed, the change of name was accompanied by a less coherent selection policy and a substantially diminished emphasis on the educational role of the Festival.³³ There is no doubt that the original promotion of the documentary idea had exhausted itself. But in distancing itself from advocacy of a particular form of cinema, the festival also began to lose its identity as a popular educator. Behind the scenes it appears that pressure had mounted on the organisers to transform the festival by giving it much broader public appeal. Honorary presidents such as John Huston were brought in with much fanfare and secured the desired press attention. The festival's principled refusal to present awards and prizes was ended with the inauguration of the David O. Selznick awards. Others followed and Gala openings were introduced. Much was made in the transition year of 1954 of the closer co-operation with the film trade. For the first

³⁰ Fred Majdalany, "Dr Edinburgh Sugars the Pill," *Daily Mail*, 26th August 1954.

³¹ Majdalany, "Films."

³² "Festival," *Film Forum*, October 1954, 3.

³³ Colin McArthur, "The Rises and Falls of the Edinburgh International Film Festival," in *From Limelight to Satellite: A Scottish Film Book*, ed. Eddie Dick (London & Glasgow: BFI and Scottish Film Council, 1990), 93.

time the festival was not independently funded by the Film Guild, having received donations from major industry bodies after an appeal for financial help. It might be speculated that the Film Guild were no longer able shoulder the financial burden of running an expanding festival alone.

It is striking that the recent criticisms McArthur makes of the festival's loss of direction during this period were anticipated in a series of yearly festival reviews written by Margaret Hancock, the influential honorary secretary of the Federation of Film Societies. Whilst continuing to praise an event which remained crucial to film societies as a place where new films were brought to the attention of the movement, Hancock questioned recent changes in the identity and organisation of the Festival. In 1956, the tenth anniversary of the Festival, Hancock praised, 'a wonderful achievement in which the film society movement in Scotland can take pride.'³⁴ The occasion of the anniversary gave Hancock an opportunity for a comprehensive critical examination that is worth quoting in full.

One strong plea then: that Edinburgh should guard against (losing) its amateur standing and individual outlook. Too many festivals deserve Sir Thomas Beecham's 'tourist trade' jibe: Edinburgh should bear the stamp of its origin.

There are disquieting signs of a desire for not only a bigger but a less discriminating audience. (Is the demon of financial necessity cracking the whip?) "The Living Cinema" was a bright new phrase, but its vagueness has dangers. The public assertion this year that "Every film shown is important to someone" seems a disquieting criterion of standards...Clear definition of aims and standards are often awkward, but could they not help eliminate some of the bad films shown each year.

Regrets? For the loss of programme appraisals of reasonable length and high quality, now mainly replaced by casual and random synopses. Time was when the Guild's brilliant linguist would obviate the need for subtitles with her commentaries: this year such explanatory aids were sadly missing or scamped. Flirtations with the film industry can have constructive results...but could not Edinburgh salute *in print* films which have already received full commercial showings and publicity? Or restrict and not emphasise such showings? Conferences too, should be an integral part and not stereotyped

³⁴ Margaret Hancock, "Edinburgh '56: A Summing Up," *Film*, November/December 1956, 24.

appendage of the Film Festival; the increasing number of exactly similar, unimaginative and futile receptions. The projection of the films could be much improved. Earlier production of programmes has always been a crying need: support would surely be keener were programmes not still largely blank at the end of the second week.

Birthday wishes? First and foremost, a more suitable and adequate meeting place for filmmakers and film enthusiasts, so that vital and constructive discussions could become more of a reality. Lectures by filmmakers each week; provision of time for discussion at the film shows in place of introductory speeches. Good films in plenty. And last of all money – a guarantee against loss, perhaps, rather than restricting grants from film industry or government. May the Edinburgh Film Festival long remain free of control from any outside body, may it become even more selective, more adventurous, more independent.

Unlike a film critic like Gavin Lambert, whose criticisms of Edinburgh whilst editor of *Sight and Sound*, are tinged with regret that it is not more like Cannes or Venice, Margaret Hancock's comments come out of a lengthy and sympathetic engagement with the festival and its work. They thoughtfully articulate the view that how a festival is organised, the selection policy it pursues, the way films are brought to a public and the relationship that the public can establish to them are crucially important and that there are qualitative differences between film festivals in these respects. It is a criticism that comes out of a sense of responsibility to see the festival worked on and improved. In her capacity as a national representative of the film society movement, Hancock urges the organisers not to neglect the needs of the dedicated activist public for participation, and opportunities to engage in dialogue with filmmakers. Like the good film society, a festival ought to be a place of critical debate and exchange of opinion where the audience are actively engaged rather than passive spectators. Hancock returned emphatically to her theme two years later when she criticised a dreary French film week composed of well-made but undistinguished films of commercial appeal. She added,

It is because this Festival is so precious that one asks also that the accent on glamour should be shifted to an emphasis on good films and to more, far more constructive talk and discussion actively and enthusiastically organised; for better microphone commentaries (such a dreary voice, half the time fighting

with the soundtrack); for the avoidance of the fiasco of the last minute cancellation of the film school; for fewer private and more public conferences throughout the festival; for better organisation and a more genuine and re-invigorated attempt to bring film enthusiasts together to the best effect.³⁵

This conception of what a festival is for can also be seen to animate film society activist's reports from other European festivals. Reports on Cannes and Venice were relatively infrequent in the Federation of Film Societies' magazine *Film* established in 1954. More regular reports brought news of film festivals less likely to have been given coverage in the press and other film periodicals. Two festivals that were particularly favoured by reporting in *Film* were Karlovy Vary and Bad Ems. Karlovy Vary, dismissed by *Sight and Sound*, was enthusiastically described by Gordon Mead of the Peckham Co-operative Film Society. The Czech festival was described as offering something all too rare in Britain, the opportunity of seeing 'off-beat films from such nations as Mongolia, Indonesia, and Viet Nam, with what might be called progressive films.'³⁶ Mead singled out in particular *Rio 40 Degrees* (1955), a film by a group of young Brazilian filmmakers and directed by Nelson Pereira Dos Santos and an adaptation of Brecht's play *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matte* (1955) by Cavalcanti. But perhaps it was at Bad Ems in Germany that film society activists found a model for the ideal festival. The 1955 Festival was the first to be organised by the Federation of German Film Clubs and was attended by Heini Przibram of Tyneside Film Society as a delegate from the English Federation of Film Societies. In a brief introductory comment to a report from a German colleague Przibram wrote that 'discussions were of a very high standard – though sometimes rather lengthy: educationists, university people and journalists are inclined to take film art and its appreciation very seriously. In spite of or because of, their youth, German societies have a spirit of adventure and enterprise – particularly in working with allied cultural and educational organisations – which we would do well to emulate.'³⁷ At the Festival, Dr Ella Bergmann-Michel of the German Federation reported that 'There

³⁵ Margaret Hancock, "Edinburgh," *Ibid.* 1958, 30.

³⁶ Gordon R. Mead, "Festival Notes: Karlovy Vary," *Ibid.*, September/October 1956, 24.

³⁷ Heini Przibram, "Bad Ems 1955," *Film*, January/February 1955, 28.

was no overwhelming avalanche of films but a harmonious blending of film, lecture, discussion and debate.³⁸ Five years later Przibram again reported on the festival organised by the German Federation of Film Clubs now relocated to Bad Nauheim and cited it as 'probably the most stimulating, exhaustive and exhausting for film society enthusiasts' among the European festivals.³⁹

Documentary as True Internationalism

As Britain's contribution to the field of documentary appeared to falter, its promoters at Edinburgh Festival looked to the rest of the world for new sources of inspiration. Through the international exchange of films, it was argued, new methods and approaches could be exchanged and the documentary idea revitalised. It was through just such an engagement with the Soviet cinema at the (London) Film Society that the idea of using film for public enlightenment had been introduced to Britain in the first place, reminded Basil Wright, in a call for greater circulation of films between the two nations. For Wright, the world of documentary pointed towards a 'true internationalism of the peoples.'⁴⁰ This true internationalism implied an international community of effort among filmmakers communicating to a corresponding community of understanding, the audience. The true internationalism of documentary was contrasted with the boundaries, divisions and conflict of international politics and diplomacy.

Wright's vision of documentary as an international community of effort led him to become involved in the short-lived World Union of Documentary, which formed in 1948 at a meeting in Marianske-Lazne and involved filmmakers and critics such as Joris Ivens, Henri Storck and Béla Belàsz. As President of the World Union, Wright wrote in the festival programme that delegates representing countries reportedly separated 'by curtains of varying materials but identical opacity' found common purpose in the documentary film.⁴¹ This unanimity found expression in the 'the first formal world definition of the documentary film.' Launched on a wave of

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Heini Przibram, "Bad Neuheim," *Film*, January/February 1960.

⁴⁰ Wright, "World Documentary," 3.

⁴¹ Ibid.: 6.

optimism, by 1950 the World Union of Documentary was defunct, a casualty of an intensifying cultural cold war, its demise apparently hastened through intervention from John Grierson. Grierson had taken exception to a glowing report by Wright and colleague Donald Alexander on the imaginative work produced by the nationalised film industries of the Eastern bloc and recommending similar developments in Britain.⁴² During his period as Director of the National Film Board of Canada, Grierson had found himself part of an enquiry into Soviet espionage focusing on a Film Board junior employee, in which his political loyalties were closely scrutinised. Grierson was hypersensitive to the political risks of being smeared as a Communist sympathiser. As the initiative in establishing the World Union had been taken by Eastern bloc filmmakers, he urged British participants, including Wright and John Taylor, to withdraw from the Union.

Another form of internationalist sentiment consistently articulated at Edinburgh linked the renewal of documentary with the theme of development. By embracing the challenges of development globally, tackling poverty, ignorance and disease, it was felt documentary's original impulse might be renewed. Wright used his association with Edinburgh as critic and symposium panellist to repeatedly raise the issue of filmmaking in what he referred to as the underdeveloped world.⁴³ Consistently he emphasised the need for underdeveloped nations to develop the capacity for film production and the help that might be given by filmmakers from the developed world. Wright considered it vital that cinema was developed as a means of communication in the underdeveloped world, in terms of public education but also in terms of promoting cultural autonomy and self-expression and subsequent cross-cultural exchange and understanding. As Wright put it in a panel discussion during an

⁴² Bert Hogenkamp, "World Union of Documentary," in *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film*, ed. Ian Aitken (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1475-76. For an account of the espionage episode see Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence*.

⁴³ Basil Wright's self-conscious use of the term underdeveloped seems striking coming several years before the concept was taken up by dependency theorists. However the term was used quite differently by Truman in 1949 on the inauguration of his presidency to suggest a new economic relationship taking the place of the old exploitative imperialism. See M. P. Cowen and R. W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Edinburgh Festival conference, 'Everybody should be able to express themselves to other countries, but the main problem at the moment is with these countries which have not merely lack of essential foods, but have not the ability to express themselves through films.'⁴⁴ Wright stressed that in reaching out to the underdeveloped world, every effort should be made not to impose culturally alien values or make films valorising Western expertise and technology as did countless documentaries about development issues with their 'patronising and charitable airs.'⁴⁵ Rather, he argued, 'Our job is to make films – if the locals cannot yet do it for themselves – about ideas and action growing up *from within*.'⁴⁶ The presence of skilled filmmakers from the West was only desirable as long as the capacity for film production remained in need of development. In some respects the relationship envisaged between the haves of the developed world and the have-nots of the underdeveloped calls to mind the doctrine of trusteeship by which liberal opinion conceptualised Britain's changing relationship to its colonies and the gradual move towards self-government. But Wright also insisted that the relationship was reciprocal. 'The underdeveloped countries can give us just as much as we can give them; our gifts may indeed seem more practical, but in the long run other values may also operate. Anyone can learn to operate a hypodermic syringe. How many can learn as quickly that the meek shall inherit the earth?'⁴⁷

Wright's career as a filmmaker had begun at the Empire Marketing Board. Intellectual discussion of film in the twenties and thirties repeatedly stressed film's potential for enhancing international understanding. In Britain, the magazine *Close Up* was one manifestation of this. The small group of modernist intellectuals on the magazine's editorial board were particularly eager to stress the transnational, borderless aspect of cinema, an emphasis Anne Friedberg relates to the biographies of the editors and their collective concern to escape fixed gender, class and sexual

⁴⁴ "New Directions in Documentary: Edinburgh Film Festival International Conference," (Edinburgh: 1952), 20-21.

⁴⁵ Basil Wright, "The Gap," *Film Forum*, October 1952, 9. Italics in the original.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

identities and construct more cosmopolitan diasporic selves.⁴⁸ At the Empire Marketing Board, a conception of film as a vehicle for enhancing international understanding was bound up with the concern to find effective ways to project the British way of life whilst strengthening the bonds of Empire.⁴⁹ The renewal and modernisation of imperial discourse sought to associate Empire with positive attributes such as economic co-operation, harmonious trading partnerships and mutual dependence between nations. Recruited to the Empire Marketing Board under Grierson's leadership, Wright undertook two assignments in the Caribbean, filming *Cargo to Jamaica* (1933) and *Windmill in Barbados* (1933) before travelling to Ceylon with a commission from the Ceylon Tea Marketing Board. *Song of Ceylon*, filmed in 1934, was immediately acclaimed by the critics of *Close Up* as a work of genuine film art. More recently revisionist histories of the documentary movement have highlighted the absences in the film, charging that it failed to represent the colonial exploitation of Ceylonese labour and to that extent it was true to its sponsor's purpose.⁵⁰ But the film testifies to something else, a filmmaker's attempt to give cinematic form to a rapturous encounter with difference. Wright's concern in Edinburgh's forums to emphasise what the West might humbly learn from the developing world is clearly prefigured in *Song of Ceylon*. In a film that sets out in part to examine the integration of Ceylon's plantations into a modern global economy, what captivates the filmmaker most are the areas of practice and belief that lie far beyond that assimilation. In particular Wright displays a sensual attentiveness to gestures and movements that are shown to be rooted organically in radically different modes of labour, ritual and cultural practice. A fisherman's hand expertly casts and gently draws on his net, Wright's camera lingers on the resting outstretched arm of his companion watching from the river bank. Traditional dance is a motif appearing throughout the film, most strikingly in a climactic sequence in which

⁴⁸ Anne Friedberg, "Reading Close up, 1927-1933," in *Close up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁴⁹ See Martin Stollery, *Alternative Empires: European Modernist Cinemas and the Cultures of Imperialism* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 140-71.

⁵⁰ For one of the blunter versions of this argument see Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations* (London: BFI, 1995).

Wright seeks to cinematically evoke the ecstatic experience of participation in a masked dance. The camera's physical proximity to the dancers, mimicking the body's movements as it weaves and sways to an accelerating drum beat, shows Wright to be a precursor to later filmmakers to explore ecstatic experience like Maya Deren and Jean Rouch. Wright's film displays a similar ambivalence to processes of modernisation as can be found in Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930), which despite acknowledging the progressive role of modern technology in a peasant community, begins and ends with elemental cycles of nature impervious to all that change.⁵¹

Song of Ceylon's representation of religious reverie, its sensorial evocation of the body liberated in dance and the physical grace of male artisan labour has led both Guynn and Stollery to situate Wright's aesthetic in a tradition of homoerotically charged primitivism.⁵² Non-western places are constructed as alternative realms of experience promising the liberation from sexual and social constraints of the West. As many critics have pointed out the complexity of such a valorisation of non-Western peoples, lies in the way it both implies a critique of Western modernity, but in doing so reproduces a dichotomy between West and East, erasing in the process a history of conquest and cultural interaction. Significantly, Stollery adds that in contrast to contemporaneous Empire films such as *Contact* (1933) made by Paul Rotha, one of a cycle of films made for Imperial Airways, *Song* seems to accept and concede the limitations to what it can know of Ceylonese culture.⁵³ Rotha's film celebrates the airplane as a symbol of Western technological superiority mastering the skies and connecting up the distant outposts of Empire. *Song of Ceylon*, whose cyclical structure involves entering the diegetic world by passing through a densely patterned lattice of palm leaves from which the viewer exits at the film's conclusion seems to suggest separation and distance between the audience and the Ceylonese. *Song of Ceylon* invites us to transcend this distance not through an act of

⁵¹ In his late work of film history *The Long View* Wright describes Dovzhenko as a 'lyric poet' who, though not a documentarist, 'revealed where the documentary idea could go.' Basil Wright, *The Long View: A Personal Perspective on World Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974): 118.

⁵² Stollery, *Alternative Empires: European Modernist Cinemas and the Cultures of Imperialism*, 195.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 193.



Figures 8-11: The physical grace of male artisan labour. Stills from Song of Ceylon, Basil Wright, 1934.



comprehension, of intellectual mastery, but through a sensorial encounter necessitating an attitude of humility.

This respect for cultural difference seems to inform Wright's understanding of how British documentary personnel should assist in the growth of cinema in the underdeveloped world. Where there is as yet no capacity for filmic expression, collective responsibility for assisting its development must be born by organisations such as the colonial film units, multinational organisations (Wright appeared to have in mind in particular global companies sponsoring film production such as Shell) and the newly created international organisations associated with the UN.⁵⁴ However, Wright's emphasis on the duties falling on the materially advantaged and technically skilled obscures a more clear-sighted appraisal of the interests served by the different organisations cited. In retrospect, at least, this is glaringly evident when Wright singles out for praise two examples of film training and education in the underdeveloped world: Ralph Elton's work with the Malayan Film Unit and 'the work of that vigorous traveller,' Joris Ivens.⁵⁵ In 1948, when Wright made these comments, Ivens was living in Prague having had his passport confiscated by the Dutch Government after he resigned as Film Commissioner for the Dutch East Indies.⁵⁶ His resignation in protest at the Dutch refusal to recognise Indonesian claims to independence after the Japanese defeat, cited an irreconcilable gulf between the Dutch government's rhetoric of equality and mutual respect and their actions. In Sydney, en route to Indonesia, Ivens then embarked on a clandestine film, sponsored by the Australian Water Front Unions with an international crew, about a strike led by the Union who refused to assist Dutch military vessels on their way to the uprising in Indonesia.

The situation in which the Malaya Film Unit was operating was very different. Here, British rule resumed after the war due to persistent ethnic tensions between Malays and migrant Chinese settlers exacerbated by the Japanese occupation. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP), supported by poor and politically

⁵⁴ Wright, "World Documentary." See also Wright's contribution to "New Directions in Documentary: Edinburgh Film Festival International Conference."

⁵⁵ Wright, "World Documentary," 6.

⁵⁶ See Rosalind Delmar, *Joris Ivens: 50 Years of Filmmaking* (London: BFI, 1979).

disenfranchised Chinese labourers, embarked on a campaign of strike action and industrial disruption against the continuation of British rule. This transformed into a full-scale guerilla struggle in 1948 when the British abandoned plans to create a Malayan Union, which would have granted equal citizenship rights to all Malaya's ethnic groups, due to Malay protest. The British military response to the guerilla struggle and in particular its treatment of Chinese settler communities suspected of supporting the MCP was brutal. The Malayan Film Unit was therefore centrally engaged in the Colonial authority's 'hearts and minds' campaign waged alongside a protracted bloody military campaign.

The two filmmakers cited together by Wright had only one thing in common: they had both worked outside the developed world with the co-operation of local technicians and crew. But whilst Ivens was a filmmaker actively opposed to colonialism who sought to assist the struggle for Indonesian independence, across the straits of Malacca, Elton and his colleagues were engaged in an effort to perpetuate colonial influence despite intensifying anti-colonial struggle. Needless to say Wright's endorsement of both individuals was brief on detail. Indeed Wright's 'true internationalism' was both idealistic and wholly apolitical, characterised by a profound reluctance to analyse the historical conjuncture within which documentary cinema operated and the interests it served. Wright's idealism was one aspect of a philosophical position in which the documentary filmmaker is presumed qualified to identify and serve common universal goals, specifically the goal of enlightenment. Such a position fails to take account of the existence of irreconcilable interests and social conflicts, some of which find their expression in political movements and organisation. Tellingly his well-intentioned insistence on the importance of documentary production being locally directed, initiated from within the underdeveloped country does not consider the possibility that the consequent 'ideas and action' may take the form of political nationalism and anti-colonial protest. Liberal documentarists such as Wright and Arthur Elton sincerely hoped for a cultural renaissance in the underdeveloped world, but appear not to have considered how

intimately linked the revitalisation of culture in the colonised world would be to popular mobilisation through anti-colonial struggle.⁵⁷

Wright's inclination, as his enthusiasm for the World Union of Documentary indicated, was to assert a harmony of purpose among an enlightened international cadre of documentary professionals and film artists and contrast this with the squabbling and fractiousness of politicians and the clashes of sectarians and ideologists. As Rosen has observed, underlying this vision of the responsible documentarian is a belief that 'an overriding social and civic virtue can be grasped and manifested by an educated, liberal elite seeking the social good. Implicitly, such an elite must first have access to an encompassing knowledge usually obstructed by specific class and socioeconomic position.'⁵⁸ Like the concept of the socially unattached intellectual advanced by Grierson's contemporary Karl Mannheim, the responsible filmmaker 'is the bearer of generalised knowledge, and hence the secret of harmonious social rationality.'⁵⁹ They fulfil their duty in imparting that knowledge to the divided masses. Rosen makes a suggestive contrast with Gramsci's conception of intellectuals as fundamentally attached by bonds of commitment and allegiance to the dilemmas and interests of particular social groups as they seek to exercise the moral and cultural authority necessary to attain hegemony. An oppositional conception of the way documentary cinema might function in terms of international allegiances and solidarities, one consistent with Gramsci's emphasis on the social and political commitments of intellectuals, can however be glimpsed in Joris Ivens's *Indonesia Calling* (1946) which was shown at the first Edinburgh Film Festival and reviewed by left wing activist and filmmaker Ralph Bond. Bond approvingly reported Ivens's belief that documentary film must take sides in interpreting the social struggles of our times, rather than approach them 'from a tower of neutrality.'⁶⁰

⁵⁷ This liberal conception of a third world cultural renaissance might be usefully contrasted with Fanon's seminal account linking cultural renewal and anti-colonial struggle in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967)

⁵⁸ Philip Rosen, "Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 80.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Ralph Bond, "Indonesia Calling," *Documentary* 47 1947, 23.

Indonesia Calling 'challenges imperialism and urges democrats everywhere to help the new Indonesian Republic.'⁶¹

World Without End as Affirmative Internationalism

Another fledgling international organisation brought to the consciousness of the film society movement and the wider festival public during Edinburgh's first decade was UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation). Like the Festival itself, UNESCO was a creation of the hopeful internationalism that marked the immediate post war reconstruction. The impulse that led to the establishment of UNESCO was simply that cultural co-operation and exchange was essential to sustain peace between nations. UNESCO's vision therefore was that the tools of mass communication, cinema, radio and the press would be harnessed to the task of popular education in the service of international understanding. David Hardman, a representative of the British delegation at the second UNESCO general conference in Mexico, was reported to have said that 'the greatest service which UNESCO could do for the common people was to use these vast new instruments of mass communications to revive hope, temper pessimism and restore faith in the ordinary decencies and common values.'⁶² Both Grierson and Wright contributed to the development of UNESCO's film projects. Grierson worked as an advisor on mass media and public relations and it was in this capacity that he opened and addressed the first Edinburgh Film Festival. Basil Wright was commissioned by Grierson to draw up plans for the production of a series of films on UNESCO subjects by forty-eight member states, plans that were never realised. Wright would make a more lasting and more meaningful contribution to the UNESCO project six years later, when with Paul Rotha he co-directed the film *World Without End* which was sponsored by the international organisation.

Filmed in Mexico and Thailand (referred to as Siam), *World Without End* took up the challenge to use the cinema to revive hope and temper pessimism. How

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² In Forsyth Hardy, *John Grierson: A Documentary Biography* (London: Faber, 1979), 167.

the decision to situate the film on the work of the UN agencies in these two countries was arrived at is uncertain. The script consultant on the film was Ritchie Calder who had collaborated with Paul Rotha on two previous films, *People of Britain* (1936) which they co-scripted and *World of Plenty* (1943), where he was an uncredited script advisor. After the war Calder, working as a science editor at the *News Chronicle*, was commissioned by UNESCO in association with the British newspaper to write a series of articles about the organisation's work. The first series of articles to appear in the *UNESCO Courier* was on the subject of irrigation and desertification in northern Africa.⁶³ In 1952 Calder undertook a three-month expedition to Southeast Asia sponsored by the United Nations and taking in Borneo, Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, Malaya, India and Afghanistan. Calder's feature articles on this '25,000 mile' expedition described a range of interventions in education, healthcare and agriculture undertaken by the United Nations agencies working in partnership with national governments.⁶⁴ The research carried out by Calder during this mission formed the basis for the Thailand sections of *World Without End*. The choice of Siam (Thailand), as the focus for the film, rather than one of the other countries visited by Calder, is interesting to note. Siam was alone in the region in not having experienced in the recent past the turmoil and violence of anti-colonial nationalist struggle. Among Siam's neighbours in Southeast Asia there were in fact precious few grounds to temper pessimism. Burma had been convulsed by civil war and ethnic violence following the protracted end of British rule six years before the film was made; Malaya was gripped by anti-colonial communist led guerrilla warfare against the British and the French were engaged in a full scale colonial war in Indo-China as they sought, like the Dutch in Indonesia, to cling on to their empire. Siam, never directly colonised, emerged from the Japanese occupation with a modernising military authoritarian leadership and was in the process of becoming a key ally of the United States seeking to extend its influence in the region.

⁶³ Ritchie Calder, "Men Against the Desert," *UNESCO Courier* III. 2 (1950): 8.

⁶⁴ Ritchie Calder, "25,000 Miles Through South-East Asia 1," *UNESCO Courier* V. 5 (1952): 2, 6-7, 8-11; "25,000 Miles through South-East Asia 2," *UNESCO Courier* V. 6 (1952): 11-13.

In the fashion of the classical expository documentary *World Without End* starts with a male voice; deliberate, unrushed and expansive, it possesses intonation less obviously marked by class background than other British documentary narrations of the period. A voice intended to speak for all. Over the image of a globe turning slowly in the darkness the voice declares, 'I am a man myself and I think that everything that has something to do with human beings has to do with me too.' Accompanying the voice, an uplifting musical theme builds, it momentarily picks out the motif from Beethoven's Ode to Joy before this is subsumed back into the melody. The opening sentence, evoking Vico's famous statement of humanist sentiment, nothing human is alien to me, invites us to involve ourselves in the fate of unknown others around the world on the basis of our shared humanity. It suggests that the proper terrain of our responsibility and duty is global, extending outwards beyond our homes and our borders, incorporating the whole of humanity. The voice then shifts to the collective pronoun, includes us, 'we are looking at human beings, and we are seeing something of two countries where they live. In both places people get their living from the earth and the water.' Here the commentary introduces its key theme, the invisible bonds that connect the peoples of Siam and the people of Mexico to each other and the common condition that ties them both to us.

The film then interweaves sequences from Siam and Mexico, crossing continents with subtle dissolves. The logic varies, sometimes actions on the two continents are explicitly matched; a sequence of the Mexican fishermen night fishing under billowing moonlit clouds dissolves into one of Siamese fishermen putting their boats out at dawn, different cloud formations, boats and hats and contrasting light but similar pictorial composition. Sometimes moods are contrasted. A siesta sing song, Mexican children gathered around Moreno, the white suited student from CREFAL (Centre for Fundamental Education in Latin America) continues to be heard as the camera slowly pans the portico and rests on a villager reclining in the shadows against the wall. With his sombrero worn low over his face he pulls on a cigarette, the smoke rising lazily as the voice over observes, 'there are moments in the life of the island when everything seems to stand still. When everything is calm.' The image dissolves to a close up of a distressed baby in Siam seen and heard screaming. The

voice-over suddenly becomes urgent: 'Calm! How can you stay calm when your skin is covered by disgusting growths?' The disease in rural Siam is Yaws, a problem dramatically resolved through the UNESCO sponsored penicillin vaccination programme. In a later sequence the medical team return, the miracle has worked and the children of the village are smiling again.

Both the Siam section directed by Basil Wright and the Mexico section directed by Paul Rotha deal primarily with development issues and schemes relating to health, agriculture and education. The Mexican section chronicles the work of a newly established programme for teaching fundamental education in rural communities. The CREFAL students, technical specialists from across the Latin American regions, trained to work in rural areas to improve basic standards of hygiene, husbandry and literacy. The parts of the film concerning the CREFAL students have a narrative shape, beginning with the arrival of the students among the island communities on Lake Patzcuaro and ending when they leave the island and graduate from the headquarters of CREFAL. The Siam sequences move geographically from rural to urban and from north to south evoking the nation as a whole and the breadth of UN sponsored development initiatives across it. In keeping with this strategy each development initiative is described as a partnership between the Siam authorities and the United Nations agencies.

A remarkable consistency of visual style, all the more striking considering the challenges of filming thousands of miles apart in isolated rural areas, underscores the theme of universal humanity and respect for cultural traditions. A distinctive pace and style of camera movement, stately, purposive pans which seem intended to match the tone of the commentary is a defining feature of both sections of the film. And there are particular visual motifs that cross the continents; rows of labourers in the fields harvesting, children grouped together watching the spectacle of their friends get haircuts or vaccination jabs, laughing and squirming. Elizabeth Lutyens' musical score skilfully weaves in and gives way to varied and diverse local song and music, from the close harmony, lilting Mexican voices to the distinctly Rumba like rhythms of postwar Siamese *Luktoong*. Finding echoes and traces of one musical tradition in

that of another the musical track too suggests underlying sameness through cultural difference.

World Without End sets out to inspire feelings of love and compassion and foster a sense of our common destiny and a shared responsibility for solving humanity's problems. It brings geographically separated peoples into proximity with each other and to us through the power of film, soliciting feelings of care and responsibility, urging us to consider these distant others as our neighbours. It tells us, finally, that the United Nations is an unprecedented organisation that embodies our hopes for a world in which we love one another rather than destroy ourselves through fear. The United Nations is presented as an organisation with the capacity to transcend the enmities between nations by embodying the ethical precept of love thy neighbour; this is the overriding global civic virtue that the filmmakers grasp and seek to convey.

In the concluding sequence of the film we are taken from the fluttering flags of Latin American nations at the Mexican headquarters of CREFAL to the flags of all United Nations members outside the agency's iconic New York building. In the next shot a wizened farmer scoops up dry earth and letting it run through his hands looks to the sky. The following shot takes us back to the UN building so that the farmer appears to be looking in hope at the international organisation. Over images of children, faces looking towards the viewer expectantly, the film concludes by suggesting that through these new international institutions we can liberate ourselves from the past. Before, people organised their fears and hatreds, but the UN agencies are something new, an organisation operating in the spirit of love. The film's argument therefore makes two moves, the first is an ethical injunction to love our neighbours, and importantly to recognise that in a shrinking world our neighbours are all those who live in the world with us. This love toward our neighbour is then bound up with a demonstration of the value of the full range of development interventions being conducted under UNESCO and UN auspices, healing the sick, teaching and sustaining livelihoods. The success of these development projects is related to the spirit in which they are conducted. The medical team who brought the miracle of penicillin to the villages in Siam we are told were doing the work because 'they

wanted to do good.' Technical expertise is harnessed to virtuous impulses. Similarly the students of CREFAL, there to learn from the rural communities they live among, can deploy their knowledge only if they possess an understanding of the people and this ultimately depends on developing a capacity to care and to love them.

Viewed over a half century after it was made, the argument developed in *World Without End* cannot but provoke an ambivalent response. There is a melancholy recognition that the film's inspiring vision of a more humane world, a world transformed by an ethic of care, belongs to a historical moment long passed. Yet the intervening years have tarnished the image of the international agencies which carried that hope in the film. We have become only too aware of the cooption of these same agencies by the political, economic and military interests of globally powerful states. The utopian aura invested in the United Nations in *World Without End*, neatly captured in the poor farmer's expectant gaze upwards that appears to follow the majestic vertical sweep of the agency's headquarters, now seems tragically naive at a time when parts of the organisation appear to face a terminal crisis of authority. Moreover, consistent with the broader tendency of the British documentary, the film raises only those problems for which there are practical development solutions. No more substantial changes in social relations are necessary and despite the rhetorical emphasis on reciprocal learning and sharing in the idea of fundamental education, the people are largely conceived as the recipients of the goodwill of professionals.

But the film might be judged differently if situated in relation to representations of non-Western people in circulation in Britain at the time. What is especially distinctive about *World Without End* is that its way of seeing and relating to the non-European world appears refreshingly unburdened by the imperatives imposed by the coloniser/colonised relationship or its unconscious legacy. These imperatives are evident in the paternalistic tone that marks the work of the Colonial Film Units in Africa and Malaya. A contemporaneous cycle of feature films concerned with Britain's post-Imperial role and its relationship to the new Commonwealth also provide a point of comparison and contrast. Focusing on the films *Simba* (Hurst, 1955) and *Windom's Way* (Neame, 1957), Christine Geraghty has

argued that the Commonwealth film of the 1950s typically distanced itself from and modified pre-war Imperial attitudes.⁶⁵ These attitudes, associated with white settler characters in both films, articulate the presumption of British strength and superiority, but are shown to provide no basis for leadership in the future. Instead the Commonwealth films discussed by Geraghty laboured under the burden of establishing a coherent liberal position. They did so through the construction of white liberal characters that embody moral goodness and sacrifice, winning respect from colonised Black and Asian characters. A characteristic of this liberal position is that goodness entirely eclipses any sense of political agency. Consequently, Geraghty argues, the question of the right to political independence is transformed into one of humanitarian largesse on the part of the white characters. Moreover, the failures of the virtuous liberal project in confronting violence compel the narratives of both *Simba* and *Windom's Way* to seek a scapegoat; both films deploy crude racialised stereotypes to that purpose.⁶⁶

World Without End shares with the Commonwealth films a preoccupation with moral goodness and a radically attenuated sense of political agency. But unusually, in the former, the moral agents doing good deeds and exercising their humanity are neither European nor American. Indeed the commentary goes to some trouble to make us aware of the nationalities of those representing UN agencies. In Siam the health visitors working for UNICEF seen doing their rounds are themselves Siamese, a Chinese agronomist with the Food and Agriculture Organisation helps local farmers clear choked waterways and the medical team that give and monitor the vaccination programme includes local doctors, a man from Trinidad and a woman from Canada. In Mexico the CREFAL students we are told come to the project from all over Latin America; Bolivia, Panama, Cuba, Haiti. The global reach of UNESCO and UN membership is emphasised, as are regional sources of humanitarian assistance. These non-European representatives of the UN also possess scientific expertise; they are the white uniformed agents of modernity bringing advanced

⁶⁵ Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

technological skills, medical knowledge, and agricultural expertise. They occupy the heroic roles more commonly reserved for Western counterparts, controlling the environment, waging war on disease and poverty. Dr Ling sent by the FAO is shown standing at the prow of a riverboat like a visionary, pristine white shirt and panama hat rising above the weeds that choke the water, his outstretched hand pointing the way ahead as the boat cuts a swathe through the tangled foliage. The film takes existing humanist values associated with individual moral goodness, self-sacrifice and care on the one hand and technocratic expertise and accomplishment on the other and identifies them with subjects of modernity in Siam, Haiti, China.

Siam as depicted by Basil Wright is a place in which the ancient and the modern coexist. The opening sequence evokes a pastoral idyll of village life, emphasising quotidian routines, herding water buffalo, women laughing and preparing a meal, but it quickly shifts focus. From images of rural waterways and boats, the camera rests on a lotus flower drawing back to reveal a large pond covered in blooms. The commentary states, 'People talk of the unchanging East. But there are changes all the same. Here, the new and the old, the changing and the unchanging are side by side and are interrelated.' The sounds of traffic are now audible as the camera slowly tilts up from the picturesque pond to reveal lorries thundering along a busy highway. We are then taken to bustling Bangkok and the soft country music we have been listening to gives way on the soundtrack to a lively urban band, music made for dancing to, a point emphasised by the narrator, 'This is Bangkok. Here too there is music on the water. Old tunes and new tunes.'

This stress on continuity and the interdependence of the traditional pastoral and the modern urbanised present was a prominent trope in several documentary films that registered the changes in British society during the closing stages of the war and into the post war years. As Robert Hewison has observed it is a particularly noticeable feature of the films of Wright's close associate Humphrey Jennings and editor Stewart McAllister.⁶⁷ Their acclaimed wartime film *Listen to Britain* (1942) used an intricate montage, juxtaposing images of pastoral Britain with bombed out

⁶⁷ Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940*, Revised ed. (London: Methuen, 1997).

urban landscapes, bustling factory floors and smoking chimney stacks, with all places represented as integral parts of a nation united at a time of danger. According to Hewison the circumstances of war had nurtured a neo-romantic current in British culture, a yearning for 'deep England' associated with mystical landscape evident also in the films of Powell and Pressburger. A later Jennings and McAllister film made for the Festival of Britain, *Family Portrait* (1950), was similarly preoccupied with continuity and tradition even as it celebrated scientific innovation. *Family Portrait* employs the central motif of the nation as a family with a long history of drawing strength from its diversity and its enduring paradoxes: the prose of industrial development and the poetry of landscape, the farmer and scientist, the admiration for innovations and the love of tradition. As in *Listen to Britain* Jennings and his editor Stewart McAllister juxtapose images that evoke the paradoxes of the family temperament, differences ultimately balanced and as such a source of strength rather than division.

Harmony and balance is suggested too in *World Without End*, the connections established between the old and the new in music and image serving to hold together the seeming contradiction of promoting development whilst affirming respect for religious tradition and cultural autonomy. Again the commentary makes this explicit describing the introduction of modern educational methods whilst cautioning, 'When you have a fine and old culture of your own, no matter how useful new methods can be you don't want your own unique things to disappear. It has happened too often in the world that an old culture has been destroyed by contact with something new. It is as important to carry on a cultural tradition as it is that the forests are being replanted.' In evoking this fine old culture Wright revisits some of the imagery and thematic preoccupations of *Song of Ceylon*, in particular dance. The following sequence of Siamese schoolchildren learning to dance is amongst the most visually arresting of the film. The commentary ceases and the interpretative grip of the voice over is momentarily loosened. Echoing a similar sequence in *Song of Ceylon* in which children receive dance instruction, Wright focuses first on children's legs and bare feet. Here they are shuffling in a crocodile formation across the schoolroom's dark wooden floorboards, their dancing shadows stretching out beside them suggesting

graceful hand movements in silhouette. Then the classroom, a pattern of light and shade, of dark wood and neat white shirts and blouses, the children apparently preoccupied with shaping their bodies in the dance. And from the classroom, a dissolve to a classical dance performance, with again an initial focus on agile feet shifting then to the hand, fingers extended, tracing a curve away from the body, an arc perfectly mimicked by the camera's movement.

Lingering on the expressive faces and idiosyncratic gestures of children, the sequence involves the viewer in an experience of the corporeality of others. Even as the film marks cultural difference in the form of tradition it bridges the distance this might create between the viewer and the film's subject. Watching children learn the disciplined moves of dance we are struck by compelling moments of familiarity in the simple gestures of play. The emphasis throughout *World Without End* on children's faces, smiling, laughing, anxious or stoical as they wait for their jabs or for haircuts powerfully affirms the commonalities of being human. The commentary rather redundantly states what we have experienced through the image. 'Children' it observes, 'here as everywhere like to act and to dance.'

Images that most sensitively register the unique and the idiosyncratic (as opposed to the iconic and the archetypal) paradoxically have the greatest power to evoke an unexpected feeling of familiarity. The contents of the photographic image, as David MacDougall has argued, are physical and psychological before they are cultural.⁶⁸ Photographic images tend to underplay and diminish consciousness of differences that might be considered cultural, enhancing instead our sense of individuals as both uniquely themselves and at the same time possessing human qualities we all share. MacDougall's observation is indebted to a rich vein of earlier theorising about cinema as prelinguistic visual language. As Balázs remarked decades earlier, 'on the motion picture screens all over the world we currently witness the development of the first international language: that of facial expression and physical

⁶⁸ David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 252.

gestures.⁶⁹ Gesture and facial expression is weighted differently in *World Without End* than *Song of Ceylon*. In *Song of Ceylon* we are inclined to recognise the movements of dance, ritual and everyday life as formed within a different regime of the body than ours. Bringing us into physical intimacy with these bodies, *Song of Ceylon* is transcultural in the sense that it crosses borders and enacts an experience of the different corporeal and spiritual identities of others. *World Without End* refers to unique cultural identity both verbally and visually but it pulls towards the other sense of the transcultural, suggesting the transcendence of cultural boundaries.⁷⁰ Through the expressive faces and gestures of children in particular it establishes a sense of affinity between ourselves and others.

World Without End's success in combining an inspiring drama of technical and educational assistance with an emphasis on our shared experience of being human led to its critical elevation as a model for how film can contribute towards efforts at mutual understanding. James Beveridge of the National Film Board of Canada wrote that *World Without End* set a high standard to all future filmmakers who 'seek to master the painful process of understanding other people and their problems.'⁷¹ Festivals, he notes, offer their audiences an abundance of films from distant lands. Such is the potency of the medium, Beveridge observed, that even the worst of these films gives an impression, 'a sense of the foreign land and its people, which is likely to lodge forever, for better or worse, in the inward eye of the spectator.'⁷² The best of these films give an indelible visual impression of place 'which we carry with us forever after in our calculations.'⁷³ The superiority of *World Without End* was judged to lie in the drawing together of an intellectual argument with a deep impression of particular men and women. Addressing our intelligence the film argues that problems are soluble; 'disease can be cured, lakes can be stocked, soil can be regenerated, rainfall can be conserved, people can learn, the world need

⁶⁹ Quoted in Stollery, *Alternative Empires: European Modernist Cinemas and the Cultures of Imperialism*, 23.

⁷⁰ MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, 245.

⁷¹ James Beveridge, "Far Horizons," *Film Forum*, October 1953, 5.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

not blow up finally or founder under waves of hopelessness and bafflement.' But then what makes the argument hard to dismiss is the sympathy with which 'men and streets and landscapes of the film have been observed by the camera.'⁷⁴ He continued, 'We see the problems set down, not coldly or objectively, but in settings of great beauty, peopled by dark exotics, whose babies cry and whose bodies shrink before pain and whose faces light up at a joke, *Just Like Ours*.'⁷⁵ Having seen them, we commit to memory some Thais and Mexicans, their households and the human problems they face. Other critics too remarked on the film's achievement in conveying that 'benevolent internationalism is no cold ideal but can have a warm heart.'⁷⁶

Margaret Hancock was also in no doubt about the film's achievement. Reviewing the film for film society movement magazine *Film News*, Hancock asserted 'All societies *should* show this film without hesitation.' This was, she stated 'documentary back in its old stride again, portraying reality with poetic feeling, harnessing great technical skill in the services of humanity and achieving beauty in the process.'⁷⁷ The emphatic use of the modal verb *should*, gives a very clear sense that *World Without End* in some way resonated deeply with the film society movement, its collective sense of purpose and values. Here was a film considered worthy of all the support and advocacy the movement, both national and international, could muster. One of Hancock's counterparts, writing in the magazine of the Canadian film society movement, *Canadian Newsreel*, likewise wrote 'film societies *should* hound their cinemas, public libraries, film councils...even write letters to Parliament if need be, in order to get it shown as widely as possible.'⁷⁸

World Without End's contribution to an affirmative internationalism was also acknowledged in a major work of film theory published in 1960, Siegfried Kracauer's

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁶ Jack Smith quoted in "Unesco Presents 'World without End'," *UNESCO Courier* 7, no. 4/5 (1954): 40.

⁷⁷ Margaret Hancock, "World without End," *Film News* (1953).

⁷⁸ *Canadian Newsreel* quoted in "Unesco Presents 'World without End'," *UNESCO Courier* 1954, 40.

Theory of Film.⁷⁹ In the book's epilogue Kracauer pondered cinema's capacity as a photographic medium to create perceptions of deeper commonality among peoples out of superficial differences. In doing so he was extending a point raised by Erich Auerbach in relation to the novel in his study *Mimesis*. Auerbach, like Kracauer, driven into exile by the Nazis, had suggested that the modern novel in its tendency to accumulate description of 'the ordinary business of living' might ultimately erode the ideological beliefs and values that separated peoples.⁸⁰ Likewise, film's affinity for the concrete, for the texture of everyday life made possible a sensorial experience of other people's physical environments and their ways of moving through them that Kracauer contrasts with more abstract and conceptual ways of knowing the habits and behaviour of a foreign people. Conceptual knowledge Kracauer likens to the well-known fact that New York streets are set out in a geometric pattern, information that becomes concrete only on the realisation 'that all the cross streets end in the nothingness of the blank sky.'⁸¹ Attempts to promote mutual understanding through various forms of cultural exchange were invariably hampered by the emphasis on conceptual learning of habits and behaviour rather than evoking experience. Insofar as films explore the fleeting moments of everyday life, 'they not only help us to appreciate our given material environment but to extend it in all directions. They virtually make the world our home.'⁸²

As commentators have observed, Kracauer's final hopeful meditation on the purpose of this film experience appear to mark a considerable shift from his earlier writings. Kracauer's Weimar writings on cinema addressed the relationship between the film medium and a historical experience characterised by disintegration and fragmentation. Like Benjamin, Kracauer understood the cinema to be both a manifestation of this historical experience and a means by which masses could collectively come to a consciousness of a disintegrating world and avert historical

⁷⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁸² *Ibid.*

catastrophe.⁸³ Writing in exile after the holocaust, Kracauer invests the film experience and its intimate experience of others, with the possibility of drawing the peoples of the world closer, diminishing ideological differences. The faces and the streets of a film provide moments of intimacy and recognition quite separate from the manifest story and on this basis, film could foster an increasing sense of commonality beneath the superficial differences that appear to divide us. The cinema, he suggests, has a role to play in 'reflecting and endorsing actual rapprochement between peoples of the world.'⁸⁴ Two films exemplify this for Kracauer, the first is *World Without End* which spans two continents with unifying and connecting transitions from Siam to Mexico, the common experience foregrounded all the more forcefully in the light of details that are unique to each place. But as critics such as James Beveridge clearly observed a sense of universality is also memorably experienced by the viewer through the camera's intimate exploration of faces, young and old, smiling, crying or creased with concentration and learning.

Kracauer's other example is the second film in Satyajit Ray's Apu trilogy, *Aparajito* (1957). Of a scene in which Apu's mother, sick and yearning for her departed son, looks out into the night, Kracauer writes, 'India is in this episode but not only India.'⁸⁵ He quotes a correspondent to the *New York Times* who writes, what makes the film remarkable is that a story from a remote land can feel so familiar, as if it was happening in the Bronx. Ray's Apu trilogy were quintessential film society films. *Pather Panchali* (1956) seemed to retain an unassailable presence among the most heavily booked films in the film societies years after its theatrical release. Like the *New York Times* reader, the rapturous British critical reception of *Pather Panchali* also praised the film's capacity to dissolve the barriers between the viewer's world and the world of the film. Derek Hill of the left wing *Tribune* wrote his review under the heading, 'See this Film and Share a Life.' For Hill, *Pather Panchali's* 'greatest quality is that it completely transcends limitations of place and time. The family,

⁸³ See for example Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Introduction," in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, ed. Siegfried Kracauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1960]).

⁸⁴ Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, 310.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

without ever becoming symbolic or typical in the customary sense is universal; and this effect is achieved with no sense of strain...When Ray makes you share the deepest emotions of his characters, his technique is more resourceful than a director of 50 years experience...Words that the cinema has vulgarised and flattened for years, words like love and compassion and family take on a new dignity and depth in *Pather Panchali*. Here is what suffering can mean, here is the hope of eventual food and warmth, here is failure. To see this film is to share a life.'⁸⁶ Hill's review and the many others like it suggest an affirmative internationalism in which sentiment and affective experience plays a crucial part in the act of understanding. Affirmative internationalism in the domain of reception can be thought of as a striving for what Victor Turner termed 'communitas.' In Turner's definition, communitas is an unstructured affirmation of commonality, a 'community of feeling' which 'strains for universality and openness' while stripping or liberating individuated members of 'structural attributes' that would particularise them.⁸⁷ The aspiration to communitas in the realm of film experience involves the recognition of humanity as undifferentiated and whole.

In *World Without End* this desire to evoke a sense of universal human experience combines with another powerful twentieth century utopian dream, that of a caring transnational cadre of professionals using their expertise as planners, doctors, teachers and scientists to alleviate poverty, disease and ignorance thus securing a better future for all. *World Without End*'s utopian vision is that of the altruistic expert dedicated to serve humanity. It is a vision that internationalises the idea of public service that is fundamental to both the British documentary movement and the volunteers of the film society movement and this surely accounts for its attraction and success.

⁸⁶ Derek Hill, "See This Film and Share a Life," *Tribune*, 10th January 1958.

⁸⁷ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1974).

Song of the Rivers: Internationalism of the Oppressed

Affirmative internationalism is a sensibility that seeks to inspire, it is represented by words with strong emotional and ethical content, love and goodness, dignity. It corresponds to a sensibility that seeks out films, which in Basil Wright's words, enact 'noble experience.' By definition it represses the ignoble aspects of international relations and minimises the attention that can be paid to a lack or failure that love and professional care alone could not ameliorate. A counterpoint to *World Without End* would be a film which develops an internationalism that is both critical and revolutionary, such as Joris Ivens's *Song of the Rivers*, which addresses aspects of international relations repressed in the former film whilst constructing its own utopian dreamworld.⁸⁸ Compared with *World Without End*, which was screened on national television after its Edinburgh premiere, *Song of the Rivers* appears to have dwelt in the exhibition shadows in Britain.

Both films were epic in conception and utopian in their vision. By an odd but suggestive coincidence both films had an estimated global audience of 250 million, with each title circulating in multiple language versions.⁸⁹ Like *World Without End*, *Song of the Rivers* was funded by an international organisation established in the aftermath of the war, the World Federation of Trade Unions. Born out of hopes for an internationally united union movement, the World Federation became another casualty of the cold war when Western European delegations withdrew in 1949 and formed the International Trade Union Organisation. After that the World Federation became identified with the Eastern bloc.

Song of the Rivers does include a central section on the World Federation's Congress in Vienna but it is no simple newsreel. Major rivers of the world provide the film with its key structuring device: six rivers are featured, the Mississippi, the Volga, the Amazon, the Nile, the Ganges and the Yangtze. Each river sequence

⁸⁸ Susan Buck-Morss describes the various utopian projects of modernity as dreamworlds, a concept borrowed from Benjamin. These dreamworlds 'are expressions of a desire for social arrangements that transcend existing forms.' Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), xi.

⁸⁹ "Unesco Presents 'World without End'."; Charles Musser, "Utopian Visions in Cold War Documentary: Joris Ivens, Paul Robeson and *Song of the Rivers* (1954)," *CiNeMAS* 12, no. 3 (2002).

concludes with a verse of *The Song of the Rivers* sung by Paul Robeson with lyrics written by Bertolt Brecht. The choice of great rivers is telling. Where *World Without End* traverses space in such a way as to emphasise universal domains of experience and aspiration, Ivens's objective is to juxtapose the three geo-political regions through which the world's great rivers flow. Across the three regions, the West, the East and the colonised world, the universal struggle to harness and transform nature and make it productive is contrasted, as are the social relationships in which the labour process is embedded. This underlying theme is introduced and developed in the film's first two sections.

In the opening prologue, natural landscapes give way to images of nature in the process of being transformed on a massive scale captured in the image of a hydroelectric dam and a spoken commentary, in the English language version, a Scottish accent, tells us, 'Aye, but man can yet be the master.' Over an aerial shot of the dam stretching emphatically across the broad river, harnessing its power, the voice continues, 'We built all this, all of us together.' Image and voice establish that the universal experience explored in this film is humanity's transformation of its environment and self-realisation through work; the universal human is the worker. Speaking on behalf of this universal worker, the commentary states, 'our hands, yellow, white, black, we change the face of the world.' Backed by strings that surge and climb triumphantly, the sequence pays homage to the extraordinary human potential for productivity and transformation of the landscape. The images emphasise both the vast scale of construction and also the individual and collective skill, creativity and pride that make it possible. In the former, epic, sweeping camera movement and expansive movement within the image suggests a mastery of space and the complex co-ordination of men and machinery; a tracking shot that pulls us smoothly back along an assembly line seems to magically stimulate a row of car chassis that lower one by one into the waiting arms of workers. In the latter, individual workers are seen in a harmonious, sensual interaction with the machines around them. The industrial worker and the artisan are alike; heavy iron rods are cradled and rocked gently by the fingertips of a glassblower, the broad artisans hands

mould the clay on a potters wheel and white coated technicians work with great precision on electrical circuitry.

Brisker in pace than *World Without End*, few shots linger for contemplation or stand out from the larger montage structures to which they belong. Montage is used to unify the disparate forms of work into a single category of human activity, crystallised in the plural form of the commentary, 'If it was up to us,' the commentary declares finally, 'everybody in the world would be happy.' That this is not the case is soon demonstrated in a transition formally similar to one in *World Without End*, where the calm of Mexico is contrasted with distress in Siam. The commentary interrogatively repeats the word happy but now over a sequence of shots of grim dehumanised labour whose iconic image is fast, repetitive motion. The commentary speaks for the ragged individuals we see, (there is no synchronised sound), 'All my life I've been hungry.' Unlike *World Without End* where relief comes in the form of the medical team from UNICEF, their heroic jeep ploughing unstoppable through the jungle, technical assistance cannot ameliorate this distress. And where the underlying causes of distress, disease, poverty and homelessness are absent in *World Without End*, they form a central preoccupation in *Song of the Rivers*. The montage sequences present a collision of images of poverty and wealth. In Europe a family living in squalor with their animals, a horse tethered next to sleeping children is matched to the horses mounted by foxhunters. 'At last' the commentary remarks ironically over a shot of the hunt, 'people who laugh.' The contrast is repeated; grubby children in rags are juxtaposed with glamorous society ladies dripping in jewellery. Then over three brief shots, a long shot of scavengers picking coal off a slag heap, followed by a shot of the mine, then suited bosses or financiers, smiling and shaking hands, the commentary summarises, 'You need thousands of poor men to make a rich man.' Rather than interdependency of different social groups, *Song of the Rivers* constructs an irreconcilable clash between the interests of workers and capitalists.

The dialectical opposition of human mastery over nature and the self-realising potential of work versus vulnerability to nature and exploitation backed by violence is taken up and explored in each episode dealing with the great rivers of the world. On

the banks of the Mississippi capitalist exploitation is experienced most intensely by Black Americans. And, the commentary tells us, because the government prefers to spend money on armaments, the levee walls burst and the raging river floods. On the banks of the Ganges and the Nile, peasants toil and the profits are harvested in London, Paris and New York. In India, we are told, two centuries of British rule created two centuries of famine. Despite political independence the same economic relations persist and in Egypt, British troops and warships seek to quell the growing claims for political independence. In Africa, where 'Western civilisation shines on the colonised world,' we are told disease stalks the land. Cape Town provides another opportunity to juxtapose wealthy whites at leisure and toiling blacks. As the images of back-breaking work supervised by pith helmeted colonials accumulate, the commentary pleads, 'It can't go on like this...You've a right to be happy.'

The penultimate section of the film features the great rivers of the Communist world: the Yangtze in post-revolutionary China and the Volga in the Soviet Union. In contrast to the wild flooded Mississippi, the Yangtze is tamed and productive, on its waters a flotilla of machinery sent from Stalingrad. There are images of abundant harvest and celebrations, here are the masters, we are told; this way lies the future. If the Communist countries represent a utopian future, the film concludes by making its universal realisation conditional on united action. In a final set of contrasts the theme of global violence and militarism is reiterated. Violence, from the atomic bomb to police brutality in Japan, West Germany, Cuba, Malaya, and Kenya threatens 'to prevent the worker from changing the fate of humanity.' The secret to victory is unity. Demonstrations in New York and in Sydney are cut together breaching the isolation of each as the commentary states, 'You are never alone.' As each of the great river sequences ended with an image of the ocean, this symbol is taken up for the last time and intercut with massed protest. In a final chorus of the *Song of the Rivers*, the massed voices of a choir replace the solo voice of Paul Robeson. If it was up to us mankind would be happy, the voice over had observed in the first section. Now it concludes emphatically 'It is up to us to see that mankind is happy.'

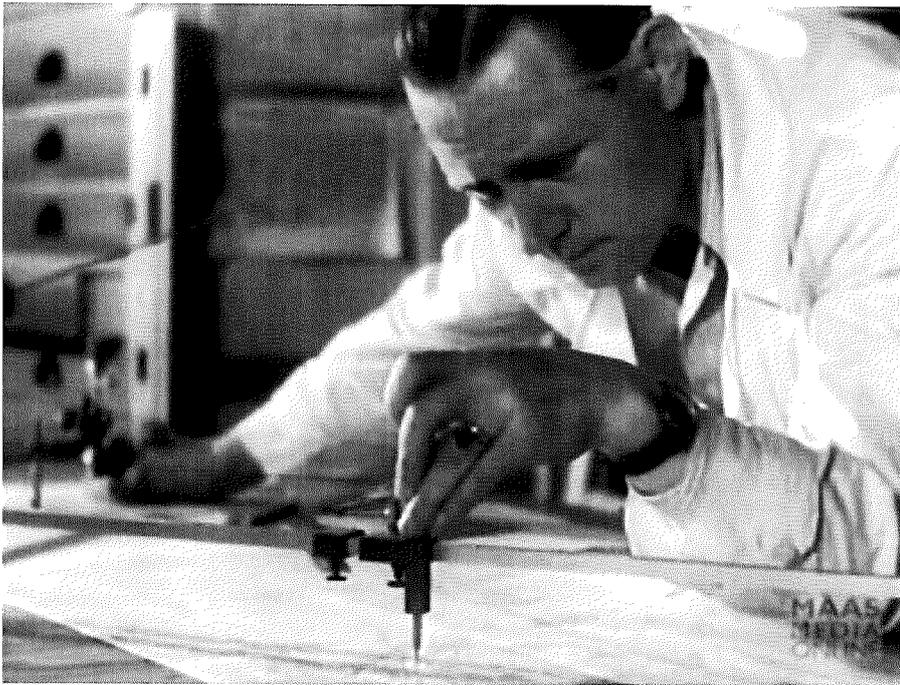
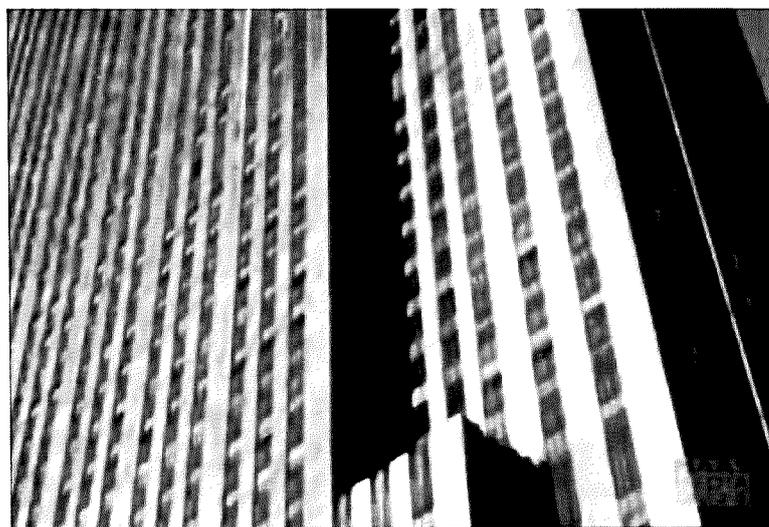
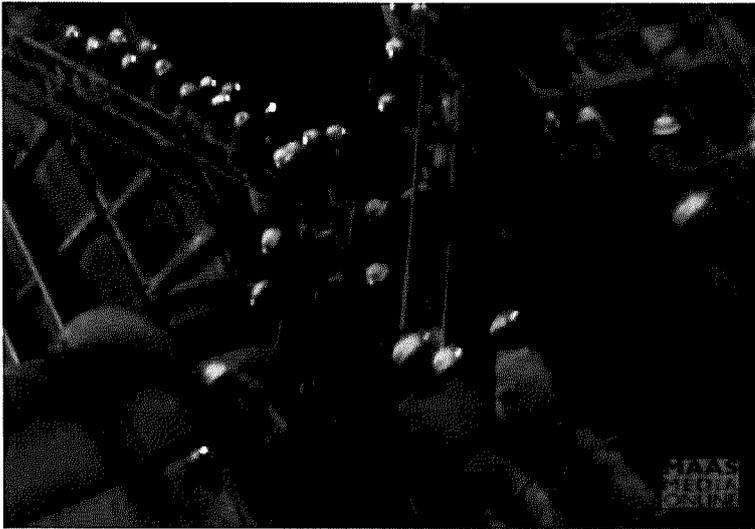


Figure 12&13: “Man can yet be the master.” Stills from *Song of the Rivers*, Joris Ivens, 1954.

Figure 14-16: From the gold mines of South Africa to Wall Street. Stills from *Song of the Rivers*.



Employing all the didactic potential of commentary and montage editing, *Song of the Rivers* draws inspiration from the achievements of the post-revolutionary Soviet cinema in seeking to mobilise workers for change. As Charles Musser has observed, the central trope of the river was partly inspired by the use of the river as a symbol for the revolutionary masses in the film *Mother* by Pudovkin, a creative mentor to Ivens since the thirties.⁹⁰ The principle of antagonism and conflict is as crucial to the conception of *Song of the Rivers* as harmonious co-existence is to *World Without End*. Shots are presented in combinations that direct the viewer towards a perception of the irreconcilable clash of interests intrinsic to the logic of capitalism and imperialism. The sequencing of the film is also structured around thematic oppositions, contrasts between abundance and scarcity, mastery over nature and dependence, state repression and revolution. Individual shots within each sequence are used primarily for their potential in connoting the overarching themes of the section with emotional impact underscored by the music and driven home by the commentary. The sequential movement from one coherent theme to the statement of its opposing theme provides the film's momentum, ending in the hopeful vision of workers united for revolutionary change overcoming repression. Underlying these oppositions is an antagonism between two social orders the capitalist West standing for violence, repression, exploitation and scarcity and the communist East, envisaged as a utopia of planning and plenty. A third geo-political space, the colonised world is a crucial theatre of struggle and of potential revolutionary agency.

Montage is not the only aspect of *Song of the Rivers* indebted to the Soviet cinema of the twenties. The film's utopian dream anachronistically invokes an older Soviet visual repertoire celebrating the fusion of man and machine.⁹¹ By comparison *World Without End* is far more circumspect about the impact of technology, emphasising environmental damage and sustainability. To a contemporary viewer the utopian dream of *Song of the Rivers* is irrevocably compromised by its blindness to the nightmare reality of socialist state-initiated social engineering. Exalting the

⁹⁰ Charles Musser, "Utopian Visions in Cold War Documentary: Joris Ivens, Paul Robeson and *Song of the Rivers* (1954)," *CiNeMAS* 12, no. 3 (2002) 118-19.

⁹¹ See Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.

mastery of nature and the end of scarcity in the Soviet Union, the film disregards the human tragedy of the centralised agricultural collectivisation projects of the thirties, which, far from leading to abundance, led to mass starvation. The utopian imagery of a Chinese peasantry celebrating with Chairman Mao on the banks of the Yangtze river is similarly clouded by our historical understanding of the massive cost in human lives of the Great Leap Forward begun within three or four years of the completion of Ivens's film, a catastrophic utopian project not unlike those praised by the film. Far from being the masters of their fate as the film suggests, the ordinary men and women of China were the victims of a social engineering scheme planned and executed by an authoritarian state. Whilst the liberal democratic state and the colonial state are represented as inherently violent and coercive, *Song of the Rivers* has nothing to say about the state under actually existing socialism, presumably because it is believed that the Party apparatus is in total harmony with the will of the proletariat.

Song of the Rivers' critique, however, shatters the dream of affirmative internationalism and shows the nightmare reality of imperialism. At the heart of international relations between the West and the underdeveloped world, it suggests, is base economic exploitation and oppression. Colonialism in Kenya, Egypt and India is associated with coerced labour, exploitation of resources, violence and mass starvation. So effectively was such a critique repressed within British film culture that the argument and images of exploitation and anti-colonial struggle in *Song of the Rivers* retain considerable power. Is there another film in the 1950s that speaks about the culpability of colonial authorities in the droughts and genocide in India? It was undoubtedly the fact that the film brought the coercive colonial state into visibility, whilst endorsing anti-colonial struggle that troubled the British Board of Film Censors which insisted on cuts before the film's release.⁹² An advert for Plato's new catalogue appeared in *Film* in 1955 which mentions *Song of the Rivers* among the distributors highlights of that year. But I can find no evidence that the film was booked by film societies; it is more likely that it reached an audience in political

⁹² Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: IB Tauris, 2006): 190.

organisations such as the Communist Party and friendship societies. The absence of *Song of Rivers* from the selection for the Federation's annual viewing session is striking, especially given the appearance of other Joris Ivens films such as *Power and the Land* (1940), *Spanish Earth* (1937) and *New Earth* (1933) on film society programmes over the previous decade and the fact that the film included contributions from internationally renowned artists Bertolt Brecht, Shostakovich and Paul Robeson. *The Seine Meets Paris* (1957), the film that Ivens made after *Song of Rivers*, when he had moved to Paris, was selected for the 16mm annual viewing sessions in 1961. For critics in Britain this later film was received warmly as 'entirely non-political' and with the hope that Ivens had emerged from his 'bout with ideology' and returned to the lyrical and personal filmmaking of his early films.⁹³

Internationalising the Film Society Programme: Contemporary Films

Concurrent with Edinburgh's consciously international programming, newly formed distribution companies were exploring the commercial potential of importing films from beyond Western Europe and renting to a range of exhibitors both commercial and non-commercial. They joined the growing numbers of distributors specialising in importing films in foreign languages including those aligned to specialist exhibitors such as Film Traders and Curzon discussed earlier. Plato (formed in 1950), Contemporary Films (1951) and Gala (1952) all took films that premiered at the Edinburgh Festival and made them available to film societies. One thing could be said to unite these three distributors, they all went out of their way to promote the geographical breadth of their film catalogue. Contemporary Films, advertising in 1957, promoted the linguistic diversity of their film offering, seventeen languages, from Greek to Chinese, Hindustani to Italian. Plato adopted the slogan 'See the Other Half of the World' indicating its association with Eastern bloc producers. Kenneth Rive's Gala claimed in a Kine Weekly ad in 1956 that it was 'The Company that Covers the World.' This promotion of the geographical breadth of their catalogues

⁹³ See Cynthia Grenier, "Joris Ivens: Social Realist Versus Lyric Poet," *Sight and Sound* 27, no. 4 (1958): 205 & 207.

marks these new distributors out from established specialist operations like Studio One and Archway which focused on the more commercial 'Continental' production, largely French and Italian films. Within the relatively specialised market for imported films, the most commercially exploitable were those featuring established French and Italian stars. Surveying the breadth of specialist exhibition in Britain in a 1954 article called *Continental and Otherwise*, Colin Young found 'despite the success of film societies in some centres, the specialist film goer in Britain is still – on any absolute standard – rather poorly served. Although he is able to see many of the contemporary French and Italian productions, he finds it much more difficult to sample the new films from Germany, Sweden or Spain; and he sees practically none from Asia and South America.'⁹⁴

As the market for foreign language films expanded it also became more differentiated; on one hand films largely sourced from France and Italy, which relied on established patterns of audience demand and interest, and on this basis could be programmed in the increasing numbers of second run and independently programmed cinemas pragmatically drawn to expand beyond their regular American and British product. Studio One's *Kine Weekly* ad, for example, described 'top class films...noted for their high entertainment value and stars of renown.'⁹⁵ On the other hand, distributors imported foreign language films and promoted them in ways that relied on authoritatively established claims of the work's singular artistic merit or cultural value. These products reached their audience in the limited number of cinemas that likewise distinguished their operations from the exhibition practices and methods of theatre owners at the other end of the commercial scale. Newspaper profiles of these pioneering art cinemas from the thirties onwards would stress that these exhibitor's methods differed from the standard showman's repertoire: there was no loud organ music and no choc-ices.⁹⁶ Various agents involved in the circulation of

⁹⁴ Colin Young, "Continental and Otherwise: The Specialised Cinema in Britain," *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 9, no. 1 (1954).

⁹⁵ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 21st October 1954, 45.

⁹⁶ In 1954, noting the increase in the exhibition of Continental films, *Kine Weekly* featured an article titled 'So You're Thinking of Showing Continental Films?' Amongst other advice for the would-be exhibitor of Continental films was to abandon

foreign language films, as theatre owners, critics and distributors, recognised these objective differences in commercial practice.

The distinction between the large scale and the limited sphere of circulation of foreign language films was understood by participants in that market as resting on the commercial exploitation of sensation and sex appeal. To some critics keen to maintain the distinction between the exhibitor promoting art and the showman peddling a movie's salacious content, the calibre of a distributor could be discerned by the size and prominence of the X certificate in their advertising. Needless to say, from at least *The Blue Angel* (1930) onwards the foreign language film had promised a franker treatment of intimate relationships and indeed a more relaxed approach to nudity than could be found in the Hays regulated American film.⁹⁷ But it was the manner in which distributors and exhibitors, who had recently gravitated to foreign language films, sold these films to their audience that drew the attention of critics. Methods of promotion that went out of their way to emphasise the erotic content of a continental picture rather than its artistic merits came in for sustained criticism in the mid to late fifties. Thus, George Hoellering of the Academy, known for selecting films based on exacting standards of artistic value, disapprovingly noted the rise of 'places which advertise Continental films as if they were dirty postcards.'⁹⁸ Founder of Contemporary Films, Charles Cooper, similarly observed in 1960 that aside from the Academy there were 'few West End cinemas that will open a foreign film on merit alone. Usually the specialised West End cinemas require a film to have a gimmick, generally Sex, Nudism or Horror.'⁹⁹ Even one of the most reputable art cinemas, the Curzon, came under the scrutiny of the watchful *Tribune* critic Derek Hill who berated its promotion of the Kurosawa film, *Ikiru (Living)* (1952), with a trailer featuring a striptease. This intensifying interest in distinguishing the art house from the 'tart house' (to use one of Hill's pithy distinctions) was itself a response to

the double feature and book a programme of high quality shorts instead and to provide the audience with programme notes with cast and credits. Both innovations were standard practice at the Academy. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 23rd September, 1954, 24.

⁹⁷ See Steve Neale, "Art Cinema as Institution."

⁹⁸ Quoted Derek Hill, "Censor-Proof Cinemas," *Daily Express*, 2nd January 1960.

⁹⁹ Charles Cooper, "Inside the Straitjacket," *Definition*, no. 3 (1960) 36.

the increasing audience for foreign language films, the differentiation of that audience and corresponding to that, new forms of entrepreneurship, on the part of distributors and exhibitors.

Although Plato, Contemporary and Gala entered the distribution business at the same time in the early fifties and shared a willingness to import films from further afield than continental Europe, they nevertheless differed significantly in their operating methods and strategy. Contemporary began as a distributor of 16mm versions of features to the non-theatrical market, mainly film societies. Plato, focusing on documentaries and shorts, supplied much the same market though with an emphasis on political groups and friendship societies. Kenneth Rive in contrast entered the business through the ownership of two West End cinemas and set up Gala as a distributor to supply his expanding circuit of theatres. Before long however Contemporary would modify its strategy in recognition of the difficulties of renting new 16mm feature titles solely through their catalogue. They found that it was necessary to launch many of their titles through West End screenings and so began a long-standing, though not exclusive, relationship with the Academy cinema.¹⁰⁰ Later this pattern for launching films could also include a showcase screening at the London Film Festival, started in 1957, or a special season at the National Film Theatre. For the distributor, what was crucial was the national press review that a West End or festival screening guaranteed. It was on the basis of these reviews that a film could acquire a national critical profile and attract subsequent interest within the film society movement.

Contemporary and Plato, could trace a connection back to the workers film movement of the 1930s. Both distributors were founded by members of the Communist Party who conceived their distribution activities in political terms. As Bert Hogenkamp has argued Charles Cooper of Contemporary and Stanley Foreman of Plato shared with other Communist cultural activists at the time a desire to

¹⁰⁰ In 1967 Cooper's Contemporary would acquire its own cinema, the Paris Pullman in Kensington. At the time Cooper hoped this would be the first of a nation-wide network of city-based art cinemas. See Charles Cooper, BECTU History Project: Interview No. 121.

challenge the dominance of American culture in Britain.¹⁰¹ Ralph Bond, veteran activist and filmmaker had argued at the 1951 conference of the Communist Party's National Cultural Committee that agitating against Hollywood was all very well, but it was important 'to ensure that our people see the best works of film art from all countries.'¹⁰² This was the basis of Contemporary's expansive policy of 'bringing into the country films from almost every nation in the world.' Through these films, Contemporary explained to readers of their newsletter, 'we can bring to people everywhere the entertainment, the culture, and diversity of opinion of every film producing nation on the globe.'¹⁰³ Cooper recalled that this brought him into conflict with figures in the Communist Party who wanted Contemporary to limit itself to Soviet and Eastern bloc films as Plato had done.¹⁰⁴

Coincidentally, Gala's initial tranche of films were also imported from the Soviet Union, but according to Rive this was a pragmatically commercial rather than an ideological decision operating on the assumption that there had to be a market for Soviet films.¹⁰⁵ Gala's distinctive talent as a cultural entrepreneur was to move between the two poles of the market for specialist foreign language cinema: the

¹⁰¹ Looking back in his BECTU interview in 1989 Cooper would also identify an anti-imperialist impulse in his policy. "We've grown up in a period where Britain has been an empire and it's now a country amongst other countries and I felt myself um - without being patronising about it - that we have tended to have a bit of an attitude in England that, of looking down on other nations and other peoples. And I felt that um, I've always felt that if we could bring in the best films from these - from other countries, and people would see these films here, and today of course it's also being seen by millions on television as well, that we can move towards a greater respect for other cultures, a mutual respect for other cultures." BECTU History Project: Interview No. 121, 1989.

¹⁰² Bert Hogenkamp, *Film, Television and the Left in Britain: 1959 to 1970* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2000), 13.

¹⁰³ "Introduction," *Contemporary News Letter* 1957, 1.

¹⁰⁴ "Contemporary Films," in *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, ed. Margaret Dickinson (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).

¹⁰⁵ Although many of these films such as *Gala 51*, from which Kenneth Rive took the company name, had already been distributed on 16mm by Contemporary this didn't stop Rive advertising Gala as 'The only company to cover the Eastern hemisphere.' *Kinematograph Weekly*, December 1954. Derek Hill would later feel obliged to correct Rive's assertion that Gala had introduced the Mark Donskoi Maxim Gorky trilogy to Britain. It had in fact been available from Contemporary for some time and was screened widely in the film society movement on 16mm.

commercial and the artistic. In amongst the Japanese films imported by the company in the mid to late fifties released with eye-catching titles like *Juvenile Passion* (1956) and *The Bath Harem* (1958) was the late Mizoguchi film *Street of Shame* (1956) which ran at the Cinephone theatre (dubbed by wags the Phoney Sin on account of its reputation for X certificate movies) in 1958 partnered with a film set in a 'nudist colony,' *Isle of Levant* (1957).¹⁰⁶

A 1959 survey on film society programming carried out by the Federation's magazine *Film* gives a useful picture of the pattern of supply to societies by the end of the decade. The total number of societies responding to the survey was thirty-six. The most heavily booked titles were, unsurprisingly, films that were newly available on 16mm having been released in the West End in the previous year or so, after critical success at a major international festival. *Pather Panchali*, the second most heavily booked film had first screened commercially at the Academy in December 1957 about eighteen months after its prize winning Cannes appearance. Acclaimed by critics in the quality press, 16mm prints of the film were subsequently made available to film societies by Contemporary. Equal to *Pather Panchali* in the number of bookings was the Bergman film *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and the Italian film *Amici Per La Pelle* (1956). The former, recipient of a special prize at Cannes in 1957, was screened at the first London Film Festival in 1957 and then opened at the Academy in March 1958. The latter was shown at the same cinema the previous year. Both films were distributed by Contemporary. Topping the list with twelve bookings was Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* (1956), which was shown at the Academy in July 1957 after taking the best director prize at Cannes earlier that summer.

The authority exercised by a small number of West End cinemas, the Academy and the Curzon in particular, in conjunction with critics in the national press in constructing a discourse of value that powerfully shaped programming decisions among film societies had been debated within the movement for some time. Commenting on an earlier programming survey, Peter Armitage, a member of Tyneside Film Society and later editor of *Film* bemoaned an overwhelming tendency

¹⁰⁶ From the Cinephone it moved to the Continentale, another Gala owned cinema, where it was double billed with the X certificate *Third Sex*!

for societies to book 'mature works whose critical reputation was above suspicion' and films recently shown in the West End. Consequently the vast majority of work selected by societies was by 'that small band known as great directors.'¹⁰⁷ Few respondents refuted that this was the basis of selection. However, from Cheltenham Film Society, Mr Stephenson wrote, 'our members naturally want to see the films they have read about and heard about. Why not? How else are they to see them? How can they appreciate what has been written about these films, compare them with others and develop a discerning attitude unless they see them.'¹⁰⁸ Two years later Contemporary Films itself entered this debate when Philip Jenkinson, representing the distributor, wrote an article in *Film*. Jenkinson argued that although most of the films Contemporary distributed were intended for 16mm consumption, a 35mm opening, preferably in the West End, was a necessity. The reason being that, 'Even if (a film) has been shown at Edinburgh or Cannes and received a lengthy appreciation in one of the better film journals, it will stay on the distributor's shelf until exposed to the Lejeunes and Powells.'¹⁰⁹ Jenkinson urged the Federation to do more to encourage demand for films that did not get a West End release and his article contained some punchy criticism of the Federation's annual national viewing sessions, the Federation's main previewing event through which Contemporary and other distributors sought to attract interest in films that hadn't already gained national press profile.

Criticism of this nature always provoked a chequered response from film societies, one that revealed an uneven cultural geography both in the commercial availability of foreign language films around the country and in the capacity for programming with an independent and original stamp. Some film society representatives argued that as their seasons were relatively short, with few available slots, many recent features, those that had not received commercial screenings locally

¹⁰⁷ "Challenge to Programmes," *Film*, no. 6 (1955): 5.

¹⁰⁸ "Challenge to Programmes," *Film*, no. 8 (1956): 25.

¹⁰⁹ Philip Jenkinson, "In the Film Pen," *Film*, no. 18 (1958): 15. *Film's* 1959.

programming survey noted that Dilys Powell was the most 'highly regarded of the national critics.' The prestige of Dilys Powell (critic of the Sunday Times) and C. A. Lejeune's (critic of The Observer) judgement in the film society movement would be hard to overemphasise.

such as *The Seventh Seal* and *Pather Panchali* were automatic selections. What was meant by 'adventurous' programming depended on where you were standing. In Wigan, Mr White calculated that forty to fifty members were lost because the West End art cinema hits that they programmed such as *Rashomon* (1950) and *Orphée* (1950) were not considered sufficiently entertaining.¹¹⁰ Heini Przibram of Tyneside Film Society, the Federation's Film Supply officer, argued that film societies in areas where good foreign films were shown commercially needed to adapt their policy to embrace more 'problematic programmes' and 'intensive methods' of film appreciation. Elsewhere, 'in communities not so "enlightened," societies almost have a duty to show "the-film-that-ran-for-weeks-at-the-Curzon."' ¹¹¹ In a final exchange, Jenkinson reiterated that, in his view, it was regrettable that a West End opening should have such a decisive influence on film society programming. Many worthwhile films were consequently neglected. Jon Evans, editor of *Film*, stated in reply that societies want to book films that have had successful West End runs because these were the best films. They were successful on commercial release because they were outstanding and this was why film societies wanted to book them.¹¹²

What was at stake in these discussions about film society selection was a question about whether the film society movement possessed sufficient critical authority to exercise an alternative discovery function, one capable of bypassing or rather supplementing the dominant nexus of art cinema theatrical release and national press. Contemporary's position in this respect was significant in that it combined two strategies. Although Contemporary imported feature films that gained their artistic reputation through West End exhibition and critical evaluation in the national press, in partnership with activists and critics in the Federation they also worked to broaden the basis of demand within the film society movement by seeking to make the previewing system of the national viewing sessions and the critical practice associated with it a more authoritative source of independent film evaluation.

¹¹⁰ "Challenge to Programmes," *Film*, no. 8 (1956): 25.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹² *Film*, no. 21 (1959): 29.

Retrospectively, on the occasion of a National Film Theatre season celebrating twenty-five years in distribution, Cooper explained that Contemporary had from the start possessed two equally important objectives. Firstly, to bring into the country the work of the best international directors; their involvement in introducing auteurs such as Satyajit Ray and Andrzej Wajda among others to British audiences testifying to their success. Secondly, they aimed to broaden the scope of their library to include 'not only those films which are artistically important but also able to satisfy the need to promote and publicise those films which fulfil a social function.'¹¹³ These included shorts and features showing the reality of war; film's providing a marginalised perspective on conflicts such as the Vietnam War and 'films which help to create a better understanding between peoples.' In the 1950s, for instance, Contemporary's decision to import two Japanese films may have been guided by the second of these objectives: *Children of Hiroshima* (1952), a trade union funded film that explored the devastation of the atom bomb, and *The Burmese Harp* (1956) set after the Japanese surrender in southeast Asia. Though both films were shown publicly in London, this was not at one of the West End art cinemas usually used by Contemporary to launch their films. National press was minimal, though both films were reviewed in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*.

Children of Hiroshima was rejected by the Academy on the grounds of print quality but did enjoy a short run of two weeks at the Marble Arch Pavilion and was subsequently revived for a similarly short period at the Everyman in Hampstead. Shown at the Edinburgh Film Festival in the summer of 1955 it was reviewed in an article in *Film* later that year. Sardonicly dismissing British critics' and cineastes' 'ardent pursuit of Japanese neo-feudalism,' film society activist John Minchinton described *Children of Hiroshima* as one of a series of films, funded through public and municipal subscription concerned with postwar reality in Japan. It was a film, he wrote, 'less concerned with film art than with its subject,' which challenged those in Britain who refused to consider Japanese suffering, as it asked its audience to consider the long-term consequences of the atom bomb on the lives of those who

¹¹³ "Contemporary Films 25th Anniversary," *National Film Theatre Programme*, April/May/June 1976, 40.

survive.¹¹⁴ Among the film societies to show the film was Tyneside which hosted a discussion meeting jointly with the United Nations Association. *The Burmese Harp*, although a prize-winner at the Venice film festival was also launched at the Everyman by Contemporary.¹¹⁵ In 1959 it was shown at the national viewing sessions and described as one of the outstanding features of that year's selections. *Film's* 1959 programming survey reported considerable interest from film societies in booking the film in the coming season.

An editorial titled 'Europe and the Far East' appeared in *Sight and Sound* in 1954 on the subject of the British cinemagoer's access to the full range of Japanese cinema. It quoted Gavin Lambert in a previous issue, 'one begins to suspect that more good films are being made at the moment in Japan than in any other country.'¹¹⁶ The point was that without access to the films the British cinephile had to speculate based on the limited evidence of a handful of festival screenings. Up till then only four films from Japan had been shown in the UK, including films by Kurosawa and Kinugasa. The editorial concluded hopefully with the thought that 'The great Russian films were introduced to Britain by the Film Society, and it is to be hoped that practical difficulties will not long prevent similar non-commercial showings of the work of these and other directors.'¹¹⁷ The evidence suggests that this was a misplaced expectation. In the 1950s the film society movement's role mediating audience access to imported foreign language, and especially non-European films, was an important yet dependent and largely subordinate one. It was dependent on distributors who themselves largely relied on leading exhibitors and the discursive authority of a few professional critics to launch their films. The long, long journey travelled by Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* before it reached British audiences tells an interesting tale. Made

¹¹⁴ John Minchinton, "Children of Hiroshima," *Film*, September - October 1955.

¹¹⁵ This pattern of an Edinburgh premiere, then a short Everyman run, followed swiftly by Federation viewing session screening, seems to have been a strategy for Contemporary's more risky imports, in particular a number of films promoted as feature debuts for their respective countries. *Rekava* (1956), a film from Sri Lanka, (Everyman screening Feb, 1958, national viewing sessions April 1958) and *Day Shall Dawn* (1959) from Pakistan are examples.

¹¹⁶ "Europe and the Far East," *Sight and Sound* 24/2 (1954): 57.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

in 1953, the first screening of *Tokyo Story* in Britain was for film society representatives in spring 1957 at the 35mm national viewing sessions organised for Federation by the BFI. A note in the programme stated that a distributor had yet to be arranged. Subsequent to this screening it was thoughtfully reviewed by the BFI's John Gillett in *Film* 13.¹¹⁸ Then in November 1957 it was featured in a festival of Japanese films at the National Film Theatre and on the strength of this showing was awarded the Sutherland Trophy in its inaugural year. Still without a distributor it was again shown at the National Film Theatre at a second Japanese film season in 1963 featuring Ozu's work. The distribution rights were eventually acquired by Contemporary and it was shown publicly at the Academy Cinema Club in March 1965, and consequently received extensive reviews in the national press. The following year it was added to Contemporary's 16mm catalogue and finally offered to film societies nine years after it had screened at their viewing sessions.

¹¹⁸ John Gillett, "Reviews: Tokyo Story," *Film*, September/October 1957, 20-21.

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Figure 18: Ad for Contemporary Films Ltd from *Sight and Sound*, Spring, 1957

Chapter Five

Film Society Criticism, Middlebrow Taste and New Cinemas

This chapter surveys the state of film criticism in the film society movement in the 1950s and early 60s. The focus of the chapter is *Film News*, a regular digest of film reviews published three or four times a year, which was frequently acclaimed by film society organisers as their Federation's most valuable service to them. Containing hundreds of film reviews covering the whole spectrum of film society programming written by an army of volunteers, *Film News* documents shifting taste and critical judgement within the film society movement of the fifties and early sixties. Moreover, *Film News* mediated the discovery of new films, guiding film society organisers in programming choices. As such it provides a useful way to consider the tension between different film society commitments, between the ethos of participation and the promotion of new and experimental work.

In 1953 the Federation of Film Societies began publishing a regular bulletin of film criticism with information on print availability called *Film News*. A year later it launched a new magazine *Film*. These two publications roughly paralleled the division of content in the BFI's own long established magazines, *Sight and Sound* and *Monthly Film Bulletin*. *Film News* was intended as a reliable reference source for film society organisers, the individuals responsible for programming. *Film* originated as a response to withering criticism of the Federation's publications and overall communication to rank and file film societies from the BFI director, Denis Forman.¹ It was therefore conceived as an attractive magazine with broad appeal, a publication that would raise awareness of the Federation, increase a sense of belonging to a coherent national and international movement, and provide a space for exploring 'the film society angle' on films, filmmakers and the wider world of cinema. Both publications prioritised soliciting critical opinion from film society members themselves. In the words of *Film's* inaugural editorial, these publications aimed to help the film society movement to find a voice. From the outset *Film* pursued an

¹ "Relationship between the British Film Institute and the Federation of Film Societies," June/July 1953. BFFS Archive, BFI Special Collections.

editorial policy of giving roughly equal space to writing by established professional critics and contributions from the amateur critics of the film societies. It also introduced a range of features in which members were encouraged to share their views on issues concerning the film society movement and film culture more generally. *Film News* made the circulation of lay judgement, that is to say reviews written by film society organisers for their colleagues, its central function.

Critical writing performs important functions within a film culture. Critics furnish the arguments that establish the value of a particular work of art. They exercise judgement about artistic or cultural value and in collaboration with exhibiting and promotional institutions, such as film festivals, perform a discovery function with respect to new film artists and movements. These discoveries, bringing new filmmakers to public visibility, in turn inform the selection activities of distributors. Critics also seek to persuade and educate the public concerning the possibilities inherent in a newly conceived work. Here their advocacy might involve claiming kinship or proximity between new work and a work whose value has already been recognised and established. Typically it also provides readers with a rationale for what has been done in the work, suggesting ways to appreciate and respond to it, bearing on the possible experiences it offers to an audience. Commenting on the art world, Howard Becker has observed that the function of criticism becomes particularly influential when engaged in explaining the necessity for formal or stylistic departures, which is to say when it demonstrates the limitations to previous criteria of judgement and makes the case for the legitimacy of alternative ways to appreciate and value the art work.² Films that in one-way or another transgress conventional practice inevitably defy some of the expectations held by viewers. If the demands and expectations of established taste and criteria of value are to be resisted then experiment and artistic innovation requires persuasive critical advocacy, often underpinned by an explicit theoretical rationale.

New work needs criticism and the film societies regarded themselves as the sponsors of new work. Arising as an alternative to the commercial system of

² Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 112.

distribution and exhibition, the film society movement's justification for its activities was two-fold. Firstly it was a movement of educational reform that set out to change the established tastes of the cinema public by raising standards of appreciation through film shows, lectures, programme notes etc. and secondly it aimed to create an audience for work that couldn't be assimilated by commercial cinema, work that departed from what was commercially valued.³ In this second instance the movement's aspiration was to be an organisational base supportive of innovation and experiment in film art. The question that is posed here then is, to what extent did the movement contribute discursively, critically, to the task of securing a public for new forms of cinema. What role did the film society movement play in making the argument for new cinemas?

The chapter focuses on the film society movement's critical engagement with three areas of new film practice, the renewal of a self-consciously experimental film practice in North America, the European new wave phenomena and in particular the French *nouvelle vague*, and the filmmakers of Japan and India brought to visibility through the mediation of international film festivals. Each kind of film practice confronted film society critics with a more or less unfamiliar film language and severely tested the movement's capacity to formulate an appropriate critical response. Finally I also consider the film society movement's response to the reappraisal of Hollywood Cinema, through the critical framework of *auteurism*. A new generation of film critics were claiming forcefully that film criticism demanded a hitherto neglected professionalism; it could no longer be the preserve of the semi-skilled or the literate layman.⁴ Although these words were directed at the established critics of *Sight and Sound*, they also had pertinence for the amateur critics of the film societies.

***Film News* Reviewing Practice**

Throughout its first decade *Film* struggled to establish a coherent identity. It remained caught between contending aims, to be an in house magazine for film

³ See for example Norman Wilson, "Film Societies - the Next Phase," *Sight and Sound*, July 1945.

⁴ See V. F. Perkins, "Fifty Famous Films: 1915-45," *Oxford Opinion*, April 1960.

society news or to be primarily a journal of film writing that could be commercially distributed. An editorial policy that aimed to accommodate the diversity of opinion in the film society movement meant the magazine rarely possessed the polemical clarity and vigour that critical partisanship provides. Remarkably, although it was conceived as a 'shop window' through which to 'sell' the Federation to the world, it received no subsidy. It was published entirely on volunteer effort and was financially dependent on what amounted to charitable advertising from the large sponsored filmmaking units such as Shell.⁵ Its sister publication *Film News*, launched a year earlier, quickly established itself as indispensable to film society programmers. *Film News* exclusively published film reviews written by film society organisers for film society organisers. As a publication it extended the existing information circulated by the Federation on film availability by incorporating critical assessments of the suitability of films for film society use. Professional reviewers previewed films at press screenings organised by distributors prior to a film's commercial release. Their amateur counterparts in the film society movement relied on the previewing system established by the Federation and the British Film Institute, the national viewing sessions. The viewing sessions, held annually at the Institut Francais and then in later years at the National Film Theatre, were like a trade show for film society representatives; a weekend of screenings of features and shorts selected by a previewing committee and intended to assist with programming. Each year one issue of *Film News* was devoted to coverage of the viewing sessions and included critical appraisals of all the films shown.

The second annual event to be incorporated into the *Film News* calendar was the Edinburgh Film Festival, an important platform for all varieties of the specialist cinema but with a policy promoting documentary and realist cinema. Additionally *Film News* also covered an impressive array of smaller regionally organised viewing sessions and arranged to survey the collections of quite an astonishing variety of film libraries. Issues of *Film News* from 1954 and '55, for example, include viewing reports of films from the Australian News and Information Bureau, Films from the

⁵ "Recommendations of the Publications and Publicity Sub-Committee to the Executive Committee," February 1954. BFFS Archive, BFI Special Collections.

BFI, Films from the National Film Board of Canada, Films of Poland, Danish Films, British Transport Films and Films from the United States Information Service. Other obscure corners of specialist film production that *Film News* patiently surveyed included the lists of films from Phillips Electrical Limited and from the Petroleum Film Board. One gets a sense of the gargantuan appetite film societies had for non-feature length film material. Not the least of the valuable services rendered by *Film News* was to sift the undifferentiated lists of sponsored films freely available to film societies for the quality production that could be of use to the film society organiser, or at least wouldn't embarrass them. Given the enormity of the task it is perhaps little wonder that irritation and frustration erupted occasionally in the reviews. Faced with yet another instructional film on the oil industry at a viewing session, one critic 'had to suppress a "what again!" at the sight of the inevitable oil barrel bobbing on the evenly undulating sea.'⁶

That the *Film News* reports were intended to be a valuable reference source to the film society programmer is clear from the detailed information given with each review. Alongside the usual film credits every review was accompanied with information useful for a film programmer; the length of the film in minutes, print availability by film gauge (35mm or 16mm), the distributors or film libraries handling the film and, where they were available, the hire charges for each distributor. References were also given to reviews in other publications, such as the BFI magazine *Monthly Film Bulletin* and the 16mm specialist periodical *Film User*, both widely read by activists within the movement.

Every review of a film screened at a viewing session also included the film's audience reaction rating. Since 1952, the viewing sessions organisers had introduced a method for gauging audience reaction to each film screened. To this day the practice of publishing the audience reaction results, which calculate the average reaction to the film based on gradings of the film submitted by viewers after the screening, is an integral part of viewing session reporting. Reporting on the first audience reaction tests, John Minchinton, organiser of the viewing sessions, remarked that the results, showing the relative popularity of each film, would be of value to

⁶ W. L. Prentice, "Review of Oil - the Unseen Traveller," *Film News*, June 1955, 9.

societies unable to send representatives to the event. As the audience was composed of both film society representatives who plan programmes (a specialist audience) and members who do not (less expert) the results might be considered to approximate those obtainable from most film societies. However, Minchinton added, 'It should be stressed that audience reaction does not claim to measure the real worth of a film but only its enjoyment by the audience. In other words, such tests are useful in anticipating the popular appeal of a given film, although regional and individual differences may make exceptions.'⁷ It was considered self-evident, however, that this assessment of popular appeal and 'real worth' were not identical qualities. Equally, each could legitimately make a claim on the film society organiser in assessing the suitability of film. Audience reaction results, as invaluable as they were in flagging up a future box office draw, did not obviate the need for critical mediation.

In their willingness to acknowledge and negotiate the differing claims associated with exhibition value on the one hand (the film that film societies will want to book because it will please their audience), and cinematic merit on the other (the film that a film society ought to book because it is of intrinsic artistic, cultural or educational value), the amateur critics of *Film News* rendered a valued service to the movement's activists. It was precisely the facility with which the large team of reviewers balanced a judgement of cinematic achievement across a diverse range of film practice with a clear assessment and recommendation concerning the suitability of each film reviewed for film society exhibition that made *Film News* indispensable to film society organisers. With a noticeable regularity over the first dozen years of its publication *Film News* was garlanded as the service offered by the Federation most valued by film society members.

Critical Evaluation as Recommendation

Close study of the reviews over the publication's first decade confirms a distinctively practical orientation to the collective critical enterprise, a preference for recommendation. Reflections on how a particular film might function within a film

⁷ John Minchinton, "Report on the Audience Reaction Tests," *Newsreel*, Summer 1952, 5.

society context often subsume evaluation of the film itself. Or rather evaluations of the film are inextricably bound up with an assessment of how a film will play out on a film society programme. What stands out about the reviews is how precisely the critic is able to identify and articulate the perspective and interests of the film society organiser with respect to the film in question. Consequently, one of the most striking features of the reviews is how frequently and knowledgeably they refer to their presumed reader, the film society programmer. All reviews were authored, identifiable by initials, with full names listed on the front page. The reviewers themselves tended to be what one contributor to the Newsreel column in *Film* jokily described as 'the modest big shots of the film society world.'⁸ They were prominent film society organisers, often individuals involved in regional or Federation activity and likely to have been well known within the movement. Whether would be critics were ever turned down by the editor on account of the standard of their contribution is uncertain.

Foremost among the critic's tasks was to assess the kind of audience the film was likely to appeal to among those accommodated within a film society and having done so make suggestions as to how the film might be programmed. The reviews testify to the fact that the film experience offered by film societies could be highly differentiated, incorporating a wide range of desires, interests and impulses. It was in the nature of the way the film society programme, the season, and its activities in general were conceived in the 1950s that this diversity could and should be accommodated. The reviews bend to the task of elucidating what a film might be useful for. 'A first rate children's film as well as excellent for grown ups.'⁹ 'For the avant-garde enthusiast.'¹⁰ 'Strongly recommended as light relief to an art film programme.'¹¹ 'All in all an interesting film that would make a lighter film than usual for the discussion group.'¹² 'Would be very useful for programmes showing the

⁸ Ian Newton, "Newsreel," *Film*, no. 25 (1960): 34.

⁹ P. Wihl, "Review of Lone White Sail," *Film News*, March 1953, 7.

¹⁰ Arnold Hare, "Review of Bells of Atlantis," *Ibid.*, May, 2.

¹¹ Heini Przibram, "Review of Our Drawings," *Ibid.*, April 1954, 3.

¹² Ronald Shields, "Review of to Be or Not to Be," *Ibid.*, 11.

development of the Western.'¹³ Dispensing programming advice based on an assessment of the many potential aims and functions of film, the various kinds of experiences that film fosters, the reviewers of *Film News* conform less to the model of the critic as custodian of film art, seeking out the very best, and appear more like informed facilitators, seeking to match the right film with the right audience. Their authority as critics is largely bound up with their expertise as exhibitors, their feel and grasp of a film society member's needs and taste. In this respect the *Film News* critics evoke Radway's description of the Book of the Month Club judges in the United States, whose job it was to make selections of quality books to send out to the club's subscribers.¹⁴

Notwithstanding the differences between a commercial bookseller, the Book of the Month Club, and non-commercial voluntary film exhibition, both cultural agencies revolve around notions of membership and subscription, and each accorded a central place to subscribers within their activities of criticism and recommendation. *Film News* reviews rarely strayed far from a clear-sighted evaluation of a film's exhibition value. Likewise the Book of the Month Club's judges foregrounded the act of reading and differentiated reading activities rather than authorship within their evaluative scheme. Radway summarises the approach of the judges to the evaluation process they presided over as 'thoroughly contingent and fundamentally reader driven. They tended to subordinate the critical act of literary judgement to the activity of recommendation. And recommendation, as they practised it, was a self-consciously social activity constituted by their effort to understand and adopt the point of view of the subscribers.'¹⁵ For the *Film News* critics too, the task of anticipating existing tastes rather forming taste appeared to take precedence.

As we shall see, however, *Film News* critics did not entirely renounce the taste-forming role of the critic; to do so would be to renounce the educational function of the film society altogether. The liveliest and most fascinating reviews are

¹³ Gerald Springett, "Review of the Stagecoach Driver and the Girl," *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 261-79.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 271.

those where the exhibition or box office value of a film was questionable but where the film possessed qualities that transcended these considerations. In such instances a sense of critical advocacy imposed itself, often balanced with advice on how a film society programmer might ease the passage of a film that constituted an exhibition risk by preparing the audience. Robert Bresson's austere *Diary of Country Priest* (1951), a film which apparently caused a significant exodus on the occasion of its viewing session screening, secured a more measured response from the critics. One review conceded 'The fact remains that for most societies this will be, in Josh Billings' phrase a ticklish booking. No society can expect it to come top of the popularity poll. Given good projection though, it should be worth showing.'¹⁶ The review proceeded to helpfully suggest that a careful programme note might make the inner turmoil of Bresson's priest less incomprehensible to the non-catholic. A colleague was less equivocating, acknowledging the exodus from the screening he wrote that 'those who stayed to see this film must surely have felt they had undergone a very moving spiritual experience.' He concluded that Bresson's film 'requires from its viewers a concentration and sympathy beyond the normal, but surely a film which every society should have the opportunity of seeing.'¹⁷

The fact that some critics from time to time identified films that societies ought to show is evidence that they believed that film society organisers had responsibilities as educators to do other than entertain members with films considered safe. Two reviews of Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934), revived in 1954 for film societies by distributors Contemporary, encapsulate the way critics explicitly reflected on the tensions between critical advocacy and exhibitor's caution. The first review written by Arnold Hare condenses the critics' ambivalence in a single sentence. 'That *L'Atalante* is great is undeniable, although its reception by one film society in Britain (that of Tyneside, whose members put it next to bottom in a recent poll) indicates that it is an exhibition risk.'¹⁸ The second reviewer Frank Pardoe, a Birmingham schoolteacher, likewise conceded that this was one French revival that

¹⁶ Josh Billings was a well-known film journalist on the trade paper *Kine Weekly*. T. Lloyd Evans, "Review of *Diary of a Country Priest*," *Film News*, May 1954, 5.

¹⁷ E. C. Hunt, *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Arnold Hare, "*L'Atalante*," *Ibid*.

represented a significant programming challenge. His energetic review in which the imperative to screen is followed by a list of qualifications and concessions is worth quoting in full for the way it both makes its case and anticipates the resistance of members.

Whether you show [*L'Atalante*] or not depends on how well you have trained your members. You ought to show it; it is one of the really great films. Read what John Grierson wrote about it. On the other hand, one man I know walked out of it at the Viewing sessions, saying that he just couldn't stand the slowness and overemphasis of it all. It does indeed show its age and breeding. It is twenty years old and it does show roughness of technique and reminiscences of the avant-garde. It is slow and occasionally hammy. It cannot tell a plain story plainly or resist the opportunity to be symbolic or fantastic. It is too commercial and sentimental for the highbrow, who prefers *Zero de Conduite*, and yet it has insufficient of these qualities for the lowbrow. Yet it is still a wonderful film. The whole film is a dream – but your members may well think it is a nightmare.¹⁹

This review is highly instructive concerning the qualities of a film thought of as likely to breach notions of film society good taste and diminish its exhibition value: 'hammy' acting, slow pace, roughness of technique and avant-garde affectation, excessive fantasy and excessive symbolism. Pardoe's advocacy, his insistence, despite these characteristics, that the film ought to be shown, is unusual in the context of *Film News*. As *Film* was less bound up in the demands of exhibition, it was generally bolder in focusing critical attention on films of historical interest. King Vidor's *Hallelujah*, which was panned by a *Film News* critic who described it as 'one of the longest films I have ever sat through,' received an appreciative review by Peter Armitage in *Film*. Armitage criticised the notions of technological progress and obsolescence that meant that cinema's history was disappearing from film society programmes. Furthermore, he defended *Hallelujah* against those who found the film offensive by astutely conceding that the film did not contain an affirmative message that could satisfy those whose main concern was to demonstrate their progressiveness. Those who take offence, he added, fail to see, despite the film's

¹⁹ F. E. Pardoe, *Ibid.*

numerous inanities, its 'total impression of sheer joy,' an indication of Vidor's sincerity.²⁰

Outstanding Film Society Fare

Consistently the reviewing practice of *Film News* identified one genre of film that could be wholeheartedly and enthusiastically recommended as 'film society fare,' the Francophone comedy. This was in part an acknowledgement of the sizeable Francophile constituency that were believed to be attracted to film societies. Almost alone among the many varieties of film written about in *Film News*, light comedies from directors such as Duvivier, Rene Clair and Feyder who made their names during the 1930s golden age of French cinema commanded unanimity of judgement. Comedies were cherished, the film society equivalent of box office hits, and French comedies apparently valued above all others. Two Rene Clair films from the 1930s *Sous les Toits de Paris* (1930) and *À Nous La Liberté* (1931) were unreservedly commended as 'outstanding additions to any programmes.' The vivid review of the latter, written by Arnold Hare, celebrates 'a film for the young at heart to be seen in the spring' and admires the 'slightly crazy air of let's have fun about all of it.' This 'joyful amateurishness...as refreshing as a month in the country' is contrasted to the over-rehearsed and calculated comedies of the present.²¹ Similarly *Sous les Toits de Paris* was praised for its carefree fun. Gaiety and charm are the terms most likely to be employed by reviewers as they assure their readers that these titles will provide an enjoyable evening that will delight their members. *Fanfan La Tulipe* (Christian-Jacque, 1952) was commended as 'a most delectable French farce with the minimum of story and the maximum of action. The comedy which is sometimes broad, is never offensive and is typically French... the result is a film which should convulse many film society members and would finish a season with high mirth.'²² As one reviewer put it, there were evenings when even the most serious of film societies want to forget Melies and Montage. The reviewers were acknowledging the fact that popular French

²⁰ Peter Armitage, "Hallelujah," *Film*, September-October 1959, 17.

²¹ Arnold Hare, "A Nous La Liberte," *Film News*, May 1954, 2.

²² Diana Moss, "Review of Fanfan La Tulipe," *Ibid.*, June 1955, 5.

cinema, not only the films of the great directors Clair and Duvivier but of the popular stars Arletty and Fernandel, were a cornerstone of film society programming. Clearly evident from the reviews is the fact that *Film News* critics in the main relished the opportunity to commend comedies with a light touch, films whose aim was to delight, to give pleasure.

Matters were more complicated and less predictable when the wit came with an American accent. Cukor's screwball classic, *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), a film for which the adjectives charming and gay immediately suggest themselves, despite being an audience reaction success when screened at the viewing sessions, was dismissed by one cross reviewer who opined, 'This never was much of a film and the idea of digging it up for critical appraisal by Film Society officers seems curious ... To show *The Philadelphia Story* is just a waste of everyone's time.'²³ The periodic revivals of Hollywood films at the viewing sessions rarely failed to raise the hackles of the more high-minded of the *Film News* critics though judging by the reaction scores they often pleased film society representatives.

Sincerity: Feeling as we are meant to feel

Witty French films were first-rate film society fare, guaranteed to please. The feature films that critics argued *ought* to be booked were most frequently described as possessing a quality of sincerity. Indeed a survey of *Film News* reviews reveals sincerity to be one of the overwhelming critical preoccupations of the film society critics. As a critical term sincerity places the stress on moral judgement. It would appear to be a judgement relating to the artist or filmmaker's communicative intention as this is manifested in the work. It asks the question, are the experiences and emotions communicated in a work congruent with those actually felt by the artist. But like many critical terms, as I. A. Richards suggests, it is also, and perhaps primarily, a way of denoting a particularly valued form of response to a work.²⁴

²³ J. P. Howard, "Review of *The Philadelphia Story*," *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ See especially chapter two, I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1924).

What did the critics of *Film News* mean when they praised a film's sincerity? Stanley Crawford's review of a film made by a Bedford amateur film group called *England May Be Home* (1957), a documentary about the Italian migrants coming to England and working as unskilled labourers, suggested that the film's principle virtue was its sincerity. The reviewer detected 'a genuine and sympathetic understanding of (the migrants) on the part of the production team... communicated strongly throughout the film.'²⁵ Crawford continues the review commending the 'straightforward treatment and avoidance of gimmicks.' Commenting on a dance sequence, the critic praised the director for wisely resisting the urge to 'do a *Momma Don't Allow*'; in other words he eschewed ostentatious editing as well as mimicking techniques adopted by others. People too, Crawford writes, 'perform before the camera without self-consciousness.' The director's 'humble and sympathetic approach to the human values of the story... in turn arouses our goodwill.' The result is a film that 'upholds the best values of documentary.' Here then sincerity of the filmmaker's feeling towards the film's subjects, the Italian migrants featured in the film, is inferred from a judicious restraint in film technique. Sincerity corresponds to an attitude of self-effacement, humility and restraint on the part of the filmmaker and these are precisely the qualities that invite the viewer's sympathetic identification with the individual men and women on the screen, the human drama.

Sincerity is therefore both a quality of the film text, corresponding in this case to unobtrusive technique, a judicious lack of ostentation, and the impact a film has on the viewer, its emotional pull, its ability to bring the viewer closer through identification with character. J. B. McDonagh's enthusiastic review of Kon Ichikawa's *The Burmese Harp* (1956) ('the highlight of the viewing sessions'), commends the film as a powerful attack on the futility of war. Yet, he quickly adds, the film is not 'a mere filmed tract.'²⁶ He continues, 'We feel, as we are meant to feel, the strength of the emotion that persuades a Japanese private to remain in Burma after his comrades have been repatriated. An exploration of the human soul as frank and detailed as this may not be to everyone's liking.' Commending the film for its

²⁵ Stanley Crawford, "England May Be Home," *Film News*, June 1959, 6.

²⁶ J. B. McDonagh, "The Burmese Harp," *Ibid.*, 18.

sureness, it's lack of sentimentality, coldness or sensationalism, McDonagh concludes, 'this is a sincere film which any film society would be proud to show.' Sincerity is contrasted with other baser impulses and cruder emotional tones that could animate a frank exploration of the human soul, sentimentality or sensationalism. Curiously the second reviewer employing identical critical terms reverses the assessment. *The Burmese Harp* failed because sentimentality got the better of sincerity such that 'one's ultimate sympathy collapses under the weight of necrophilious sentimentality.'²⁷ One reviewer feels that the film is sincere, the other that it lacks sincerity. Both reviewers evoke an impression that the film made on them but with little substantial discussion of how the film did what it did. Sincerity like wit or gaiety when used in relation to a film or a work of literature confounds precise definition, hence the fact that two different critics could come to completely opposing views as to whether a film possessed the quality or not. It is an impression felt by the critic and believed of a filmmaker, though rarely explicitly reflected on as a term of evaluation.

The meaning of sincerity as a critical term stands out more clearly when contrasted to its opposing terms, as in Germaine Dulac's epigram, 'Art is simply sincerity. Industry is simply calculation.'²⁸ In film society critical discourse, the virtue of sincerity is contrasted with two cardinal vices connoting communicative disingenuousness, sentimentality and didacticism; the former associated with the calculating hand of commercialism, the latter with (Communist) propaganda. The *Film News* critics recoiled from films that in their eyes appeared to be solely motivated by a concern to illustrate political ideology. Large numbers of films made in the Eastern bloc countries were now available to film societies through left wing distributors like Plato, Contemporary and Bond and state film agencies like Film of Poland. The film society critic's attitude towards this output was ambivalent: internationalist sentiments mixed with cold war suspicions. In reviewing films from Soviet Russia and the Eastern bloc, film society critics were perpetually on their

²⁷ J. L. St. G. Eyre, *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁸ Quoted in Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 235.

guard for signs that the creative process had been marred by propaganda concerns. Few Eastern bloc films were reviewed without an explicit judgement on the political content and whether it was acceptable to a film society audience. Accusations of communist influence, reds on the committee, did surface within film societies during a decade in which Cold War paranoia was gripping mainstream British cinema.²⁹ In 1951 *Film User* reported resignations at Tooting Co-op Film Society when Joris Ivens's anti-colonial documentary *Indonesia Calling* was screened. Resigning members accused Wilfred Bedford, the society's secretary with peddling red propaganda.³⁰

Frequently the Eastern-bloc films reviewed in *Film News* would be dismissed as 'mere tracts,' more unusually they would be given a clean bill of health and warmly recommended because they were free from political content. Polish film *The Treasure* (Buczowski, 1949), for example, was enthusiastically commended as 'one of the few post-war film's from behind the iron curtain that keeps its propaganda content out of harms way.'³¹ In fact the reviewer quipped that *The Treasure* was 'a highly successful piece of oblique propaganda which succeeds in leaving you kindly disposed towards Poland.' On the other hand, a Soviet film, *Glinka* (Arnshtam, 1946), a biopic of the composer shown at the 1953 Edinburgh Film Festival, was briefly dismissed in a short review which stated that the film's characters were 'mere puppets arranged for the greater glorification of Russia according to the party line.'³² Revealingly the critic of the Russian film *Lone White Sail* (Legoshin, 1937), twice in the space of a short review, remarked that the film was noteworthy for the 'lack of didactic propaganda'. Political content, he observed, was 'insignificant and would hardly bother any audience.'³³

²⁹ See Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: IB Tauris, 2006).

³⁰ "Random Rays," *Film User* 1951, 617. See also the interview with Gwen Bryanston of Solihull Film Society in the appendix in which she relates an incident in which of Communist paranoia erupted in the film society.

³¹ Arnold Hare, "Review of *The Treasure*," *Film News*, May 1954, 10.

³² Margaret Hancock, "Review of *Glinka*," *Ibid.*, October 1953, 6.

³³ P. Wihl, "Review of *Lone White Sail*," *Ibid.*, March.

Didacticism diminished sincerity. Critics found it intolerable when characters served allegorical functions and ceased to be unique. Reviewing *Salt of the Earth* (Biberman, 1954), a film dramatising a strike at a New Mexico tin mine made by a group of House of Un-American Activities blacklisted filmmakers, Margaret Hancock set out her reservations. While insisting that *Salt of the Earth* was a film worth seeing, indeed that 'in its plea for justice there was a ring of sincerity,' Mrs Hancock judged that 'it does not attain full stature.'³⁴ Questioning the tendency for characters to become types and the artless acting of the non-professional cast, Mrs Hancock asserted that 'the morals of unity and fair treatment are hammered home with needless repetition.' Curiously, given this apparent repetition, she goes on to suggest that 'there is also so much detail that the force of the main theme is dissipated and its power is lost.' She concluded that 'had (the film) preached less and been pruned more it would have become something bigger than an interesting failure.' The failure of *Salt of the Earth* contrasts with the success of a short independent American film *A Time Out of War* (Sanders, 1954), 'one of the finest films of the festival, faultless and perfect.'³⁵ Here the characters 'spring to life' in a 'perfect statement of a most moving episode.' The story of a brief truce between Union and Confederate soldiers, *A Time Out of War* was praised as 'a very simple tale, translated to the screen with the perfect discipline of great art.' Time and again the *Film News* critics underlined the virtues of simplicity, restraint and understatement and condemned vulgarity, obviousness and sentimentality.

The reviews of the different varieties of educational, instructional and sponsored films elaborated a clear vision of how educational purpose was best served in factual filmmaking. The most frequent source of irritation to *Film News* critics was a didactic expository commentary, regularly described as patronising, pompous or facetious, a complaint even more forcefully made when the speaker possessed an American accent. Only the presence of 'cloying' or 'trite' music could repel the critics more. The film *Full Circle* was condemned for possessing 'commentary of pompous and ponderous obviousness floating in a river of bad music. Pictures gawdy

³⁴ Margaret Hancock, "Review of *Salt of the Earth*," *Ibid.*, October 1954, 16.

³⁵ Margaret Hancock, "Review of *Time out of War*," *Film News*, October 1954, 18.

and commonplace.³⁶ Images were often judged too clever or 'too pretty-pretty,' the critics insisting that the intelligence of the viewer be respected. *Grey Metropolis* was praised, 'for once no duplication of words and image. Instead there is between text and picture a balanced counterpoint, sometimes witty, always intelligent.'³⁷ For *Film News* critics Disney nature films typified an approach that failed to respect the viewer's intelligence. *Prowlers of the Everglades* which Mrs Hancock noted was not as vulgar as some from the studio was nevertheless critically mauled for its 'facetious commentary and overlavish musical effects.' The film generated only 'surface excitement in clever photography.'³⁸ *Aquarium* was praised by the same critic as 'an interesting nature film...not only clever but informed photography. In contrast to the popular vulgarity of the Disney films, one feels that there is a scientist handling the material, intent on revealing its beauty and its purpose.'³⁹ Likewise, *In the Forest of the Red-Footed Falcons*, was appreciated because 'camera work is superb and one rather appreciated this all the more because it is used in the service of knowledge rather than of popular entertainment.'⁴⁰ But if the critics eschewed an overly popular appeal in ostensibly educational films they were also keen to avoid dull films delivered like lectures. As one critic of a sponsored film on germs called *Unseen Enemies* observed, 'if the interest of an audience is to be sustained, something more than text book enumeration, however well illustrated is required.'⁴¹

In one sense the film society critics worked with and contributed to an expanded definition of cinema, reviewing with equal seriousness the many varieties of film practice existing independently of dominant commercial production and distribution networks. The different varieties of non-fiction film were praised when they manifested polished technique, (perceived roughness of technique was berated and consequently amateur productions often displeased), when they exhibited formal unity and above all where they balanced educational goals with dramatically

³⁶ J. C. Cottrill, "Review of Full Circle," *Ibid.* 1953, 6.

³⁷ E. C. Hunt, "Review of Grey Metropolis," *Ibid.*, April 1954, 4.

³⁸ Margaret Hancock, "Prowlers of the Everglades," *Ibid.*, October, 14.

³⁹ Margaret Hancock, "Review of Aquarium," *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁰ Margaret Hancock, "Review of In the Forest of the Redfooted Falcons," *Film News*, October 1954, 9.

⁴¹ Stanley Crawford, "Review of Unseen Enemies," *Ibid.*, July 1961, 15.

engaging or visually pleasurable forms. Moreover they demanded restraint in commentary, music and pictorial appeal, as a sign that their intelligence was respected.

In relation to feature films the critics' discourse conceived of the most fundamental element of film experience to be a vivid state of emotional absorption, a response above all bound up with a spectator who identifies with fictional characters. A successful feature film was 'peopled with real human beings' whose lives and experiences could move the spectator or delight them and make them laugh. Feeling as you were meant to feel, experiencing an authentic emotionally rich engagement with the drama of other people's lives was a fundamental value that underwrote the critic's judgement, and it was above all the quality and substance of their emotional response that critics sought to fully evoke in their criticism. The feelings of empathy, warmth and compassion that critics valued in the viewing experience were easily jeopardised by any suspicion of emotional excess or sentimentality, hallmarks, it was felt, of the mass entertainment film. Self-consciousness on the part of the filmmaker in the form of excessive stylisation or acting that departed from restrained, naturalistic norms also emotionally distanced the viewer, and were deemed to impoverish the viewing experience. Demanding realistic, which is to say psychologically complex characters, critics were repelled when in place of unique and singular individuals a film dealt in abstractions or constructed crude or simple representative types for the purpose of illustrating ideas or political positions.

Broadly speaking the critics of *Film News* elaborated, through the films they most readily recommended and the way they wrote about them, a set of judgements that closely conformed to what John Ellis has analysed as the common discursive system employed by the dominant critical tradition of the 1940s.⁴² Ellis argues that British film journalists and critics constructed a highly coherent conception of an ideal object, an entity known as the quality film, defined through its multiple levels of realism and its humanitarian vocation. Quality films not only demonstrated a surface

⁴² John Ellis, "The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948," in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. Andrew Higson (London & New York: Cassell, 1996).

realism, verisimilitude as a technical accomplishment, but deeper levels of realism were demanded, what critics termed authenticity or truth. The authentic film was one that felt like real life, or as Ellis puts it a 'feeling of closeness to events.'⁴³ Pre-war British film was felt to be plagued by its lack of authenticity, its failure to truthfully represent the reality of ordinary people's lives, and its prudish avoidance of mature explorations of relations between men and women. Attaining authenticity or capturing 'the spirit of the real' was regarded as a moral imperative ultimately bound up with the conception of cinema's vocation to facilitate an emotionally charged connection between a hopeful, forward thinking, compassionate audience and the individual lives of geographically or socially distant fictional others.⁴⁴ Cinema's service to humanity was its ability to permit its audiences to sympathetically discover and emotionally connect to the lives of others.

It is a construction of the film experience and a conception of cinema that resonates with the characterisation of the act of reading Janice Radway finds at the heart of middlebrow literary taste.⁴⁵ The desire that defines this taste formation is for affirming affective experience. Middlebrow reading, according to Radway, is founded on a state of passionate absorption or connection rather than distanced analytical contemplation or visceral sensory pleasure. Reading is an event for identification. At the heart of this literary culture was a sensibility or habit of mind that Radway calls personalist, an insistence on the centrality of individuals and of grasping how events are humanly experienced.⁴⁶ The stories and characters of middlebrow reading struck a note of reassurance that idiosyncratic individual lives still mattered amidst the ungraspable abstract forces of contemporary life. Radway argues that a mode of reading that privileged feeling and connection provided compensations for the pragmatic and utilitarian orientation of professionalized lives. And where upward mobility into a professional-managerial class exacerbated social

⁴³ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁴ John Ellis, "The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema, 1942-1948," in *Dissolving Views*, ed. Andrew Higson (London: 1996), 84-85.

⁴⁵ Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire*.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 283-84.

distance, deep reading bore the conviction that connection and affiliation could nonetheless be imaginatively forged across those widening divides.⁴⁷

Criticism and New Cinemas

Given the underlying logic of the publication's critical practice, *Film News* struggled to enthusiastically embrace or critically endorse three distinct areas of new film practice: new wave films associated with a creatively resurgent European cinema, the proto-world cinemas of India and Japan and the early manifestations of New American Cinema such as the experimental films of figures like Sidney Peterson, Kenneth Anger and Maya Deren viewed at the Edinburgh Film Festival. *Film News* reviews testified to a tension between the critical values of the movement, articulating, though never explicitly defending, a preferred form of cinema and the enduring vision of its cultural role as encouraging 'advanced work in film art.' In other words there was an unresolved tension between the critical values given discursive prominence within the movement and the different kinds of film practice then actively engaged in creatively redefining the conception of film art. It is questionable whether a reviewing practice so systematically oriented to anticipating the existing tastes and interests of the general membership, what members would be prepared to sit through, could also function effectively as a critical advocate of 'advanced' film art. One way that the reviewers sought to reconcile these competing demands was through cautious recommendation for the specialist discussion group that film societies often ran alongside the general programme. Films that were considered too challenging, that departed too radically from the preferred viewing experience to be included in the general programme, could be steered towards the specialist study group where they could be discussed without fear of offence to the general membership. The distinction between the general film society show and the specialist group was a manifestation of the tension between the two conceptions of film society purpose, agent of popular education and film culture vanguard.

Despite the film society critic's emphasis on a film's achievement in terms of authenticity, its truthfulness to life, the recent Italian experiments in cinematic

⁴⁷ Ibid., 294-301.

realism sometimes failed to impress. In his review of Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1948) in a predecessor of *Film News*, an Edinburgh Festival bulletin, James Clark of Boston Film Society wrote, 'the will was weak, and I left at half time. It should have been a fine piece of direction, but fails because it is too fine, too preciously handled – every move is done with slow calculation. One regrets its slowness and its poorly directed action which merely makes the intended realism seem unrealistic. One cannot realise why competent critical faculties have been taken in by such a hopeless attempt.'⁴⁸ Clark's assessment inevitably brings to mind the more celebrated criticism of the film written by André Bazin for whom *La Terra Trema* was a landmark film that extended the neo-realist impulse to embrace new subject matter. Bazin celebrated a film in which 'the action deliberately resists the seductions of "drama": the story unfolds without regard for the rules of suspense, its only resources a concern with things themselves in life.'⁴⁹ The slowness that Clark regretted, the preponderance of lengthy sequence shots, was understood by Bazin as a commitment to concretely representing everyday gestures such as rolling a cigarette, without extracting a dramatic and symbolic meaning functional for the unfolding plot. He writes, 'Each image contains a meaning of its own which it expresses fully,' a quality Bazin contrasts with the imagery of the films of Eisenstein that bear a burden of symbolism.⁵⁰ Clark, perhaps referring to the pictorial composition, disapproves of an approach he considers too precious, too calculating, ultimately, unreal. Bazin was altogether more receptive to the film's paradoxes, the balance struck between the poetic qualities of the photography which nevertheless displayed an intimate knowledge of the real life settings, the village, fisherman's houses. Even Bazin acknowledged, however, that the limited action of Visconti's film made for 'austere "entertainment"' that could anticipate only a limited commercial future.⁵¹

⁴⁸ James Clark, "Edinburgh Film Festival: The First Week," in *Festival: Reports from Edinburgh, Venice, Biarritz*, ed. James Clark (Federation of Film Societies, 1950), 12.

⁴⁹ André Bazin, "La Terra Trema," in *What Is Cinema? Volume 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 41.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

Clark's disappointment at *La Terra Trema's* pace anticipates one of the commonest preoccupations of *Film News* critics throughout the 1950s, slowness. Throughout this decade realist filmmakers were developing looser more episodic narrative structures that enabled them to incorporate a greater degree of concrete visual description of real spaces and objects. Looser narrative structures also permitted a greater scope for development of unique and expressive visual style. The critical response to this emergent mode of cinematic discourse suggests a taste formation firmly grounded in the brisker narrative economy of classicism, with the French tradition of quality commercial filmmaking seemingly the ideal.

Day Shall Dawn (Kardar, 1959), a first feature from Pakistan described by a sympathetic critic as standing worthily alongside Ray's debut also divided critical opinion when a forty-minute extract was shown at the viewing session in 1961. The film was sensitively reviewed by Stanley Crawford who, noting Walter Lassally's expressive camerawork, went on to praise a film in which 'details of a way of life quite, quite strange to us present a fascinating if at times horrifying, picture of what abject poverty really means.'⁵² Mr Eyre of Bedford Film Society was enraged by the film's contemplative pace and descriptive style.

The opening extract of this film, which is all that we were shown, was ineffably tedious. What would seem to be a banal, cliché-ridden little story of humble fisher folk, laboriously uncoiled itself, replete with platitudes of oriental low-life. In prolonged arty establishing shots, some of them of great but irrelevant pictorial beauty, water rippled, sails patterned across the screen, punt poles punted, merchants bargained, peasants were sombrely sincere and children waddled in and out of chiaroscuro hutments. I have no rooted objection to Asiatic slowness as such, but here it would seem to be degenerating into a ponderous (though fashionable) cult, pregnant with insignificance.⁵³

Mr Eyre's irritable reference to a 'cult' of asiatic slowness points to a recurrent theme in the critical reception of Indian and Japanese filmmakers such as Ray, Ozu, Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, that is the characterisation of the viewing experience as one of impatience, tedium and boredom; long, slow film's that 'wear

⁵² Stanley Crawford, "Review of *Day Shall Dawn*," *Film News*, July 1961, 4.

⁵³ J. L. St. G. Eyre, "Day Shall Dawn," *Ibid*.

the audience.’ Audience reaction at the viewing session screenings of both Ozu’s *Tokyo Story* (1953) and Kurosawa’s *Ikiru* (1952) were marked by complaints about the slow pace of the films, an objection David Moore took up in his review of the latter. Ending an enthusiastic review, Moore observed, ‘There are many who accuse the film of being “slow” – as if one of the laws of the cinema is that film must move fast if it is to be truly cinematic. I believe that this superficial approach denies the film acknowledgement of its very considerable rhythm and emotional force.’⁵⁴ In a similar vein John Gillett, a regular *Sight and Sound* contributor and a critic closely identified with the ‘discovery’ of Japanese cinema in Britain, wrote a review of *Tokyo Story* in *Film* that mentioned the large numbers of people prematurely walking out of the screening at the national viewing sessions and the ‘violent disagreement between supporters and detractors.’⁵⁵ Gillett conceded, ‘it is easy to understand how the film’s slowly paced cutting and unfamiliar idiom could quickly alienate an unresponsive audience. Not unnaturally, its approach is totally different from that of the West, although if one looks beneath the surface (where nothing apparently happens) there is plenty to see and learn. What Ozu is saying is important to all of us, and here he speaks in a voice free from vulgarity or compromise.’⁵⁶ Even Lindsay Anderson, in an appreciative but not entirely successful *Sight and Sound* article about *Tokyo Story*’s style, which he related to the values of Zen Buddhism, commented on the difficulty of conveying the film’s qualities to film society secretaries who complain that it is too long and nothing happens.⁵⁷

Criticism preoccupied with judging a film’s sincerity permitted only a very limited elaboration of authorial discourse. What concerned these critics most was a conception of the creator’s moral integrity evidenced in their imperviousness to the mass entertainment film’s excessively emotional appeal. At the same time though sincerity was associated with plain and familiar communication. What Thompson has termed cinematic excess, those traces of stylisation that are not clearly motivated by

⁵⁴ David Moore, "Review of Living (*Ikiru*)," *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁵ John Gillett, "Reviews: *Tokyo Story*," *Film*, September/October 1957, 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁷ Lindsay Anderson, "Two Inches Off the Ground," *Sight and Sound* 27, no. 3 (1957/1958).

the advancement of the narrative, were in danger of being dismissed as pretentious.⁵⁸ If filmmakers were judged harshly for courting their audience too ingratiatingly through sentiment they were also rebuked for apparently showing too little interest in the viewer's needs by developing overly idiosyncratic and unfamiliar styles. Unfamiliar film language was therefore frequently interpreted as a form of disdain or affectation, an abuse of creative freedom and talent manifested in an unwillingness to communicate simply to one's fellow human beings. This kind of judgement on film authorship as communicative integrity was increasingly at odds with an evolving discourse of film authorship as individual self-expression. In his discussion of the textual features of the art film, Bordwell summed up the centrality of a conception of authorship as a frame of reference within art cinema. Significantly the author was regarded as 'the overriding intelligence organising the film for our comprehension.'⁵⁹ From this critical perspective, the author is not only believed to be communicating through the film but also expressing their personal vision. The critical project that fostered the flowering of the art film was one which increasingly concerned itself with elaborating on the ways in which a film's creator could be discerned in a unique visual sensibility, a distinctive stylistic signature identifiable across their oeuvre. As Bordwell notes, departures from the norms of classical filmic storytelling were open to be read and appreciated as traces of authorial expressivity.⁶⁰ It is significant that the critics who distanced themselves from the film society audience's displeasure at 'the cult of asiatic slowness' demonstrated a greater concern with elaborating on the author's vision.

Those who were unconvinced of the value of films by Satyajit Ray or Ozu, who were more concerned that these films would 'wear most members,' were inclined to argue that cultural differences between East and West were simply too

⁵⁸ Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵⁹ David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Ibid.*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York), 719.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 720.

great to result in satisfactory communication.⁶¹ In the case of the films of the French new wave, the breakdown in communication that they were presumed to enact was considered far more wilful. Consequently the celebration of these films by respected professional film critics and festival awards was much harder to ignore. The listless protagonists, episodic plotting and stylistic idiosyncrasies of the nouvelle vague were greeted by some film society critics with bafflement, mounting irritation and hostility. Other reviewers were more circumspect, mindful of the critical approbation the filmmakers were receiving in authoritative film publications. What other critics were writing about the film in question increasingly forms a reference point in the reviews. In a refreshingly honest review of Jacques Demy's *Lola* (1961), Mansel Stimpson of Eastbourne Film Society, a new voice on *Film News*, reflected on the interpretation of the film suggested by the Times critic Dilys Powell. Finding Powell's reading of the symbolism in the film persuasive, Stimpson stated that

For an audience not well versed in the critics' interpretations of *Lola* the film is rather a bore, its plot often incoherent and its moods oddly mixed and unsettled until the final fifteen minutes. The piece has merits...*Lola* places this reviewer in a kind of no mans land, equally aware that the subtle explanations of the critics are justified and that the boredom which many audiences may feel are understandable.⁶²

The second reviewer however was not inclined to struggle and opens the review, '*Lola* is a film of gross pretentiousness which turns out to be trivial in the extreme.' It concludes, 'Although once or twice there are hints that some kind of story is about to crystallise *Lola* has no real plot.'⁶³ The nouvelle vague was regarded as something like an intellectual exercise, an in-joke that had fooled the professional critics. It was

⁶¹ This was most waspishly expressed in John Cottrill's review of Ray's film *Devi* (1960). 'Would I book it for a film society show? Well, no I don't think so, it would wear most members. I sometimes wonder what the Indian audience in, say, Allahabad would make of one of Scott's duller tales set in pre-Victorian Melrose.' J. C. Cottrill, "Review of *Devi*," *Film News* 1963, 34.

⁶² Mansel Stimpson, "Review of *Lola*," *Ibid.*, June 1964, 10.

⁶³ Stanley Crawford, *Ibid.*

as if *Film News* reviewers could see through this cinematic emperor's new clothes and felt duty bound to expose the truth.

Two Godard films reviewed at the same viewing sessions follow the pattern. Mansel Stimpson's review of *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) begins disarmingly, 'The qualities of this film are difficult to describe.'⁶⁴ Again, Mansel Stimpson demonstrated a willingness to struggle with the film and unusually doesn't speculate how the film will play with the film society audience. Describing it as 'an unexceptional story filmed in a most personal manner, often with immense distinction.' Then later 'an exceptionally rich film which has an emotional quality of its own and often a strange beauty. On first viewing, the film has a tendency to irritate, in the first episode for instance, Nana and her companion are photographed solely from the back during a long conversation. The idea presumably suggests the lack of communication and real understanding between the two characters but the technique soon becomes tiresome.' Interestingly Stimpson implies in a round about way that one viewing may not be enough. 'Vivre Sa Vie is not a flawless masterpiece but its faults diminish on further viewings.'

Once again Stimpson's reviewing partner took a dramatically different stance.

Unrestrained eulogies of the latest film from the high priest of the 'nouvelle vague' may be found by consulting the appropriate references in 'Sight and Sound' and the 'Monthly Film Bulletin'. To this reviewer, Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* constitutes a very dubious film society booking for the following reasons. The subject matter, the adoption of prostitution as a profession, is created in a frank and uninhibited fashion which will give offence to the more puritanical sections of an English audience... The eccentric form of the film is intensely irritating to anyone not conditioned to the wilder avant-garde aberrations. *Vivre Sa Vie* consists of about a dozen separate episodes linked by clumsy and uninformative captions in an early silent film style which will prove infuriating to a normal audience. The film contains two lengthy scenes of boredom likely to drive all but the most indomitable film society members to desperation The continuity of this scrappy and disjointed affair is so slipshod that much of the action is wrapped in obscurity on a single viewing Despite the critical acclaim lavished upon this film programme secretaries are strongly advised to see it before making a booking. Few adherents are

⁶⁴ Mansel Stimpson, "Review of *Vivre Sa Vie*," *Ibid.*, 17.

likely to be won over by what appears to be a most ludicrously overpraised import from France.⁶⁵

Reviewing Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* (1963), Stimpson's strategy was to approach the film in relation to the author's oeuvre and attempt to enumerate the stylistic and thematic signatures. Hence he highlights certain similarities with *Vivre Sa Vie*, 'the atmospheric use of locations, a tendency to abruptness, philosophic undertones combined with references to the work of other artists (Jean Cocteau and Paul Klee) and the presence of Anna Karina.'⁶⁶ The second reviewer argued, 'The work of Jean-Luc Godard is clearly an acquired taste, one which this reviewer has failed to cultivate...The film is made as an excuse for weighty observations about life and love liberally spattered with quotations from fashionable authors. *Le Petit Soldat* however seems to lack the craftsmanship of communication... On the whole the professionalism of *The Manchurian Candidate* is to be preferred.'⁶⁷

The reviews of these two Godard films encapsulate the film society critic's resistance to the challenges of these diverse emergent and transgressive cinemas. In essence what many of the critics valued in a film was precisely 'craftsmanship of communication' and consequently what they objected to was a mode of cinematic narration that seemed to deny the audience the rapport they sought, holding them at a distance and rendering the process of identification which they valued more difficult.⁶⁸ What film society critics construed as a failure to communicate was

⁶⁵ Clifford H. Brown, "Vivre Sa Vie," Ibid.

⁶⁶ Mansel Stimpson, "Review of Le Petit Soldat," Ibid., 27.

⁶⁷ Brian Chaplin, Ibid.

⁶⁸ This attitude was neatly expressed in a letter to *Film* in response to a moderately favourable piece on Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*. W. Royston Millmore, an English scholar and author of a minor study on the Brontes was moved to write, 'I am indebted to you...for throwing some light on that dark subject *The Diary of a Country Priest*. I watched this film with mounting irritation which reached its proper culmination in a vast sigh of thankfulness when the chief character died.... If we want interior monologue, we think or we read modern novels. If we want music we still prefer the actual sounds to a scholarly glimpse at the score. If we go to see a film we have every right to expect it to be made within the limitations – and the vast potentialities of the filmic medium. It would not need many more films like *The Diary of a Country Priest* to set films firmly and disastrously on the slippery slope at

invariably attributed either to a lack of professional technique and polish, or to an attitude of cliquish intellectual superiority, pretentiousness or 'high-brow smugness', all off-putting to the film society critic because they raised questions about the filmmakers sincerity. A reviewer of Jacques Rivette's *Paris Nous Appartient* (1960), an extract of which was screened at a viewing session wrote,

The extract shown was tantalising; there was not enough to indicate whether this is a piece of new wave spoofery, or whether the evident sincerity and tense sensitivity of the young actors is matched by an equivalent integrity from the director. How much are we going to be allowed to share in the total experience? There is a sort of inside knowingness about the more off-the-cuff new wave efforts which can be rather depressing for those who are not instinctively with it.⁶⁹

The artist is admired who establishes a communicative relationship, who shares the world they have created generously with an educated audience. The nouvelle vague filmmakers were suspected of a form of social arrogance, of only speaking to a clique.

Inadmissible Obscurity

Similar themes arise in the criticism of the early films of the New American Cinema, though in one particularly notorious case, that of Kenneth Anger, the aversion to pretension and irritation with obscurity was compounded by more explicitly moral objections to what was being communicated. Screened at a national viewing session in 1955, Anger's film *Inauguration of the Pleasuredome* (1954) was awarded an audience reaction score of just two out of ten. Two critics appraised the film; the first was Diana Moss, a film society organiser and teacher at George Trevelyan's proto-new age adult education college Attingham Park, who identified herself as an enthusiast for experimental film. Critics don't often display humility in the face of a cinematic form that challenges their expectations of the medium. This was particularly true within the critical practice of the film society movement. Moss's

the bottom of which already lies the mangled mess that is "modern verse." You have been warned.' W. Royston Millmore, *Film*, December 1954, 7.

⁶⁹ J. L. St. G. Eyre, "Review of Paris Nous Appartient," *Film News*, June 1963, 15.

critical attitude was therefore an unusual one as it admits the possibility of the viewer struggling to grasp oblique symbolism or elusive meaning, an attitude which can be contrasted with the assumption of critical superiority most readily expressed by her colleagues. 'This was certainly the most thought provoking film in the viewing sessions', Moss wrote.

It is the latest experiment by a talented American, Kenneth Anger...There is an impelling sense of evil and revulsion, and symbolism is used extensively, sometimes understandably, sometimes (to this viewer) incomprehensibly but nevertheless it was impossible not to become engrossed in the film and its meanings. It needs to be seen many times. People will either enthuse over the film or hate it. It could certainly be shown to film study groups, and would promote endless discussion but an average film society audience might walk out after five minutes.⁷⁰

The second reviewer was less ambivalent.

I think few societies will wish to show this, although it might just be used in a specialist lecture programme of experimental films. It certainly has an effect on an audience (apart from boredom), an effect of nastiness, of degradation and of decadence; a figment of an unhealthy mind...The work is pretentious in the extreme and totally obscure, and obscurity is surely inadmissible in any film.⁷¹

By comparison Clifford Brown's review of Anger's first film *Fireworks* (1947) restricted itself to a more descriptive treatment. 'A film which contains numerous scenes of physical violence involving symbols doubtless familiar to psychoanalysts.' Brown concluded, 'The meaning of this lurid avant-garde short eluded me, but a more sophisticated colleague explained that it was an attempt to describe the hallucinations of a homosexual.'⁷²

Moss returned to Kenneth Anger's work in a piece she wrote about experimental cinema for *Film* in 1956. Now though she appeared to have undergone a radical disenchantment. She expressed only frustration that in her words, 'the

⁷⁰ Diana Moss, "Review of Inauguration of the Pleasuredome," Ibid. 1955, 7.

⁷¹ J. P. Howard, Ibid.

⁷² Clifford H. Brown, "Review of Fireworks," Ibid. 1961, 6.

experimental film is receding behind banked clouds of obscurity.’⁷³ Experimental filmmakers like Anger she argued had ‘become so intent on concealing their meaning that the films lose all meaning.’ *Inauguration of the Pleasuredome* ‘takes thirty minutes to say that drug taking is a vice – using brilliant colour and a sort of Chinese-Indian music in the process,’ where his previous film, *Fireworks*, ‘had the same nasty flavour of homosexuality but it was at least concise and comprehensible.’ Against this wilful obscurity and distended length and an apparent shortage of inspiration among once admired filmmakers like James Broughton and Maya Deren, Moss argued that the avant-garde spirit of the twenties had been kept alive in documentary by Humphrey Jennings. Continuing this tradition, Lindsay Anderson’s recent film *Thursdays Children* (1954) was an example of where the future of the experimental film might lie. It was a film with ‘something to say, something to show and the power to stimulate the minds of their audiences.’ She concluded with a question, ‘Could it be that the real experiments of the future are going to be intelligent and intelligible – and that they will reach a wider audience as a result of their appeal to film societies and their suitability for inclusion in commercial programmes as second features?’⁷⁴

Despite being the only critic to have shown any patience for the post-war American experimental cinema, Moss too dismissed the highly personal cinematic explorations of subjective states, the dreams, hallucinations and fantasies with which it was preoccupied on the grounds of obscurity. Instead she held up, as a more appropriate model of personal and experimental cinema, an acclaimed documentary about a children’s school for the deaf. With this example and her formulation of films with something to say and something to show she seems to be closer in sensibility to the notions of artistic freedom then being promoted by the filmmakers associated with Free Cinema. Free Cinema filmmakers had declared of their films that they ‘are free in the sense that their statements are entirely personal. Though their moods and subjects differ, the concern of each of them is with some aspect of life as it is lived in

⁷³ Diana Moss, "Experimental Film," *Film*, January-February 1956, 23.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

this country today.’⁷⁵ For the Free Cinema filmmakers it was a given that having something to say and something to show meant that the filmmaker should be engaged in communicating about social issues. As Alan Lovell pointed out, the apparent contradiction between the belief in artistic freedom and the assertion of the artist’s engagement with contemporary social issues was left unexamined.⁷⁶ Within this conception of personal cinema the realms of the unconscious, desire, sexuality and fantasy would remain implicitly out of bounds for cinematic exploration. The Free Cinema programmes at the National Film Theatre were a frequent discussion topic in the pages of *Film*. The magazine’s editor, Jon Evans, described Free Cinema as a new genre ‘which owes something to the documentary tradition and something to the avant garde movement.’ He concluded that many of the films were now available to film societies and added that ‘every adventurous society (is the adjective necessary?) should show them.’ One of Free Cinema’s most ardent champions within the film society movement was John Hall, a young would-be filmmaker, who helped establish the short-lived Film Society Experimental Production Committee. Hall linked the work of this scheme to provide film society booking guarantees to amateur filmmakers to the daring adventures of Free Cinema. Supporting both was the responsibility and privilege of the film society movement.⁷⁷ Film societies were instrumental in showing Free Cinema programmes around the country between 1958 and 1960. In their 1958/1959 season, for example, Eastbourne Film Society featured two evenings of short films described as experimental, the second of which included the Lindsey Anderson film *O Dreamland* (1956) alongside Ian Hugo’s *Ai-Ye* (1950), Frank Stauffacher’s *Sausalito* (1948) and Stan Brakhage’s *Interim* (1952).⁷⁸ Free Cinema may even have renewed interest in Humphrey Jennings, the documentary

⁷⁵ Quoted in Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier, *Studies in Documentary* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), 136.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 144-45.

⁷⁷ “What’s the Answer?” *Film*, November/December 1956.

⁷⁸ Interview with Mansel Stimpson conducted by the author 22nd November 2005. Stimpson: ‘I don’t know how many people liked [the films], but I think it is still significant that a film society in a place like Eastbourne, which is seen as rather old fashioned and backward and so on, would feel that they could even experiment with putting on an evening of short films like that with discussions in between.’

filmmaker lauded by Anderson and Reisz. The Federation's Eastern Region remarked on the fact that seven of the societies in their region were showing a Jennings film that season and that *Nice Time* was also a popular choice.⁷⁹

Other examples of film experimentation that did attract the approval of *Film News* reviewers were short lyrical studies of movement, pattern and music such as Charles and Ray Eames's *Blacktop* (1952). Free from the burden of interpreting symbolism and the awkward eroticism of other American experimentalists, the Eames films were considered delightful. Norman McLaren's abstract animation films for the National Film Board of Canada were also appreciated without reservation. Critics reveled in the 'personal wit of one of the most original artists in the cinema.'⁸⁰ Margaret Hancock's review conveys the pleasures and relief of yielding to McLaren's 'fireworks' and 'magic,' his 'explosive visual laughter, leading you up the garden path, digging you in the ribs and having enormous fun.' Perhaps it would be churlish to suggest that the brevity of these films also assisted in their critical appreciation.

The disjunctive styles employed by avant-garde filmmakers, the deliberate disruption of continuity was invariably dismissed as bad technique. Critics were inclined to respond with ferocious hostility to any breach in the norms of clear communication, and to regard such breaches as signs of pretension or simply bad technique. The strength of feeling is suggestive of the fact that radical aesthetic departures are often experienced with a kind of moral revulsion.⁸¹ Bunuel's *L'Age D'Or* (1930) evidently retained its power to provoke at least as far as one *Film News* critic was concerned. This film, he wrote, was 'a long series of dreary meaningless actions studded with incongruities, knocks at the church and mild pornography.' Not a wholly inaccurate description, but on that account this critic could not recommend it for film society use.⁸² An early film by Scottish experimental filmmaker Margaret Tait was judged to be 'an appalling waste of good material.' On account of its

⁷⁹ "Film Society Newsreel," *Film*, March/April 1959.

⁸⁰ Margaret Hancock, "Review of Blinky Blank," *Film News*, October 1955.

⁸¹ See Becker, *Art Worlds*.

⁸² Frank Pardoe, "Review of L'Age D'Or," *Film News*, May 1953, 13.

technique, the reviewer wrote, the film 'qualifies without difficulty for the category of amateur.'⁸³

In her study of the BFI Experimental Film Fund, which operated between 1952 and 1966, Michele Pierson has argued that the dominant way of thinking about experiment in British film culture was experimentation within and for the commercial film industry.⁸⁴ What justified experimentation in the cinema was the role it played in renewing commercial filmmaking. Without a willingness to experiment, to take risks, developing new techniques for the industry, then commercial filmmaking would stagnate and become banal. This is a way of valuing experiment diametrically opposed to a privileging of film art as a cinema of difference, possessing transgressive or critical impulses with respect to the commercially dominant uses of the medium. There is little in the critical writing of the film society movement to suggest that the utilitarian conception of commercially exploitable experimentation was challenged or that what Michelson calls the transgressive impulse of a 'perverse cinephilia' was widely appreciated.⁸⁵ Indeed the two objects Michelson associates with that distinctive cinephilia, challenging the mystique of professionalism of the film industry and confronting taboos of eroticism and sexuality were both quite unpalatable to film society critics. These critics clung tenaciously to the mystique of professionalism even as they supported artisan and amateur filmmaking in principle. And as for eroticism...it was, as a film society adage goes, 'too hot for Woking.'

Central to the identity of the film society movement was a vision of its role as educational agents, teaching standards of discrimination and criticism and in the process creating a public that would support new forms of cinema that may be marginalised by commercial provision. Increasingly as the fifties drew to an end and a new decade began, the film society movement was challenged to embrace and more importantly promote, help to build an audience for, film practices that either deliberately transgressed middlebrow conceptions of quality cinema or by cinemas

⁸³ Jack Griffin, "Review of *The Lion, the Griffin and the Kangaroo*," *Ibid.*, March, 1.

⁸⁴ Michele Pierson, "Amateurism and Experiment: The British Film Institute's Experimental Film Fund (1952-1966)," *The Moving Image* 5, no. 1 (2005).

⁸⁵ Annette Michelson, "Gnosis and Iconoclasm: A Case Study of Cinephilia," *October*, no. 83 (1998).

not so much transgressive as stylistically and thematically other. Newness in cinematic terms became a problem for a movement that had expanded dramatically over the previous decade, extending out geographically from the metropolis to the town and village where it became an established part of local civic culture. The institutional agencies that had evolved to become key to the public discovery of new cinemas, a discovery necessitating an authoritative discourse of artistic or cultural value, were the international festival and national cinemateques and of course professional critics. Critical writing in the movement did not lend itself to the kind of polemical advocacy and passionate enthusiasm that characterised the now celebrated film criticism associated with successive journals of the fifties and sixties. Trying to accommodate the diversity of film society opinion *Film* did not or could not develop a *politique*, supportive of a particular conception of cinema or film aesthetic movement. In its favour it did attempt to contribute critical appreciation of filmmakers and films that it considered in danger of neglect and it often did so fully aware that film society opinion might not share the judgement.

Arguably the more influential critical organ was *Film News*. The character and tone of *Film News* was determined by its function as exchange of opinion on the suitability of films for a general film society audience. The exigencies of programming and of meeting the expectations of audiences, or at least the task of assessing the likelihood of doing so, took precedence over the critical task of making sense of what was unfamiliar, difficult and new about the object of criticism. It could be argued that the unusual practice of multiple reviews of the same film created the conditions for a dialogue about criteria of judgement, taste and value. The dialogical aspect of this reviewing practice meant that readers could witness juxtaposed contrasting critical approaches; reviews demonstrating a more detailed attention to visual style alongside Olympian dismissals based upon how the film made the reviewer feel. Moreover, the reputations and significance of filmmakers such as Bresson, Franju and Godard were vigorously debated and contested by film society members. Against that the limitations of a reviewing practice based upon single viewings written by a deliberately broad pool of contributors possessing varying skills as critics and writers gives *Film News* and its evaluations a distinctly uneven hit

and miss quality. But perhaps the most salient weakness in the critical practice is the way assessments of what the general audience would tolerate, the kind of experiences that viewers should be exposed to, lead the criteria of evaluation. The spectre of a capricious film society spectator, irritable, prone to boredom and quick to take offence haunted *Film News* writing. Rooted in middlebrow desires for narrative involvement and 'invisible' style, the critics' attitude was characterised by an aversion to the grotesque, the shameful, the fantastic, emotional expressiveness and to style made visible. Notwithstanding the contributions of many skilled and highly informed critics writing thoughtfully against the grain, *Film News* couldn't help but convey a tone of aesthetic conservatism that failed to generate a discourse of appreciation and commentary expansive enough to value the cinematic departures of either the historical avant-garde, its later American incarnation or the emergent modernist international art cinema. The movement's critical organs were by no means the only source of ideas on the cinema read by the movement's activists. But they could have played an important role in orientating reader's sensibilities and expectations in relation to emergent forms of cinema. Finally then, the limitations of this critical writing needs to be assessed against the movement's perception of itself as a vanguard, supporting cinema that breaks new ground. Measured against such a standard it is difficult not to agree with the author of an anonymous letter comprehensively criticising the Federation of Film Societies published in *Film* in early 1960. Arguing that the film society movement was suffering from an acute attack of middle-aged spread, the correspondent singled out the viewing sessions and the movement's reviewing practice.

We should publish our criticisms of films viewed in *Film* and *Film News*, but the pathetic ratings system which place *Old Man Motorcar* at the top of a viewing session should go. The whole system of reviewing films needs overhauling. It will no doubt be argued that there is a shortage of responsible people who will give time and thought to writing criticism, but have enough steps been taken to ensure that only those that can write intelligently are invited?⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Anonymous, "Into the Looking Glass," *Film*, January/February 1960, 28.

The very fact that *Film News* critics were so sensitively attuned to the tastes of film society members restricted the magazine from consistently fulfilling a critical function in support of new forms of cinema.

‘An evening of American rubbish’: Film Society Delegates and The Lusty Men

While the *Film News* critics were grappling with the challenges of international art cinema, British film criticism itself was undergoing a revolution. In 1960 a debate about the state of film criticism erupted in a number of film journals, including *Film*, and had a cultural impact beyond the national press. The debate was ignited by a scathing attack on two BFI initiatives, the Fifty Years of Cinema programme at the National Film Theatre and *Sight and Sound* by Victor Perkins and Ian Cameron, then undergraduates writing for the student arts journal *Oxford Opinion*. Perkins, Cameron and Mark Shivas launched a devastating polemic against the critical establishment represented by *Sight and Sound* and in particular the criteria for evaluation employed by the magazine’s film critics. ‘Film criticism in Britain is dead,’ they announced with youthful brio.⁸⁷ They deplored ‘a fundamentally perverted’ approach to films on the part of *Sight and Sound* critics, a tendency to automatically praise the well-intentioned social conscience film, an attitude memorably dismissed by Ian Cameron as ‘pallid philanthropy.’⁸⁸ Similarly Perkins deplored an attitude that ‘exalts right-mindedness above form, style and technique.’⁸⁹ Collectively this younger generation of critics attacked the establishment critics for their lack of precise attention to visual style, the tendency to evaluate without careful analysis and the unexamined and, in their view, indefensible distinction between art (largely European) and commerce (American). They argued that criticism had suffered from an overemphasis on cinema as an intellectual medium at the expense of an appreciation of its visual and sensory qualities. The result was the chronic neglect of important films and filmmakers and an inability to say anything of consequence about the most vital examples of contemporary filmmaking: the cinema of Sam

⁸⁷ Ian Cameron, "Fifty Famous Films: 1915-45," *Oxford Opinion*, April 1960, 36.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ V. F. Perkins, "Fifty Famous Films 1915-45," *Oxford Opinion*, no. 38 (1960).

Fuller, Nicholas Ray, Budd Boetticher and Howard Hawks, a pantheon that signified the continental influence of *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

Certainly, a challenge to *Sight and Sound*, a magazine with few rivals to its dominance in shaping debate and opinion for the best part of a decade, appears to have been long overdue. John Gibbs has attempted to specify the complex determinations contributing to a progressive loss of the critical vitality initially brought to the magazine by the Sequence critics. Gibbs argues that the political events of 1956 (Suez, the Soviet invasion of Hungary) and the cultural changes in fields of literature and the theatre served to renew a debate about the social function of art.⁹⁰ Lindsay Anderson's article 'Stand Up, Stand Up' exemplified this reaction to a climate of political apathy, cultural conformity and cynicism.⁹¹ The committed critic judged a film according to its moral value and expounded on the humane qualities of the characterisation and plot. As committed criticism developed at *Sight and Sound*, so too did a firmer rejection of the American cinema as Penelope Houston assumed editorship.⁹² Affluence, or rather the myth of affluence, was stirring up the early signs of moral panic and increasing latent sensitivities to the impacts of American popular culture. By the end of the 1950s critical prejudices, *for* - exercising the social conscience, *against* - American genre films, had hardened into what younger critics considered routinised judgements, machine like in their predictability and what is more self-plagiarising.

How this generational shift in film criticism impacted on the film society movement is not easy to determine. *Film* was directly involved in making the film criticism debate public by devoting successive issues between 1960 and 1961 to a series of articles written by representatives of the various concerned parties.⁹³ The

⁹⁰ John Gibbs, "'It Was Never All in the Script.' Mise-En-Scene and the Interpretation of Visual Style in British Film Journals, 1946-1978," (Department of Film and Drama, University of Reading, 1999), 57.

⁹¹ Lindsay Anderson, "'Stand Up! Stand Up!'" *Sight and Sound* (1956).

⁹² Gibbs, "'It Was Never All in the Script.' Mise-En-Scene and the Interpretation of Visual Style in British Film Journals, 1946-1978."

⁹³ Ian Cameron, "Attack on Film Criticism: All Together Now," *Film*, September/October, 1960, 12; Ian Jarvie, "Attack: Preface to Film Criticism," *Film*, September/October 1960, 13-14; Peter John Dyer, "Counter Attack," *Film*,

Federation's London Regional Group played host to a debate on the state of film criticism at Kensington library in January 1961 where, infamously, Sam Fuller's *Pick Up On South Street* (1953) was screened and Penelope Houston's absence was noted.⁹⁴ Looking at the articles written in *Film* by Ian Cameron and Ian Jarvie the argument about the quality of film criticism targeted primarily at *Sight and Sound* has considerable resonance for the critical practices of the film society movement itself. An interesting aspect of this particular disagreement was the way each side in the dispute attempted to position the other as unskilled or amateur. Cameron writes pithily,

You don't have to know anything about the cinema to judge a film on the acceptability of its social and political attitudes. Perhaps that is the reason why the bulk of film criticism in Britain is so useless. Criticism is thought of as a job for the unskilled or at best semi-skilled, a refuge for failed film directors and superannuated law court reporters, a relaxation for literary critics and lady novelists, or an extra source of income for the I can criticise anything boys ... They are incapable of judging anything but the literary content of the script; about the film itself they can write nothing [...] Our film magazines and the critics who write in them are all failing in their job. They are saying almost nothing which could not be said by the literate layman. To do more they must talk about style. They must have a profound knowledge of the cinema. A critical faculty is not just a gift; it must be trained.⁹⁵

Directed at the established professional, Cameron's call for greater critical rigour and dedication also implicates the reviewing practice adopted by *Film News*. The Oxford critics argued that, in order to do justice to its object, criticism required multiple viewings of a film. Perkins recalled that he considered it an extraordinary arrogance that a film could be written about, and often dismissed, on the strength of a single

November/December, 1960, 8-9; Dai Vaughan and Phillip Riley, "Letters from the Trenches," *Film*, January/February, 1961, 9-11; Peter Armitage, "Free Criticism," *Film*, March/April, 1961, 8-10; Ian Cameron, "What's the Use?" *Film*, March/April, 1961, 10-11.

⁹⁴ Robert Murphy, *Sixties British Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992).

⁹⁵ Ian Cameron, "Attack on Film Criticism: Altogether Now," *Film*, September/October 1960, 12.

viewing.⁹⁶ The call for greater levels of rigour and seriousness in film criticism, a more dedicated and detailed examination of film style, elucidation before evaluation, as Ian Cameron put it,⁹⁷ appeared within *Film*, but ironically reads like a portent of the future redundancy or marginalisation of amateur criticism. *Sight and Sound* defended its critical practice, refuting the centrality of film style that the younger critics had urged. Penelope Houston in a much-quoted rejoinder argued that ‘cinema is about the human situation, not about “spatial relationships.”’⁹⁸ Characteristically *Film*’s editorial line attempted to steer a cautious path between the younger *Oxford Opinion* critics, the established *Sight and Sound* line and the group of ‘committed’ critics associated with the new journal *Definition*. Peter Armitage summarised, ‘the uncommitted approach is lunatically narrow for pretending to have no politics or morals.... the committed approach is lunatically narrow to reject films that do not conform to the critic’s situation. Why be lunatically narrow? There is no need to be deliberately blind to anything.’⁹⁹ Armitage also expressed strong reservations about the assumptions underpinning the veneration of the director that characterised criticism old and new. What he called ‘the personal vision’ approach, in his view a manifestation of fears about the place of the individual in technological society, restricted critical thought.¹⁰⁰ Armitage’s defence of this middle path involved giving more sympathetic consideration to quality American filmmakers like Stanley Kramer, Elia Kazan and Sidney Lumet who were dismissed by auteurist critics as lacking in stylistic brilliance.

For two or three years a boldly redesigned *Film* was reinvigorated, both by the debate on film criticism and by sharp, intelligent and enthusiastic writing by a new generation of critics beginning careers in film writing outside of *Sight and Sound*’s ambit, and championing new currents in cinema. The distance between the critical appreciation characteristic of *Film* and that typical of *Film News* and viewing session

⁹⁶ See the interview with V. F. Perkins included as appendix 2 of John Gibbs, ‘“It Was Never All in the Script.” Mise-En-Scène and the Interpretation of Visual Style in British Film Journals, 1946-1978 ’ (University of Reading, 1999).

⁹⁷ Ian Cameron, ‘What’s the Use?’ *Film*, March-April 1961.

⁹⁸ Penelope Houston, ‘The Critical Question,’ *Sight and Sound* 29, no. 4 (1960): 163.

⁹⁹ Peter Armitage, ‘Free Criticism,’ *Film*, March-April 1961, 8.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

audience reaction opinion deepened. As for *Oxford Opinion's* re-evaluation of American cinema emphasising the subtleties of *mise-en-scène*, some parts of the film society movement had great difficulty in seeing Hollywood as anything other than the purveyor of sentimental entertainment, the enemy of film art. In 1963 Ian Cameron and Victor Perkins having established a new journal, *Movie*, led a discussion on film criticism at the Federation's Annual General Meeting weekend with Peter Armitage chairing. The session was an opportunity to confront film society attitudes toward American cinema and stimulate constructive discussion about the criteria for evaluating films. Appropriately, Cameron and Perkins offered the gathering of film society activists the splendid Nicholas Ray movie, *The Lusty Men* (1952), screened in full as a prelude and stimulus for discussion, framing it as ripe for film society re-evaluation. An extract of Minnelli's *Bandwagon* (1953) was also shown. Judging by two reports on the event written by film society representatives, the critics' arguments about Ray's handling of *mise-en-scène* fell on deaf ears. Dr Walsh of Billingham Synthonia Film Society recorded that *The Lusty Men*, 'offered by the speakers as a minor masterpiece of the cinema was regarded by the audience as nothing more than an evening of American rubbish.'¹⁰¹ He regretted that an opportunity to re-examine attitudes to film appreciation 'was thrown away by the choice of films.' Dr Clifford Shaw of Sheffield Film Society echoed these sentiments.

A forthright discussion was provoked by the showing of *The Lusty Men*, a little known film of the early fifties with a rodeo background. The speakers contended that Nicholas Ray's treatment transcended the limitations of the material, while most of the delegates thought the script so full of clichés that the film was not worthy of serious critical appreciation. Diverging views were also held on the quality of the acting, and whether the quality of the characterisations went any deeper than the familiar star personalities of Robert Mitchum and Susan Haywood. These sharp differences of opinion to some extent sidetracked the argument from the more general proposition that societies should show greater readiness to revive the best English or American features.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ "Report on the AGM Weekend," Saturday May 25th 1963, BFFS Archive, BFI Special Collections.

¹⁰² Ibid.

On that night, in that company, it would appear that the *Movie* critics failed to win the argument; Ray's *The Lusty Men* was regarded with contempt. Shifting the film society attitude in favour of a reappraisal of popular American films was a step too far.

Veteran *Film News* reviewer John Cottrill died three years after this event. Cottrill, a former Chairman of the Federation of Film Society, like so many other dedicated activists in the film society movement was a teacher, he taught Classics at Vaughan College in Leicester. In the early sixties, while film critics tussled over the relative merits and importance of Satyajit and Nicholas Ray, Mr Cottrill was giving a series of lectures at Vaughan College on the theme of Film and Civilisation. In a tribute to the late John Cottrill, the officers and Executive of the Federation of Film Societies decided to commemorate his work in the film society movement by producing a booklet of extracts from the notebooks on which these lectures were based. The booklet was distributed to everyone who attended a residential weekend that coincided with the Federation's Annual General meeting and featured a number of speakers addressing Cottrill's theme, Film and Civilisation.

These notes constitute a highly idiosyncratic and frankly conservative variation on film criticism as a humanist vocation. The object of the course was 'to consider the way in which moving pictures...have contributed something to or taken something away from the structure we call civilisation.'¹⁰³ Civilised society he observed 'has a respect for its own ancestors and its own history, a respect for the world of nature and the things in it. It respects opinions, admires noble enterprises, but restrains actions which would destroy its fabric.' Cottrill's thoughts on the evaluation of films included a section on values. Each film, he argued, should be assessed according to whether its values could be said to contribute to 'the fortification of the civilised world.' This he stated was by far the most important quality a film could have. 'It is unfortunate,' he added 'that the censor has so often to intervene to see that civilised values are not destroyed in the name of freedom.'

¹⁰³ Extracts from the Notebooks of John Cottrill, circulated at Federation of Film Societies Residential Weekend, 1967. BFFS Archive, BFI Special Collections.

Elaborating on this theme Cottrill remarked that ‘the value of a study of people depends on whether or not the people are worth studying at all.... For many years now films famous at the time seem to be concerned with little else but the doings of a very poor, even worthless lot of people; hence I got nothing out of *La Dolce Vita*.’ On Dreyer’s *Passion of Joan of Arc*, he wrote, ‘obviously the film cannot have any civilised values, and the scenes of violence at the end as the soldiery attack the civilians are unedifying...it seems impossible to extract anything positive of value to a civilised state from it.’ Closing with his thoughts on *A Taste of Honey*, (according to Cottrill a film in which, ‘no-one shows any trace of what French writers call *desinvolture*’) he wrote, ‘I may conclude this analysis by referring to the weakness of film criticism today, especially that in the arty periodicals like *Sight and Sound*. It is that directors and actors become cult objects. Everyone is rushing to say how wonderful Antonioni is, or James Dean was – their work is discussed in the most abstract terms which have little or no meaning to any of us.’

‘No meaning to any of us.’ It is not clear who Cottrill means to include in his collective ‘us.’ Obviously he cannot be assumed to be speaking for the film society movement in any straightforward sense. Neither can his opinions about film criticism and civilised values be regarded as representative of wider film society opinion. Nevertheless there is something striking about the decision to circulate these notes widely to film society activists in a gesture of commemoration. It is difficult not to take the approach and the concluding sentiment as an indication of the movement’s estrangement from the new vitality in film criticism and film culture. As a historical document, this collection of lecture notes may also confirm a suspicion that individuals with a strong sense of civic duty and commitment to voluntary organisational participation did not always possess the necessary skills for film criticism.

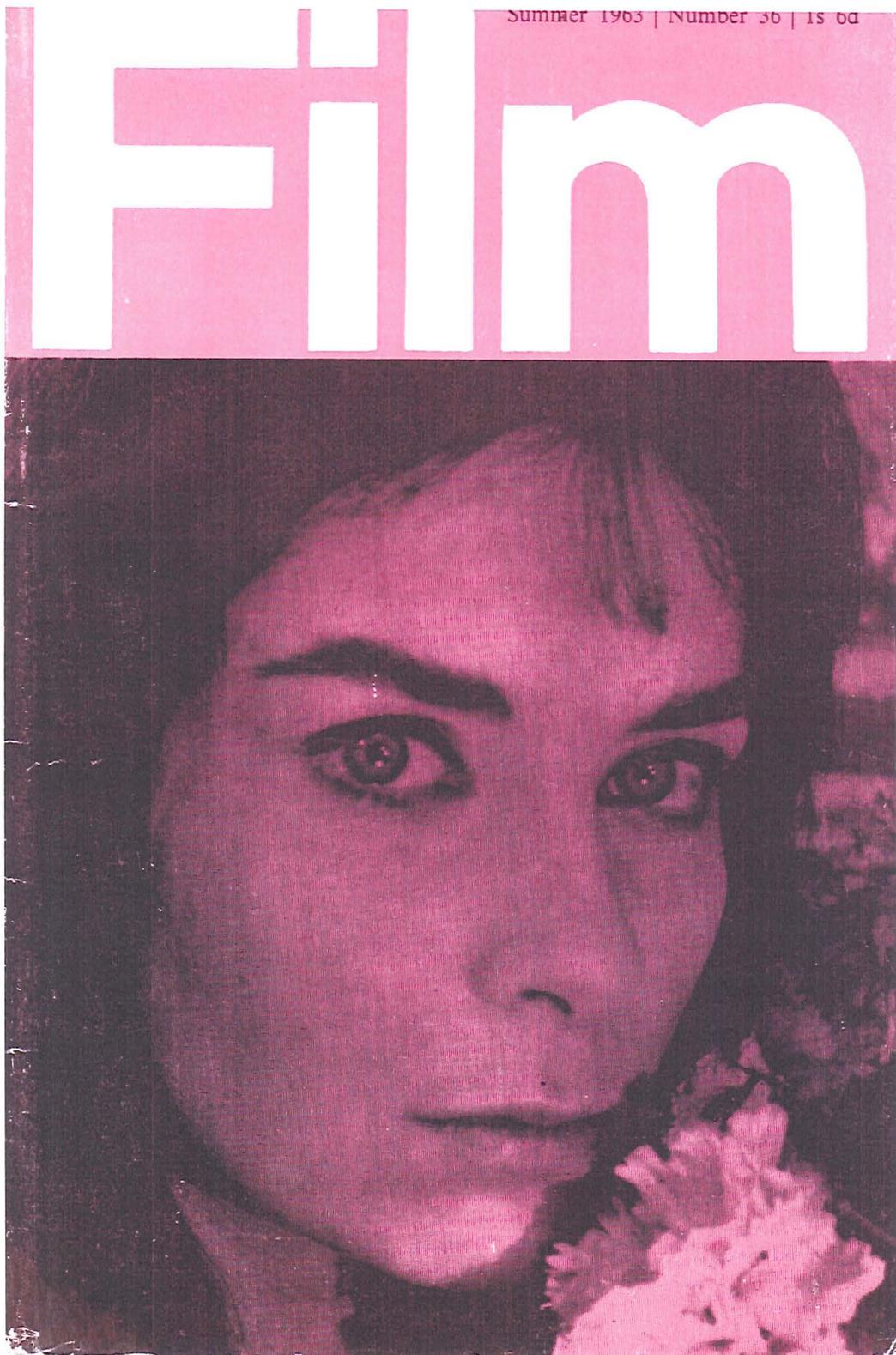


Figure 19: The redesigned *Film*, edited by Peter Armitage with layout by Ivor Kamlisch.

Chapter Six

Film Societies, Universities and the Emergence of Film Studies

A film lover wanting to study film as an artistic medium, its history, movements, the development of film technique, in the 1950s joined a film society and attended its discussion group meetings. The would-be student of film, living in Merseyside, would have applied to join six hundred other enthusiasts for the two year survey of cinema planned by Thorold Dickinson and organised in 1956 by the Merseyside Council for Film Appreciation, an offshoot of the film society. In Peterborough, they would have signed up for the course on *The First Half Century of Cinema* run by Jack Griffin, by day an employee of the British Sugar Corporation. In Solihull, a serious enthusiast would have gone to the Conservative Association for the newly formed Solihull Film Society's lecture series on *Film and Reality*, started with the participation of Birmingham University's extra-mural department in 1958. Throughout the decade, the film society movement was at the vanguard of film education, defining the way in which film could be studied in close collaboration with university extra-mural departments. The following decade saw major developments in the teaching and study of film, the expansion of film study in schools and in a higher education sector which was also expanding rapidly and diversifying.

This chapter examines the teaching and study of film in relation to these important institutional changes. It considers the way changes in the institutions of film education implied radical shifts in the conception of how film should be studied and why. The first section looks at the film society movement's relationship to the film appreciation curriculum. Then, focusing on *The Popular Arts*, a seminal work in the development of film teaching, I examine the way in which the case against film appreciation was advanced.¹ Within a few short years the approach to film teaching centred on criticism, and emphasising the student's personal response, developed in *The Popular Arts* would itself be characterised as impressionistic by advocates of the

¹ Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (London: Hutchinson Educational Ltd, 1964).

more rigorous and specialised methodologies grounded in linguistics and psychoanalysis then being introduced to British readers by the journal *Screen*. The general trend within the film society movement during this new phase in the formation of film studies was one of increasing distance from the new vanguard of film education, and a diminished commitment to promoting structured study. The chapter is especially concerned to foreground other possibilities, finding these in Birmingham Film Society, whose film study activities actually grew in importance and retained a close connection to developments in film and cultural theory. Where other chapters have attempted to grasp something of the character of a movement, for example by analysing the film reviewing practice or assessing exhibition strategies deemed typical, the concluding section of this final chapter aims to understand the film society that resisted a widespread trend of disinvestment from organised film education.

Film Appreciation's Curriculum

The key premise on which film appreciation was founded was that its object of attention was an artistic medium enjoyed by the majority of people, but enjoyed at different levels. Cinema possessed social penetration and reach; it potentially created a bridge, inviting the majority into a relationship to art that other art forms denied them. It was precisely this contact between social constituencies and corresponding taste formations that film educators regarded as cinema's great promise and opportunity. Introducing *Film*, Manvell wrote that unlike novels borrowed from libraries by only a fraction of the public that read newspapers, '[The film] can delight the most fastidious taste, whilst the millions pay in their weekly tribute.'² Cinema, he added was a typical twentieth-century hybrid, mixing the standards of the culturally privileged few and of the culturally underprivileged. Film appreciation was premised on the coexistence of these two standards, those belonging to the culturally privileged and those of the underprivileged, its project was to reform the cinema by making the interests of the former dominant and authoritative. Resolutely reformist, the favoured metaphor deployed by film society activists was that of a spearhead, indicating their

² Roger Manvell, *Film*, 1st ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1944), 12.

progressive and optimistic sensibility, leading a reforming process in which popular art was the ultimate objective.

The two most widely read post-war film appreciation books were conceived as interventions against forms of cinema that they believed routinely solicited a crude response from their audience, one grounded in immediate sensorial gratification and excessive emotional stimulation. Opening his textbook *The Art of Film* with a quotation from Wordsworth, Lindgren encouraged readers to draw comparisons between the poet's conception of the writer's vocation and the film educator.³ Wordsworth wrote, 'For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants: and he must have a very faint perception of beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he possesses this capability.' Lindgren was asking his readers to see his introduction to film technique in the terms deployed by Wordsworth, enlarging 'the discriminating powers of the mind' and thereby offering resistance to the stimulations that would blunt such powers. Lindgren's main objective was to train his readers to recognise film technique as the basis of sound criticism and judgement. In his view, he was contributing to a 'science of criticism', establishing the underlying principles that had guided the use of each area of technique in the best works of the past. His curriculum was oriented to teaching a canon strongly accented towards the great works of the silent period.

Manvell, as I noted in chapter two, likewise differentiated between simple and complex responses to art relating these to differences in the 'quality' of skill and emotion involved. Like Lindgren, Manvell held that a complex response implied an understanding of the artistic medium, including its traditions. But in the final part of his book he seemed to retreat from the implications of this argument proposing instead that all good art satisfied a fundamental instinct for enriching experience. In place of an audience divided on the basis of an unequal cultural competence, Manvell could envisage an audience united in their desire for socially responsible, humanist and realist cinema. In effect Manvell's argument downplayed the need for an

³ Ernest Lindgren, *The Art of Film: An Introduction to Film Appreciation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950).

educational intervention by revealing a more primal instinct for good art shared by all. Manvell is inclined to regard an overinvestment in analysing film technique with suspicion as a form of highbrow cliquishness, excluding rather than including and leading the majority by good example. In its evocation of a future cinema centred around notions of duty, restraint and community, Manvell it might be supposed was in tune with the middlebrow sentiments of the film society movement's rank and file members. Lindgren, however, provided the movement's activists with their curriculum.

How was film appreciation taught within a film society context in the 40s and 50s? Like a number of well-run film societies of similar size and ambition Birmingham Film Society (BFS) offered their members several distinct series of activities. Reconvening after the war, BFS offered an ambitious programme; a main series of eight film shows, a film weekend and a lecture and discussion course held in conjunction with the extra-mural department of the University of Birmingham. The first set of lectures was given by BFS members Frank Pardoe and Basil Harley both local school teachers. Pardoe had co-authored one of the BFI's first published pamphlets on film appreciation with another BFS member Ceinwen Jones.⁴ In outline, the lecture series they offered corresponded closely to the key themes of this pamphlet, covering topics headed: the Case for Film Appreciation, the Fundamentals of Film, Film Technique 1 and 2, the Film Unit, History of the Cinema 1 and 2, and the Film as an Art Form. The second series of lectures promised specialist visiting speakers, on Film Directing, Camera Work, The Art Director, Sound Recording, Film Editing, The Cartoon Film and Colour in the Cinema. Film societies sought contact and exchange with filmmakers believing that both could benefit from the exchange of views. Filmmakers as varied as Joseph Losey, Kenneth Anger, Anthony Asquith and Basil Wright spoke to film society audiences in the 50s.

In an effort at devolution six regional groups were formed within the Federation of Film Societies in 1953, and these became focal points of film study activity. The Federation, however, had no money to support an expansion in organised film study and so the most significant developments were weekend film

⁴ Ceinwen Jones and F.E. Pardoe, *A First Course in Film Appreciation* (BFI, 1946).

courses that took place through the co-sponsorship of university extra-mural departments, notably at Hull University, Kings College Newcastle, Birmingham University and through a number of local educational authorities and the WEA. Again, the emphasis was on teaching an appreciation of film technique, mounting broad surveys of film history and including practitioners' accounts of film production. Specialist genres such as documentary and animation were also a common topic, as was the pairing up of film with the traditional arts in courses such as Shakespeare and Film. Finally there was significant interest in the relationship between cinema and national culture reflected in courses such as National Aspects of the Cinema and National Character and Characteristic in Film. The lecturers and speakers were drawn either from the staff of the Film Appreciation department of the BFI, or from the list of amateur lecturers maintained by the Federation. Film society activists drawn from a wide variety of professions doubled as lecturers touring film societies or establishing courses at adult education venues often with their own privately owned collection of film extracts.

Two Contexts of Film Appreciation

Film appreciation was premised on the belief that a film viewer's responses could be blunted or they could be refined. From this founding premise two distinct emphases could emerge within film appreciation as practiced, depending on whether the dangers of the former or the potentially enriching pleasures of the latter were given prominence. The discourse of film appreciation was given different emphases in schools and film societies. Perceived as vulnerable to the enticements of commercial media, young people it was argued needed to be equipped to tell the true from the false, to maintain the powers of discrimination that crassly commercial entertainment always threatened to blunt. Film appreciation in this context was conceived as a rear-guard action, protecting against the ever-present threat of diminished capacity to respond with sensitivity. Surveying the development of screen education in Britain from the vantage point of the BFI Education Department in the mid sixties, Peter Harcourt noted the titles of publications typically circulated by his predecessor: *Are They Safe at the Cinema?* In an education system divided into

grammar schools and secondary modern, screen education was believed to be more suited to the latter on account of assumptions about which children had the most pressing need to be protected from bad cinema and its apparently corrosive values.⁵

Unsurprisingly, this investment in film appreciation as a way of arming the defenceless is far less apparent in the adult education context. Adults participated in organised study at film societies voluntarily and educators in this context could hardly subscribe to the notion that they were providing the means for intellectual self-protection for individuals deemed especially at risk. More importantly, despite a strong convergence between textbook film appreciation and the content of organised film study at film societies, the context in which that education took place seems likely to have modified its emphasis in some if not all instances. In significant respects the educational philosophy implicit in structured film appreciation was at odds with that of liberal adult education. A defining feature of the adult education environment for many of the educationists who worked in it was an emphasis on the activity of the students and a distinctive conception of the teacher student relationship. This had been a key concern in Tawney's influential essay on the workers educational movement and what we would now call lifelong learning. Describing the university tutorial classes of the WEA, Tawney highlighted the significance of fellowship between tutor and students and the importance of learning through discussion rather than 'the unintentional system of mutual deception which seems inseparable from any education which relies principally on the formal lecture.'⁶ It is in the informal discussions that take place before and after class, Tawney suggests, 'the root of the matter is reached both by student and tutor.' Educationist and writer on mass communications, Brian Groombridge also defined the essential quality of adult education, its 'social and cultural model value,' in terms of the distinctive relationships established between teachers and learners.⁷ He writes, 'the basic justification of adult education lies in its respect for people and its

⁵ Peter Harcourt, "Towards Higher Education," *Screen Education*, no. 26 (1964).

⁶ R H Tawney, "An Experiment in Democratic Education," *Political Quarterly* (1914).

⁷ Brian Groombridge, "Democratic Communication," *Adult Education: A Quarterly Journal of the British Institute of Adult Education* 33 (1960): 31.

recognition that they are both equal and not equal: this paradox is intrinsic to democratic communication, and adult education is an exemplar of it.’⁸ Both emphasise the pedagogical relationship in order to challenge a view of the educational process as a philanthropic endowment, a form of passing down a closed store of knowledge to a passive recipient.

In contrast, film appreciation was, as Perkins argued in *Film as Film*, concerned above all with defining correct technique in generalised terms.⁹ Grounded in a conception of art that stressed the process of selection and ordering, the chaos of life ordered by the artist, Lindgren’s introduction to film appreciation held that the most significant creative element in film was the editing process and in particular the montage principle developed by the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s. In the relationships established by montage lay cinema’s poetry. As Perkins notes the prescriptive tendency in Lindgren’s writing, the dogmatic stress on what is filmic, was actually undermined by his own enthusiasm for films that his explicit criteria should have excluded.¹⁰ In summary, film appreciation as defined by Lindgren suggested an attitude of acquiescent immersion that was contrary to the exercise and exchange of critical opinion that was cultivated as an ideal in the film societies.

Criticism and Democracy

Towards the end of the fifties the broad generalisations and historical surveys that constituted film appreciation’s curriculum were being explicitly challenged both by a younger generation of film critics and from within the teaching profession. In spring 1959 an eight-day forum was organised by the Joint Council for Education through Art at the National Film Theatre called ‘Visual Persuaders.’ Organiser, John Morley explained that the objective of the forum was to develop a substantial body of public opinion that will ‘share our vision of the role of the arts in education and the part that this education plays in our mass society.’¹¹ They went on to argue that to

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

¹⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹¹ John Morley, "Visual Persuaders," *Film*, September - October 1959, 6.

fulfil the expectations of the 1944 Education Act, which recognised the vital importance of education through art, it was considered essential that teachers connect with the cultural backgrounds of their pupils and take film and television seriously. At the conclusion of eight days of discussion a statement was released claiming that the potential for research, study and enjoyment of film and television had been emphatically demonstrated. The Forum was reported to have brought together teachers, NFT members and film society organisers and was animated by the recent reinvigoration of independent left politics in the aftermath of the exodus from the Communist Party of Great Britain brought about by the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Prominently represented among the speakers were a younger generation of left intellectuals associated with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and contributors to the two recently established independent left publications, *The New Reasoner* (Peter Worsley) and *Universities and Left Review* (Alan Lovell, Stuart Hall, Graham Martin, John Berger). Members of the growing number of Universities and Left Review clubs were among the 5,500 who attended across the eight days. The New Left were urging a more sophisticated understanding and engagement with a massively expanded communications industry, as a necessary part of grappling with the social changes that post-war affluence had brought and their consequences for political mobilisation.¹²

Visual Persuaders publicly galvanised a shift away from the term film appreciation. An editorial in *Screen Education* reflected on the fact that ‘several speakers at the forum bandied about the term “film appreciation” as if it was a dirty expression.’¹³ It continued ‘There is more than a hint of passivity in “film appreciation,” a feeling of it being mainly concerned with techniques and technicalities.’¹⁴ One of those speakers, Raymond Williams, had made just such a criticism of the film appreciation approach almost ten years earlier. Reflecting on his experience of organising a class on film for the WEA, Williams stated the ‘small body of serious appreciatory work’ (Rotha, Grierson, Lindgren and Manvell) whilst

¹² See Stuart Hall, "A Sense of Classlessness," *Universities and Left Review* 5 (1958).

¹³ "Editorial," *Screen Education*, no. 1 (1959).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

interesting and informed was 'to one trained in literary criticism...likely to seem inadequate.'¹⁵ He elaborated, 'It is technically expert, but this advantage is limited by a common failure to understand the place of technical analysis in a total judgement; so that what technical analysis there is comes usually as a separate kind of judgement – the film is interesting because of the emotional situation with which it deals; it is also, technically, very competent.'¹⁶ These reservations about the standard of the critical tradition in film stemmed from a deeper unease at the notion of appreciation. Appreciation had fostered a process of relating to the arts that Williams likened to department classes, 'what mattered was that the uninstructed (the lesser breeds who read the penny papers) should learn under the guidance of experts the finer points of an art which must be accepted as absolute.'¹⁷ In contrast Williams insisted that the case for the arts in education, including film, was that it provided opportunities for criticism, for the discovery of values in creative work.

Dissatisfied with an approach to teaching literature based on generalised surveys of literary history, Williams had drawn on the tradition of practical criticism that emphasised close analysis of actual texts. It was this approach to the study of literature that he sought to extend to film. The value of practical criticism for Williams was substantially bound up with his teaching practice in WEA tutorial classes. Like Tawney before him, Williams insisted that a defining feature of the tutorial class was that students play an active and determining role through the method of group discussion.¹⁸ As a tutor Williams abandoned lectures entirely and introduced a method of group reading and discussion that aimed to provide opportunities for student response to an actual work of poetry read, reread and discussed in class under the tutor's guidance. The training in reading that Williams developed followed the experiments of I. A. Richards of withholding an author's

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, "Film as a Tutorial Subject," in *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education*, ed. John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood (Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 1993), 188.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁸ Raymond Williams, "Discussion Method in the Tutorial Class," in *Discussion Method: The Purpose, Nature and Application of Group Discussion* (Bureau of Current Affairs, 1950).

name in order to emphasise the reader's engagement and competence with the actual text, as opposed to their assessment of the critical consensus surrounding the poem.¹⁹

For Williams, tutor-led group discussion, grounded in criticism was an important contribution to strengthening democratic culture. Lindgren had begun *The Art of Film* by comparing the film appreciator with the gourmet who takes pleasure in a fine blend of coffee having refined their palate over many years.²⁰ Rejecting an approach based on such an analogy Williams pointedly argued that 'training' was about more than a merely superficial process of individual cultivation, it implied 'the process of decision of a society about the quality of its own living, in terms of the experience and embodiment of art.'²¹ This connection between education in cultural criticism and developments in democracy was a key theme in Williams's writings of this period. In *The Long Revolution* Williams stressed that the central goal of education was the creation of a participatory democracy in which people were actively involved in a public discussion of all priorities and values, including those relating to artistic and cultural practice. Education, he argued, had done too little to deepen 'the capacity for significant response' to ever changing cultural forms.²² In Williams's vision, the development of a genuinely democratic culture would require two parallel and related developments, active encouragement of artists making new and unfamiliar work and a growth in real criticism, public discussion accompanying the circulation of a genuine variety of creative work. Both in *The Long Revolution* and *Communications* published the following year, Williams attempted to specify the forms of cultural organisation that would be compatible with this two-sided emphasis on creative production that underwrote new work and reception that emphasised the fullest participation and open discussion.²³ Critical of existing systems of communications in which bureaucratic and commercial control equally restricted the

¹⁹ See John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood, eds., *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education* (Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 1993).

²⁰ Lindgren, *The Art of Film: An Introduction to Film Appreciation*, v.

²¹ Williams, "Film as a Tutorial Subject," 187.

²² Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 365.

²³ Raymond Williams, *Britain in the Sixties: Communications* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

freedom to produce, transmit and receive in ways compatible with democracy, Williams argued for alternative forms of public ownership and policy formation through democratic means.

The Popular Arts as the Touchstone of Criticism

In *Communications*, Williams had stated that generalisations about mass media greatly inhibited the development of real criticism, a sentiment at the heart of Hall and Whannel's pioneering work *The Popular Arts*. Both these books were published in the aftermath of a special NUT conference on the theme of *Popular Culture and Personal Responsibility* in 1960 and should be seen as interventions in an ongoing debate within the teaching profession about the way formal education should address mass communications. The conference was not only a response to the rapid growth in television and other forms of commercial entertainment but also to a rising anxiety about youth. The cultural visibility of youth in the late fifties and early sixties was, as Hall et al later observed, the dark counterpart of the myth of affluence of an expanding consumer society. Generalised anxieties about social change were displaced onto youth, a category constructed as 'the vanguard of the Golden age and the vanguard party of the new materialism, the new hedonism.'²⁴ Within the teaching profession, Hall and Whannel argued, the response of some was to cling to the school as an oasis of traditional values and standards constantly under threat from the desert beyond. But there were also teachers, particularly those drawn into an expanding profession from outside the professional middle class, from backgrounds that made them more ambivalent about their role as guardians of traditional culture.

In 1963 the Newsom Report, *Half Our Future*, a Government White Paper into secondary education, made a decisive argument for including film on the school humanities curriculum. The emphasis was on 'training children to look critically and discriminate in what is good and bad in what they see.'²⁵ Developing their capacity to evaluate through specific examples of films of varying quality and integrity, pupils

²⁴ Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1978), 234.

²⁵ "The Newsom Report: Half Our Future," ed. Central Advisory Council for Education (London: HMSO, 1963).

would be lead to 'an understanding of film as a potentially valuable art form in its own right, as capable of communicating depth of experience as any other art form.' Consequently, the report suggested, the long accepted educational objective of broadening children's response to music and literature should be extended to film. The Newsom Report's recommendations were taken as a vindication of the ongoing efforts of the screen education movement.

Echoing Williams, Hall and Whannel condemned arts appreciation, the acquisition of good taste, as a trivialisation of activities through which individuals articulate experience and understand their lives. Instead they insisted on the distinction between discrimination and appreciation. The purpose of teaching the popular arts was not to raise the level of taste but to train the ability to discriminate.

The power to discriminate is the power to analyse and evaluate our experiences. As it develops it may well lead to a shift in values, to a change in taste but such a process, involving the work of independent thinking, must be distinguished from the attempt to change taste as a first aim. A great deal of teaching in the arts is still taste changing. Much of it is carried out with the best of intentions, but however worthy the motive, however admirable the standards, it is still of course an imposition. This is not to say that there are no standards; there are standards, but they cannot be imposed, only discovered.²⁶

Imposition of a closed canon was substituted for an open-ended discovery of values through the kind of tutor led discussion that had been more typical of adult education.

The Popular Arts was explicitly indebted to Leavis's contribution to English Studies and the extension of this approach to popular and commercial forms of writing in Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* and Leavis and Denys Thompson's *Culture and Environment*.²⁷ These works represented an ambiguous legacy for the advance of film study, as they held commercially distributed mass culture responsible for the erosion of literary standards and the humane values they embodied. In the face of this erosion, Leavis and his colleagues developed a two-pronged educational project; the study of literature conceived as the preservation of

²⁶ Hall and Whannel, *The Popular Arts*.

²⁷ F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932); Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).

humane values and the study of the immediate cultural environment, the educational project of training awareness to recognise and resist the tricks of commercially oriented writing in advertising, public relations and mass market fiction. Hall and Whannel's appropriation of the Leavis legacy was therefore selective. The historical argument, emphasising the destruction of an organic way of life by the machine, was forcefully rejected as conservative. What was retained from the earlier works was the emphasis on close analysis and critical judgement, in which an attention to specific form and style was necessary to a careful consideration of the moral values affirmed by the individual work.

Underlying Hall and Whannel's approach was their attempt to redefine the mass media's relationship to art through the concept of popular art. They argued that creative work in the cinema had generally been recognised where it could be considered to have established a relationship with the realm of high culture. This was work that, 'bears the stamp of an original imagination; its power depends upon a capacity to force us 'out of ourselves' to attend to the range and quality of someone else's mind.'²⁸ Creative work of this quality has the capacity to bring new social experiences to consciousness and to break with existing forms in order 'to dissolve the images of life and the social stereotypes supported by them.'²⁹ But what of the majority of creative work that does not possess these characteristics? Rather than define all of this material negatively as non-art, Whannel and Hall propose a further distinction between popular art and mass art. Popular art shares some of the characteristics of the folk art of a previous historical period. Folk art was a communal art with forms and material that were widely known and easily transmitted. It conjured up a familiar world grounded in common situations shared by performer and audience. The transition from folk art into popular entertainment involved the development of a more rigid distinction between professional entertainers and spectators. Performance style became individualised in the form of the artist-entertainer. Nevertheless the essence of popular performance was the closeness of the connection between audience and artist, affirmed through widely understood and

²⁸ Hall and Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

accepted conventions. In contrast to high art, popular art 'persuades by the depth and intensity of its feelings and values, rather than by the range of experience.'³⁰ The popular artist makes their art through developing a personal style, improvised from widely understood conventions and drawing on a store of experience that the artist shares with the audience.

Nevertheless, Hall and Whannel insist that popular art is by no means the typical product of the mass media for which they reserve the category mass art. In the latter, the personal expression that was the hallmark of the popular artist was squeezed out, though the traces of personality removed from the work's creation retained a superficial presence as an enhancement of the product's commercial appeal. Conventional forms were used not as a vehicle for personal expression, in a way that was respectful of the audience, but manipulatively in order to simplify and stereotype. Influenced by Clement Greenberg's definition of kitsch they argued that mass art represents the total subjection of cultural production and performance to the mass audience's perceived demands.

For Hall and Whannel the possibilities of teaching popular art were most evident in jazz and the cinema, each widely accessible and in differing ways possessing the capacity for self-expression. Each appealed to the young, to individuals without the educational privileges demanded by the traditional arts. The fact that popular art implies the participation of groups routinely excluded from a relationship with the traditional arts is of central importance to Hall and Whannel. Popular art undermined the cultural hierarchies that both serious and mass art implied. Yet the creation of popular forms in the cinema was under threat. Cinema's gravitation towards high art catering to an educated, middle class audience on the one hand and the growth of blockbusters, seen as the embodiment of mass art, threatened to increase the stratification of the audience that popular art undermined. Moreover, the fragmentation of serious and popular forms was to the detriment of each. Hall and Whannel delineate important phases in the development of drama and the novel when serious artists were deeply grounded in popular attitudes, genres and character types. Popular work, they argue, 'helps the serious artist to focus the actual world, to draw

³⁰ Ibid.

upon common types, to sharpen his observation and to detect the large but hidden movements of society.'³¹ The alienation of high art from popular art was by no means complete in the cinema. Consequently they concluded:

When we look at the new media – especially those where the fragmentation between popular and serious is not yet complete (like the cinema) – we are showing a proper concern, not only for the moments of quality in the popular arts, but for the condition and quality of imaginative work of any level, and thus for the quality of the culture as a whole. It is this care for the quality of the culture – rather than the manufacture and manipulation of levels of taste – which is the ultimate educational responsibility we try to focus here.³²

In Hall and Whannel's argument popular art occupies an analogous position to literature in the analysis of the Scrutiny group, but the differences are important to acknowledge. For Leavis and his colleagues, a concern with literature was a concern with civilisation as a whole. Literature was defended and preserved by the minority against the whole historical trend of society because it represented a superior record of thought, language and experience. Hall and Whannel's emphasis on popular art as the touchstone of their criticism is an attempt to ground a critical and evaluative approach in artistic expression with wide appeal, transmitted through a mass medium, rather than a selective literary canon upheld by an intellectual elite who proclaim their alienation from civilisation. They were advocating an educational project that privileged an engagement between intellectuals and classes educationally excluded from a relationship with art, and framed this intervention as the mutual and creative discovery of values and meanings through the process of discussion and close analysis of style. Addressing a film's style and form revealed distinctive social conflicts and moral choices as aspects of a film around which students were encouraged to articulate their own response and judgement. The lecturer's task was to ensure that judgements offered in discussion were brought back to the film itself and the particular kinds of imaginative and emotional experience it offered, balancing, as Stuart Hall wrote, the social and the artistic concern. Teaching young people might

³¹ Ibid., 83.

³² Ibid., 85.

involve building a course around themes that had a direct resonance for the students, such as the young hero on screen. Hall and Whannel were therefore closely identified with the pedagogical impulses expressed in *Half Our Future* which urged English teaching to connect with their pupils experience as a means of releasing their expressive selves.

The mutually beneficial relationship between popular and high cultural traditions valued by Hall and Whannel had its corollary in a conviction that film study should develop at different levels but that the links between serious and popular education were vital. The final chapter of *The Popular Arts* concludes with a vision of film education in which a growing body of serious film scholarship would have an impact on the quality and direction of film teaching both in schools and adult education. *The Popular Arts* envisaged a new kind of cultural institution, a permanent study laboratory, contemporary arts centre, training college, university and night school with residential accommodation, a core staff of lecturers and technicians, a book and film library, study rooms and small cinema with 35 and 16mm projection. The study laboratory would offer intensive teaching on six monthly programmes to small groups of students and it would also serve the local community, connecting up with adult education organisations. An important function of this community provision would be to combine regular film screenings and experiments in multi-media performance alongside lectures and study weekends. It would be a centre for research and study in depth focused on developing critical methods and advanced through detailed studies of individual films.

The importance of forging connections between in depth study, serious critical writing and popular education was a key theme of Paddy Whannel's writing on film pedagogy during his tenure as Education Officer at the BFI. In 1961, he wrote that the film teaching movement needed the developments that the establishment of academic film study would encourage, though he warned of the possibility that a gulf would open up between popular education and serious critical writing.³³ The following year Whannel wrote again of the importance of educational work that

³³ Paddy Whannel, "Where Do We Go from Here?" *Screen Education*, no. 7 (1961).

covered 'all types of adult audience not just the teaching profession.'³⁴ He argued that popular education and intensive study were fundamentally linked by the common practice of discrimination. The teacher engaged in film teaching needed a sympathetic and informed public behind them.

Birmingham Film Society and the University

Organised film appreciation activities around screenings were a long-standing film society tradition given a renewed emphasis by some activists in the mid to late fifties, a period of self-examination for the voluntary movement. By the end of the fifties it was evident to many larger, urban 35mm film societies that they needed to adapt. As early as 1955, a *Film* editorial suggested that one phase of the film society movement had come to completion with the increase in commercial screenings of foreign language films; new directions were urged, with a stronger emphasis on film study and more constructive support for experimental and amateur filmmaking.³⁵ These new directions were also debated the following year by the first national film society conference sponsored by the Federation. Throughout the decade a number of film societies and regional Federation groups had drawn closer to university extra-mural departments, regularly co-sponsoring a range of film study activity with involvement from local educational professionals and BFI education department staff.

In 1959, Birmingham Film Society reported that the changing nature of local exhibition required a fresh approach to their programming. The film society no longer needed to show new continental films, many of which would get a local release. Film selection would focus on films that were genuine regional premieres. Two years later they were emphasising the importance of reviving neglected repertory of American and British films. In the 1959-60 season the Film Study Group was re-launched as a more ambitious enterprise, once again involving Birmingham University's extra-mural department. Typically the Film Study Group undertook an integrated series of lectures with supporting screenings, ten meetings in all from October through to April, around an overarching theme. In the first few years the themes are broadly

³⁴ Paddy Whannel, "Meanwhile, Back at Base," *Screen Education*, no. 13 (1962).

³⁵ "New Directions.," *Film*, March 1955, 5.

reflective of the concerns of film appreciation, the 59-60 season was 'a survey of the art of the film:' this featured a lecture by Ken Russell on 'The Filmmakers Viewpoint,' lectures on 'The Documentary Film;' 'Film Music and Sound;' and 'The Film as an Art Form' and composite programmes of extracts around the topics of animation, documentary and amateur film. The signs of a different approach can be seen two years later. For the society's twenty-seventh season, the study group took the theme of 'Film Analysis.' A whole film was screened with an introduction one week, followed at the next meeting a fortnight later by analysis of the film, led by tutors associated with the BFI Education Department, Paddy Whannel, Alan Lovell and Peter Harcourt. Lovell's choice of the Western, *The 3.10 to Yuma* (Davis, 1957), for his analysis inaugurated a definite shift towards the inclusion of popular taste.

In the year that *The Popular Arts* was published, the BFS study programme was indebted to its influence. Sharing the lecturing duties Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel delivered an integrated course of screenings and talks around the theme of the film hero. The films screened ranged from the New Left favourites, *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) and *Eroica* (1958), by Polish directors Wajda and Munk, to *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941) and Sam Peckinpah's *Guns in the Afternoon* (1962). Lectures and discussion explored these films under headings such as 'The Political Hero,' 'The Existentialist Hero' and 'The Mythical Hero.' Birmingham Film Society's approach to programming: themed seasons that integrated screenings and film critical discussion led by professional tutors, anticipated what would come to be a core BFI cultural policy in the mid 70s, in which the Institute's affiliated regional exhibitors were encouraged to plan structured programmes that focused on key debates in film studies.

Film Education and the New Vanguard

The Newsom report was one of a series of important reviews of educational policy conducted in the early 1960s. Broadly social democratic in political orientation these policy reviews raised the public profile of education and provided the broad framework for substantial increases in educational funding through the decade. Complementing reports like Newsom on the secondary education curriculum, the

Robbins committee published its report on higher education in 1963. The Robbins report highlighted the low levels of higher education in Britain comparative with other Western European countries and the United States and concluded that this was detrimental to Britain's economic competitiveness. The report pointed to a vast reservoir of untapped talent caused by the historic and continuing inaccessibility of higher education to girls of all classes and to working class children in Britain.³⁶ Implementation of the Robbins report would result in a major expansion of higher education, though it hadn't envisaged that this would be through a two-tier system of polytechnics and universities with different sources of funding. Nevertheless, the new polytechnics were less burdened by the dead weight of disciplinary traditions, more inclined to curriculum innovation and therefore generally more receptive to film study.

Film study was growing across a proliferating range of sites in formal education. Aiming to stimulate and cultivate this movement the BFI education department strategically identified what it called fields of direct action, key sites for the development of film teaching.³⁷ The optimal field was considered to be the teacher training colleges, crucial to the subsequent development and growth of film teaching in schools. Related to this, and again with school film study primarily in mind, film teaching was to be encouraged by targeting university education departments though this had been relatively unsuccessful compared to the growth of film study in university extra-mural departments. The other key area were colleges of further education, art colleges in particular. Film teaching, often with a strong practical orientation had been developing at Hornsey, Chelsea, Kingston and the Slade School of Fine Art where industry funded film scholarships under Thorold Dickinson's direction as lecturer in film were bearing fruit in the form of new modes of interrogating film style developed by alumni. An idea of the kind of approaches to film study being developed in these diverse contexts was given in an education department pamphlet on film teaching in formal education first published in 1964 and

³⁶ Michael Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change in England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 71-74.

³⁷ Harcourt, "Towards Higher Education."

reprinted four years later.³⁸ Stuart Hall described the challenges facing a film teacher developing a course under the rubric of the liberal arts, on the margins of the curriculum in a technology college attended by student chemists studying for a science diploma. Albert Hunt, talking about his work as an Area Tutor Organiser for Shropshire Education Committee described discussion sessions in rural communities using Ray's *The World of Apu* (1959). Alan Lovell provided a detailed example of the kind of course offered in the context of a two-year certificate course of film study, (soon to be extended to a three-year diploma) offered by the University of London's Extra-Mural Department supported by the BFI.

The assumption underpinning the Education Department's work was that film study was moving in the direction of higher education. On this direction of travel, Whannel was more circumspect than some of his colleagues, he cautioned that the institutionalisation of film study within higher education may come at the cost of ghettoisation. He emphasised the need for close links to be maintained between the various agencies of film culture and all levels of teaching and research, intensive study and popular education.³⁹ In his view *Screen*, the journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television, was ideally placed to maintain those connections. In the event, when *Screen* was relaunched in 1971 with a new editorial board and a new format it was clear that building bridges was not its priority. The periodical's new editorial board framed their sense of purpose in relation to their advantageous position as the journal of an independent society of film teachers whose financial security was guaranteed by the BFI. Freed from the more routine film critical functions of other film magazines, *Screen* would seize this opportunity to promote theories of film in conjunction with theories of education. Theory would introduce an attitude of self-awareness, rigour and self-criticism that *Screen's* editorial board considered to be absent from English film criticism and education.⁴⁰ *Screen*, they announced would 'go beyond subjective taste-ridden criticism and try to develop

³⁸ Paddy Whannel and Peter Harcourt, "Introduction," in *Film Teaching: Studies in the Teaching of Film within Formal Education*, ed. Paddy Whannel and Peter Harcourt (London: BFI Education Department, 1964).

³⁹ Paddy Whannel, "Film Education and Film Culture," *Screen* 10, no. 3 (1969).

⁴⁰ "Editorial," *Screen* 12, no. 1 (1971).

more systematic approaches over a wider field.⁴¹ With polemical clarity the present and future of film study was radically disassociated from its past, a manoeuvre that deployed a series of binary distinctions: conscious v unconscious; (descriptive) knowledge v (prescriptive) taste; systematic v impressionistic; dichotomies that bore the formative influence of the opposition between science and ideology proposed by Althusserian epistemology.⁴²

Actively hostile to 'massively available criticism' *Screen* was promoting a shift in the agency producing film knowledge from cinephile journals to the university and the academic periodical. This shift inevitably entailed the development of an increasingly specialised discourse. For perhaps the first time, as Casetti remarks of this period, film analysis acquired a specialised jargon distinct from ordinary language.⁴³ He also observes that this phase of film theoretical production was accompanied by a series of breaks and fractures as theory alienated itself from criticism and from filmmaking practice. In Britain, these breaks were self-conscious, an essential element of a programme of opposition to established tendencies and institutions in British film culture.

Recent institutional histories of both the BFI and SEFT have usefully restored a fuller sense of the cultural struggles that shaped the periodical's early work, an aspect obscured by the assimilation of 'Screen Theory' onto the curriculum.⁴⁴ *Screen's* polemical re-launch in 1971 came in the midst of protracted crisis and paralysis at the British Film Institute, tremors from the wider cultural rebellions both at home and abroad. At a time of widespread criticism of institutional authority, dissatisfaction among BFI staff with the BFI's governance and management structures was translating into activism. For a growing number of film activists and educators the BFI was looking increasingly out of touch. As Nowell-Smith states the Institute had grown rapidly in the years since Labour was elected to power in 1964,

⁴¹ Ibid.: 5.

⁴² See Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

⁴³ Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 8-9.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "The 1970 Crisis at the BFI and Its Aftermath," *Screen* 47, no. 4 (2006). Terry Bolas, *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009).

but had failed to maintain connections with a rapidly changing film culture.⁴⁵ Where that film culture had changed dramatically was of course in the area of film education and the Institute's Education Department was increasingly critical of the BFI's policy formation and general direction. This conflict would lead to a hostile report on the work of the Education Department drafted by a sub-committee set up by the Board of Governors. The report recommended drastic cuts to *Screen* and was critical of the department's role in developing film research, recommending a much narrower and mainly practical remit for its work. The intended cuts to *Screen's* budget were in the end forestalled but the report provoked the resignations of several members of the department including its head Paddy Whannel.⁴⁶

Much hostility focused on the BFI's Regional Film Theatre policy as the embodiment of complacent expansion. Dissent was channelled into a Members Action Committee that was composed of intellectuals and activists who situated themselves outside of what Lovell had termed the establishment film culture. As Nowell-Smith notes, despite representing differing interests, from popular American cinema to the avant-garde, what united this group was a shared perception that the BFI's resources were being squandered in support of a limited and out of touch conception of cinema.⁴⁷ Critics argued that the BFI's authority was exercised on the basis of unexamined assumptions of quality and assumed a consensus regarding what cinema was of value that was increasingly difficult to sustain. Policy was informed by judgements that operated on the level of taste and were not explicitly defended and discussed. Critics also drew attention to the proliferation of film cultural activity beyond the BFI's presently defined remit and highlighted the narrowness of the conception of film culture that the BFI actually endorsed. A key article was Alan Lovell's mapping of the patterns of relationship and alignment that constituted British film culture. Lovell made a distinction between a sharply contracting majority film culture identified with the commercial exhibition of British and American films and a

⁴⁵ Ibid.: 454.

⁴⁶ For an account see Colin McArthur, "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Cultural Struggle in the British Film Institute," *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, no. 4 (2001).

⁴⁷ Nowell-Smith, "The 1970 Crisis at the BFI and Its Aftermath," 457.

growing minority film culture. This minority film culture had three distinct sites; an establishment, the publicly subsidised activities of the BFI in distribution, criticism and exhibition, the commercial art house cinemas and the voluntary film societies; a growing film study movement linked to periodicals, book publishing and educational institutions and finally an expanding set of independent film activities, in distribution, production and exhibition conceived in opposition to the aesthetic and political tendencies of the film culture establishment.⁴⁸

The initial phase of *Screen's* intellectual project had a coherent underlying impulse, the desire to displace 'traditional notions of art and criticism and the systems of education which still in part is tied to them.'⁴⁹ Over the course of the previous decade, film criticism and education had claimed that film should be studied as popular art because of the scope for unique personal expression that one found there. As a popular art, film was the potential meeting point of unique artistic expression within familiar, widely recognised genres. Popular art's potential for the teacher was that it could constitute a genuine form of contact with their students, a common culture. Similarly in film criticism, auteurism had proposed that popular commercial cinema - Hollywood - was worth serious investigation because behind the best of such work one could find an artist meeting the considerable challenge of creating for a mass audience. The auteur theory, Peter Wollen suggested in *Signs and Meanings*, needed to be continually stressed, as a counterweight to the critical celebration of the art film.⁵⁰ Now, however, *Screen* regarded approaches that had once enabled a critical revolt, the identification of commercial art with an individual artist's expression, as a serious limitation. Auteurism would remain the topic of constant re-examination and critique, building on and extending the structuralist modifications to that critical approach inaugurated by Wollen and others. But the impulse was towards identifying

⁴⁸ Alan Lovell, "Notes on British Film Culture," *Screen: The Journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television* 13, no. 2 (1972).

⁴⁹ "Editorial," 5.

⁵⁰ Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), 16.

authorship as one of the sub-codes that the analysis of a body of texts might disengage.⁵¹

The intellectual attention previously devoted to establishing individual artistic creativity was redirected towards radically extending understandings of cinematic specificity whilst simultaneously interrogating what form radical and progressive cinema would take. *Screen* followed the lead of the two French film publications, *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Cinéthique* in pursuing two closely related lines of enquiry. Firstly there was an engagement with Russian formalism as a critical tradition concerned to address the mediating effect of the devices specific to each medium of representation with respect to what is represented. Theorists from this tradition such as Osip Brik and Boris Eikhenbaum were translated and published. As Harvey has pointed out the radical cultural theorists of the post-68 generation were attracted to Russian formalist criticism in order to emphasise the necessity for a struggle at the level of form rather than simply introducing new subject matter.⁵²

Secondly, *Screen* undertook an ambitious programme of translation, critique and commentary on the key works of European Saussurean semiology, central to which was an ongoing engagement with the work of Christian Metz. The impulse of this work was to systematically elaborate precisely how cinema could be considered a language. Based on an initial series of distinctions between the empirical and the abstract and between singular and multiple phenomena, Metz had proposed a number of logical alternatives for semiological film analysis and developed a correspondingly nuanced terminology for distinguishing each area of analytical concern.⁵³ Working from a specific film text, analysis could construct the underlying textual system, a singular entity corresponding to the specific configuration of codes and sub-codes found in the text. Alternatively, working at a more general level, semiological analysis aimed to elucidate cinematic language, describing the general cinematic codes, some specific to film, some shared with other cultural systems and the sub-codes that are found in a specific group of films, such as a genre or movement. What

⁵¹ See for example Edward Buscombe, "Ideas of Authorship," *Screen* 14, no. 3 (1973).

⁵² Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: BFI, 1980), 56.

⁵³ See Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).

Metz emphasised in discussing the filmic system was not the existence of a given order or configuration but the process or operation, which he termed filmic writing, that has produced this particular configuration. Moreover this process or operation involves the dynamic interaction of codes, each signifying element redefined by the existence of others. This emphasis, on the filmic text as a practice in which the different signifying elements were in relations of tension and conflict, was highly influential for subsequent forms of textual analysis that explored the disjuncture between a coherent ideological project and its displacement in a specific text.

Film Studies and Informal Learning

The intensive theoretical development pioneered by *Screen* in the 1970s presented a challenge to those engaged in film teaching. The journal's subsequent assimilation of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in order to elaborate a theory of the subject provoked the resignation of five members of the editorial board. In a statement the resigning members unequivocally reiterated their support for the initial ambition of the re-launched *Screen* to develop a body of knowledge and theory that would give film study its foundations, but which was not immediately and directly relevant to classroom practice. What was crucial, they argued, was that 'the question of the relationship between work on film theory and the concerns of teachers...should inflect [*Screen's*] work.'⁵⁴ *Screen* had played an important role in challenging prejudices against theory, creating a situation conducive to the growth of serious film study. But, they argued, the journal's present contribution was more ambivalent. Specifically they held that *Screen's* obscurity and inaccessibility impeded the ability to forge alliances with other groups working to change the dominant ideas and institutions of British film culture. The *Screen* board were perceived to have failed to recognise this as a pressing concern and work through the admittedly complex questions it raised. The resigning board members took this indifference as a demonstration of how detached *Screen's* editorial line had become from fundamental pedagogical questions.

⁵⁴ "Statement: Why We Have Resigned from the Board of *Screen*," *Screen* 17, no. 2 (1976): 107.

The gap that had opened up between the concerns of advanced film theory and film teaching would have been most evident to those engaged in informal adult education such as that sponsored by film societies. In this context, one would expect the specialisation of language, the break from methods of film analysis grounded in ordinary language, would have been felt most acutely. The process of formal training within an academic discipline implies an induction into a jargon through a long apprenticeship. Informal learning involves a less intensive process of learning and a program of limited duration. The learning context is different, situated between work and leisure and without the formal disciplines of examination and assessment. But closely related to the specific problem of the language employed, is the wider issue of the substantial problems and issues addressed. A very different conception of how students of film would be learning was being advanced.

The Popular Arts had insisted that film study was an opportunity for criticism and discrimination. Film appreciation was regarded an impoverished approach because it seemed to foreclose the discovery of values through disciplined viewing, focusing instead on the recognition of a prescribed set of techniques. Now students were being asked to respond to subtleties of style and treatment, regarding these as the basis for making judgements about a film's attitude towards aspects of the real world. Students were therefore called upon to draw on two areas of experience. Firstly, their response to films analysed and discussed closely in class. Film material was often selected in order to emphasise the way in which similar themes could be embodied in widely differing styles. Secondly, students were encouraged to draw on their personal experience, for example the course on young people stressed that discussion should consider 'their sense of being part of a generation, what this might mean to them.'⁵⁵ The course proposals were composed of clusters of questions that aimed to stimulate student articulation and growing self-awareness. At the same time an approach centred on detailed film analysis disciplined the discussion, bringing it back to specific questions of style and treatment. Students were assumed to be growing in their capacity for critical response to creative work and becoming more conscious of the basis of their judgements and attitudes.

⁵⁵ Hall and Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, 406.

The radicalisation of film criticism and education that constituted *Screen's* programme broke decisively with this pattern. The Leavisite literary critical tradition that *The Popular Arts* sought to modify and extend, regarded literary judgement to be an irreducibly moral matter, though the terms of that judgement were rarely explicitly examined. Thus Alan Lovell in a series of exchanges with the critic Robin Wood on the pages of *Screen* argued that the moral judgements, shared by Leavis and Wood were discernable in certain recurrent yet vaguely articulated references to the artist's reverence for life. *Screen's* critics, following the intense debates on cinema's relationship to politics in French film journals in the aftermath of 1968, shifted critical attention decisively towards thinking about cinema as expressive of ideology, the values and ideas of dominant groups. Rather than associating the ideological with specific themes or represented content, critical attention was focused on formal characteristics of cinema, the manner in which the spectator was positioned in relation to the spectacle of depicted reality. Drawing on Lacanian-Althusserian accounts of subject formation, *Screen* increasingly focused on spectatorship as the central ideological problem to be addressed. Whether this work on ideology focused on the cinema apparatus itself or the characteristics of the realist text, the emphasis was on the implications of these dominant tendencies for the constitution of a subject-spectator who was positioned or interpellated by ideology on the basis of the fantasy of control, privileged knowledge, stability and coherence offered by the film. The emphasis on how film experience was forcefully shaped by dominant ideology in the form of cinema's representational realism implicitly contrasted markedly with that of *Screen's* precursors in formal and informal film education who had stressed both individual intentionality and collective agency. Critics of a pedagogy grounded in the student's personal response questioned the assumptions it made about the adequacy of the experiential to effective learning. Pertinent as these criticisms were they often failed to consider that practical criticism had been pioneered by a generation of progressive educators in the context of student-centred adult education. Practical criticism was developed as a way of actively involving students in their learning. Reflecting on his extra-mural teaching at the University of Keele, Richard Dyer contrasted his subject-oriented undergraduate teaching with adult education where the

task was as much about 'creating opportunities for students to explore themselves as with developing film knowledge per se.'⁵⁶ Parts of the course were about 'response,' creating opportunities for students to speak from socially grounded experience. This part of the course was balanced by study oriented to broader conceptual categories such as genre, film language, authorship and stars.

Coinciding with the developments in film education was an efflorescence of new forms of small-scale, independently organised film activism, membership based workshops like the London Filmmakers Co-op and politically engaged production collectives such as Cinema Action and Amber. Supporting these new areas of film practice, new publications were founded such as *Afterimage*. These pioneering groups in turn stimulated the formation of other film groups representing a wide spectrum of radical political and aesthetic projects. New politically oriented film distributors like The Other Cinema were established and like Contemporary, founded twenty years earlier, relied on the interest of film societies in their titles. Here at least the boundaries between what was establishment, the film societies, according to Lovell, and what was oppositional, independent distributors, was permeable. In 1974 this heterogeneous independent film culture would come together with a representative organisation the Independent Filmmakers Association. As Dickinson notes one of the key principles of the IFA was to connect film theory with practice. The critique of cinematic realism developed in *Screen* 'acquired the status of an IFA orthodoxy.'⁵⁷ Film theory and practice thus coalesced around a shared conception of radical film practice as centrally concerned with reflexively foregrounding the artistic devices specific to the medium. As Dickinson observes the circulation of formally reflexive films outside of a higher educational context represents a considerable challenge. In one sense this was an independent film culture that was oppositional, committed to developing radical alternatives to mainstream cinema. Yet, as Sylvia Harvey comments in a measured critique of the prevailing discursive framing of radical film practice, the strategy has tended to focus on resisting the dominant practice through

⁵⁶ Richard Dyer, "The BFI Lectureships in Film," *Screen Education* 19 (1976): 56.

⁵⁷ Margaret Dickinson, ed., *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945 - 90* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 51.

the creation of an alternative apparatus. Whilst this alternative apparatus provides a foundation for radical innovation of the means of representation it rarely entails an intervention in the conditions of consumption of avant-garde art.⁵⁸ To be genuinely oppositional, rather than merely a benign alternative to the mainstream, Harvey insists that a radical independent practice must seek to make an intervention at the level of consumption as well as production. She writes, an oppositional apparatus 'must engage with the question of audiences; it must be able to draw certain audiences away from the dominant apparatus.'⁵⁹ It is from this position with respect to audience that Harvey challenges the puritanical tendencies of a materialist counter cinema, its insistence on the virtues of the spectator performing a specific kind of activity, reflecting on the material processes of a film's production. Following Brecht, she contrasts two kinds of pleasure; the first corresponding to the reflexivity characteristic of counter-cinema, the pleasure to be gained from experiencing the formal transgressions of artistic convention and on the other hand, a pleasure that derives from learning about the world in order to change it. As Harvey concludes, Brechtian aesthetics regarded instruction and entertainment as interdependent, the theatre and therefore the cinema was to be considered a place of entertainment and instruction.

Birmingham Film Society and the Idea of Film Culture

Through the 1970s the expansion of university film studies was accompanied by a marked decline in organised film study activity within film societies. A study into the state of arts education in the adult sector conducted in the late seventies concluded that very few film societies engaged in educational activity.⁶⁰ The expansion of the formal education sector fragmented the public that once gravitated to the adult and voluntary sector as teachers and students. The educational role of the Regional Film Theatres (RFTs), many of which had incorporated their local film

⁵⁸ Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, 75-82.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶⁰ Geoffrey Adkins, *The Arts and Adult Education: The Report of an Enquiry Jointly Commissioned by the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education, the Arts Council of Great Britain, the British Film Institute, the Crafts Council*. (Leicester: Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education, 1981).

society, was highlighted by the cultural policy formulated within the BFI Film Availability Services. It had been a criticism of the departing Head of the Education Department, Paddy Whannel that the RFTs had failed to develop into centres of film culture in which exhibition was integrated into innovative education.⁶¹ New policies at the BFI in the 1970s attempted to make both acquisitions to the BFI's distribution library and the programming undertaken in the RFTs responsive to critical debates within film studies. The aim was to stimulate more educationally meaningful exhibition by encouraging structured programming: films would be programmed as part of themed seasons supported by critical documentation which would form the basis for activities such as discussion and lectures. The reaction from regional programmers to this policy varied from enthusiastic co-operation to active hostility according to former head of Film Availability Services, Colin MacArthur.⁶² Taking a regional view of the BFI's policy of structured programming, Selfe has recently interpreted it as another instance of a centrist and metropolitan cultural agenda failing to properly grasp the specific local circumstances in which RFTs operated, including the various demographic factors that influence local film exhibition economies.⁶³ She argues that empirical research, conducted several years later, into the subsidised regional film exhibition sector led to a more sympathetic understanding of the vulnerability of RFTs to market pressures due to the very minimal subsidy they received to cover revenue deficit.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that criticism of unadventurous and unambitious programming was not restricted to metropolitan professionals, it was just as likely to be made within the film society movement. Film society activists urged their colleagues to be educationally focused in their activities and were themselves critical of societies that operated like

⁶¹ Paddy Whannel, "Letter to the Chairman of the BFI," *Screen* 12, no. 3 (1971): 42-43.

⁶² McArthur, "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Cultural Struggle in the British Film Institute."

⁶³ Melanie Selfe, "The View from Outside London," in *The British Film Institute: The Government and Film Culture*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Christophe Dupin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009 forthcoming).

⁶⁴ Ian Christie, "Regional Film Theatres: Towards a New Definition," in *The New Social Function of Cinema*, ed. Rod Stoneman and Hilary Thompson (London: BFI, 1981).

commercial cinemas. As early as 1963, the movement's Federation published a policy report which attributed the high turnover of film society membership to programming that simply provided what could be found at the art house. The report suggested that ambitious integrated programmes, more typical of film societies in other countries, would stimulate the interest of members.⁶⁵ True, a number of film society representatives responded to this aspect of the report with concern, pointing out that everything depends on geography and population. But this indicates a perennial tension between an exhibitor's sensitivity to perceived local demand and the aspirations of cultural policy that cannot be easily reduced to conflict between the metropolis and the regions.

The pressures on film societies were different to the Regional Film Theatres. Film societies received no public money for their routine activities, and they, like the RFTs, were operating at a time when cinema audiences were declining and when the film trade were closely scrutinising the non-theatrical sector fearing competition. It would not be difficult to corroborate the portrayal of the film society movement as a regional old guard, reactionary in the face of a metropolitan educational vanguard. One could mine the pages of *Film* for hostile references to the BFI 'structuralists' and their pedantic science of film study. However to polarise professionals and volunteers would be to run the risk of ignoring those instances of collaboration when university film studies and film societies established successful educational partnerships.

In one sense university film studies had actually contributed to a resurgence of film society activism. It had fostered student film societies and indirectly encouraged these to undertake adventurous programming and the publication of critical magazines wholly in the spirit of the movement's best activist traditions. The new BFI lecturerships, started in 1973, also provided the stimulus for new forms of popular education. Describing his post at the University of Keele where he taught in both an undergraduate and extra-mural context, Richard Dyer concluded with an account of the range of organisations with whom he was involved in developing film study initiatives; a local SEFT *Screen* reading group, BFI-affiliated Stoke Film

⁶⁵ "Federation of Film Societies: Report of the Planning Committee," London, April, 1962. BFFS Archive, BFI Special Collections.

Theatre, the WEA, West Midland Arts, and various local groups, 'filmic, political, official.' Here was evidence, he stated, that a BFI lectureship with 'at least some roots in adult education, can contribute to the development of a film culture beyond the academic ghetto.'⁶⁶

Having pioneered the development of structured programming in the early sixties, Birmingham Film Society continued to evolve in close conjunction with the growth of the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies. Graduates at the centre Ian Connell, John Ellis, Richard Dyer and Charlotte Brunsden maintained the tradition of CCCS involvement with BFS that began with Stuart Hall in the early sixties. With these strong institutional connections the BFS Study Group maintained a tradition of innovative popular adult education work built around thematically linked seasons of films and lectures. It is clear from the programmes announcing each year's course of study that the planning of the study programme was a collaborative venture between the voluntary membership and the teaching professionals. Tutors from the university participated on the Birmingham Film Society committee. Several study themes were introduced as a response to popular requests from members including a season that reassessed the notion of the film classic with tutors that included Robin Wood and Richard Dyer. BFS committee members also contributed occasional lectures alongside the professional educationalists. In the 1973-74 season the study group looked at aspects of film criticism focusing in particular on 'the problem of authorship,' film style and cinema as language.⁶⁷ The following season was dedicated to the study of languages of film. Devised and taught by Richard Dyer the course was designed to introduce the concept of film language by looking at parody in cinema, through the French nouvelle vague's relationship to genres of American cinema for example. Additionally the codes of the realist and art film were explored. In his detailed course description, Dyer concluded by noting that the course would introduce semiological ideas but without the 'unnecessary jargon and intellectual

⁶⁶ Dyer, "The BFI Lectureships in Film," 57.

⁶⁷ *Birmingham Film Society Prospectus 1973-74*, Birmingham Film Society Collection: BFI Special Collections.

mumbo-jumbo which this new approach to film study has spawned.’⁶⁸ Subsequent seasons engaged with the politics of representation around marginalised social groups inviting members to evaluate and debate contrasting images of gender, race and sexuality in a range of films. The society’s fiftieth Anniversary season in 1980-81 was themed Film as a Subversive Activity with ‘films chosen in order to discuss the question whether films made within a capitalist system can have subversive readings, or whether they inevitably carry the ideological imprint of the system which produced them.’⁶⁹ Like all the study seasons, the programme announced that this one aimed to be attractive as a balanced season of films as well as provoke discussion about questions fundamental to film criticism. The screening of hard to see films remained central to BFS activity. Programming was often ambitious and bold, taking the opportunity to highlight the contemporary currents of independent political and avant-garde film practice. It wasn’t unusual in 1969 for a film society to have a token evening of underground films, though these often suffered from being poorly introduced by individuals with no particular grounding in the questions this film practice raised. In Birmingham, a whole season was programmed under the heading ‘Experiments in the Cinema’ and filmmaker Steve Dwoskin gave a series of talks accompanying the screenings. The following year Stuart Hall returned to the Study Group to deliver a course which included Glauber Rocha’s *Black God, White Devil* (1964), Peter Whitehead’s film *The Fall* (1969) and Bertolucci’s *Before The Revolution* (1964). It was designed to ‘examine the ways in which the cinema has been associated with social and political change’⁷⁰

Reflecting on the work of the Birmingham Centre of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall noted that it was sustained by a distinctive notion of intellectual work associated with the Gramscian concept of the organic intellectual. According to Gramsci, the organic intellectual differs from the traditional intellectual on the basis of his or her alignment to emergent, progressive social movements. What those emergent forces were in 70s Britain, Hall acknowledged, was more difficult to identify. The Centre’s

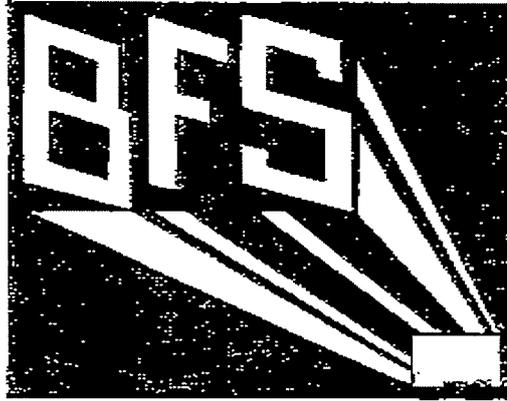
⁶⁸ Richard Dyer, *Birmingham Film Society Prospectus 1974-75*, 10.

⁶⁹ Allan Brookfield, *Birmingham Film Society Prospectus 1980-81*

⁷⁰ *Birmingham Film Society Prospectus 1970-71*

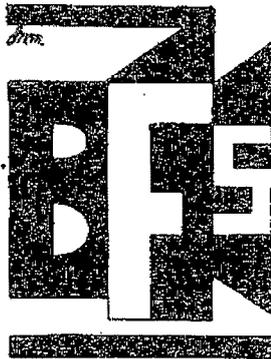
analysis of contemporary power relations stressed the intersections of class with race, gender and sexuality and sought to articulate the modes of effective counter-hegemonic struggle with and against the attempts of ideology to fix the dominant meanings of these social identities. By definition the organic intellectual was required to operate on two fronts, each as vital as the other. Firstly, they had to be at the vanguard of theoretical work, concerned with analysing the precise manner in which consent is secured through culture and representation, the second demanded that they assumed responsibility for transmitting these ideas to those 'who do not belong professionally to the intellectual class.'⁷¹ To what extent this describes the constituency drawn to the Birmingham Film Society is difficult to say. What can be said is that a conception of intellectual work, professionalized and yet socially politically committed, emphasising engagement in dialogue with adult learners outside of the university, could radically invigorate the civic spaces of voluntary association such as film societies. The strength of Birmingham Film Society's educational practice may be considered a legacy of both the vitality and longevity of its traditions of self-organisation, and a consequence of this two-sided intellectual practice informing its institutional partner.

⁷¹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996).



PROGRAMME

Figure 20: Birmingham Film Society Logo, January 1932



BIRMINGHAM FILM SOCIETY

13th SEASON.

1947-48.

Chairman : BASIL W. HARLEY,

24 Selborne Road, Birmingham, 20. NOR 4232.

Membership Secretary : Miss M. MOTTERSHEAD,

259 Barclay Road, Smethwick, 41.

Figure 21: Birmingham Film Society Logo, 1947-48



Figure 22: Paddy Whannel introducing a programme of 'Free Cinema' at the Tyneside Film Society Monday night 16mm discussion group. "You might call our Monday audience our hard core. The ten per cent who want to do more than look at films."



Figure 23: "There was no lack of argument. There rarely is." Stills and text from Tyneside Film Society Jubilee film, 1959.

Conclusion: What Was Film Appreciation?

Appreciation, a once ubiquitous word in cultural pedagogy has largely disappeared from active use. In the historical documents that formed a primary source for this research the term was inescapable, but it was a word with multiple referents. The preceding chapters have explored key moments in the definition of film appreciation in discourse and in practices developed by film societies that have engaged those definitions. By way of a conclusion I shall retrace the changing meanings of film appreciation and contrast the assumptions those meanings carried regarding the nature of audience and the role of film education. Encouraging the appreciation of film was a fundamental aim of the film society movement that emerged after the war, the foremost objective on the standard constitution circulated by the movement's Federation. The pursuit of this aim therefore defined a genuine film society, it was the basis on which a film society participated in a movement rather than remained a solitary phenomenon.

Film appreciation was not a term used by Arnheim, though his monograph, written, he stated, to help those, 'who will accept a book but not a ticket to the "flicks"... to understand film art,' was one of the key sources for later popularisations of the term in pamphlets and textbooks.¹ However, as I noted in chapter two, *Film* is centrally concerned with defining what constitutes 'proper aesthetic appreciation.' Proper appreciation according to Arnheim did not relate to the viewer's interest in or response to the represented object. Aesthetic appreciation, he insisted, involved the capacity to fully apprehend and respond to an achievement within a specific medium, one with distinctive formal characteristics and certain limitations. For a film to be used for artistic ends meant emphasising the formal attributes of the medium rather than seeking to diminish the viewer's awareness of them. Arnheim was interested in the way this awareness of form renewed our perception of depicted reality because it enabled us to transcend everyday perception, attaining what he termed true observation. The willingness and ability to turn one's attention to form was, Arnheim suggested, the product of years of education and training. His book addressed those

¹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), 8.

who had enjoyed such an education, whose patronage of the arts might extend to film rather than the majority who had not been fortunate enough to undergo the long initiation in appreciation.

Acknowledging that the conception of aesthetic appreciation he elaborated sounded undemocratic and elitist, Arnheim refused to make the expected gesture of endorsing the wider teaching of art appreciation. Material working conditions had alienated the proletariat from artistic experience and only a change in those conditions could be regarded as a satisfactory way to democratise aesthetic appreciation. Arnheim's priorities regarding cultural education did not chime with the consensual rhetoric and reforming climate of postwar Britain. Educationalists and leading film society activists perceived that a vast audience might be guided towards an appreciation of film that did not regularly attend musical concerts or art galleries. In *The Art of Film* Lindgren's premise was that the training of 'eye and understanding' that constituted appreciation was teachable. Strikingly, he argued that the aesthetic passions and enthusiasms of the thirties, long since subsided, could be revisited with a cooler, more dispassionate eye. The kernel of truth they contained could be extracted to form the laws of film art.² Lindgren's textbook is therefore a rationalisation of the knowledge that constituted film aesthetic appreciation in the interwar period. Unconscious acquisition of the rules of film art by small groups of enthusiasts was contrasted with the more formal learning process in adult education classes using introductory textbooks that guide their readers through systematic aesthetic principles.³ Lindgren's conception of appreciation was bound up with his belief that the best works of the past provide the surest basis for understanding the principles of film aesthetics. His judgement, consistent with his role as curator of the national film library, was that true cinematic art, above all seen in the mastery of

² Ernest H. Lindgren, "Nostalgia," *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1940.

³ This contrast between aesthetic enthusiasm and systematic learning can be related to Bourdieu's discussion of the struggle between two modes of acquiring cultural competence. On one hand early familiarisation, a competence that bourgeois families 'hand down to their offspring as if it were an heirloom.' On the other hand, methodical learning later in life, using textbooks that rationalise cultural knowledge. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1999), 66-67.

movement and rhythm exemplified by silent era montage, had waned since the introduction of sound.

Manvell's approach to extending appreciation involved redefining what aesthetic experience entailed. Metaphorically speaking, Manvell lowered the high threshold to participation in aesthetic appreciation insisted on by Arnheim. Although Manvell maintained that there were different levels of appreciation, there was also a quality to the experience of good art that united all people. Manvell defined this aspect of appreciation under the capacious term recreation. Though all people, irrespective of their educational backgrounds, were open to the experience of recreation, Manvell implied that those without the privileges of culture were more susceptible to the excitation and stimulation of bad entertainment. Appreciation of good art did not require that the beholder turn their attention to form, as Arnheim insisted. Instead what were valued were films that responsibly connected the predicaments of individual characters to a wider canvas of public affairs. Manvell constructed a familiar opposition between reflective and unreflective dispositions towards cultural objects, and yet, unlike Arnheim, appreciation did not preclude emotional involvement with character, on condition that those characters act as exemplars of (bourgeois) moral virtue and selflessness. It is this attempt to define a space for a mode of involvement distinct from sensorial gratification that distinguishes Manvell's as a middlebrow conception of appreciation. In the conclusion of his book Manvell strongly admonished the prewar film societies for their tendency to nurture a highbrow interest in 'recondite technique.'⁴ Manvell's sense of appreciation thus confirms Radway's useful understanding of the middlebrow as a counterpractice to high cultural tastes rather than their imitation. In the field of literature with which she is concerned, Radway observes that agencies of middlebrow culture seek to establish alternative sources of cultural authority to academic English.⁵ Without equivalent sources of educational authority with which to take issue, Manvell directs his criticism at the prewar film societies and attempts to

⁴ Roger Manvell, *Film*, 1st ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1944), 164.

⁵ Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 9.

steer their postwar successors towards what he considered to be a socially inclusive middlebrow taste.

Manvell's attempt to unite levels of taste under the authority of the middlebrow and a consensual, recreative instinct can be contrasted with the way Hall and Whannel's *The Popular Arts* addresses the social and cultural divide created by the hierarchy of tastes. Their concern is to establish a broader and differentiated sense of artistic value which acknowledges and gives equal weight and importance to popular and serious work. Tracing the historical transformation of specific art forms they stressed the vitality of artistic expression in which popular and serious elements interpenetrated each other. Writing as teachers, their understanding of training in criticism rejected the doctrinal aspects of Lindgren's film appreciation, not to mention the fact that its aesthetic values were prescriptively rooted in a film language long since past.

Within the film society movement film appreciation was furthered through film programming itself or through educational activities that supplemented it. The rationalisation of film appreciation enacted by the archival practices of the National Film Library was reproduced in the programming of some newly formed film societies, particularly those with affiliations to formal education. For the growing numbers of new societies and their adult education partners, the archive's selection, its chronology of styles and movements was regarded as a sound basis for acquiring the competence that constituted appreciation. More established societies, however, were in a position to be less deferential to the archive's implied values and their programming demonstrates an authoritative eclecticism and a more extensive film knowledge than that bound up with the archive's canon and its chronological categories. In the standard film society constitution the ideal of encouraging appreciation referred not to film art as such but to the medium in all its various uses, as entertainment, art, information and education. As I discussed in chapter three a distinctive film society programming tradition upheld this inclusive ideal by consciously selecting and contrasting the most diverse uses of the medium. In these cases the film society programme usually made up of three or four films of varying length was utilised for the purpose of bringing together provocative combinations of

films drawn from across the usual categorical divisions. The notion of training or appreciation implicit in a programming practice of this nature has less to do with elevating taste through an acquaintance with canonical works than with extending or broadening taste and knowledge through experience of the film medium's varied uses. Rather than guide the viewer through core aesthetic precepts, the selected films invite each viewer's response to the concrete stimulus of a public programme, exercising judgement without the explicit guidance of film historical categories. This style of programming in provocative and vivid juxtaposition was especially associated with the movement's larger well-established societies. The condition of possibility for such a programming strategy was a familiarity with a wide range of film material. Working with specialist distributors like Contemporary Films and the BFI, Federation publications and viewing sessions tried to cultivate this knowledge and awareness.

On the evidence of the movement's reviewing practice, film society activists worried a great deal about testing the patience of their members or displeasing them. The advice that organisers received from the film criticism written by their peers was intended to guide them towards films that were broadly in tune with their member's moral values and their expectations for a pleasurable viewing experience. Good films possessed the quality of sincerity, a term indicating a strong preference for a transparent, communicative, and therefore familiar style and affirmative experience. Film society activists wrote about films with an understanding that a particular viewing experience was especially valued within a film society, one that regarded spectatorship as an occasion for emotional experience derived from a sense of communion with fictional characters and immersion in their world. Films that solicited and aroused that emotional response too blatantly without regard for the viewer's intelligence however were condemned as sentimental, a property of the excessively audience-oriented mass commercial film. Film society critics and the members they wrote for had little patience for the film that foregrounded its formal characteristics. This kind of aesthetic distancing or estrangement from the represented world and its characters was liable to be regarded as a form of smugness or social arrogance on the part of the film's maker. At best these films were hesitantly

recommended, though often without enthusiasm, for the specialist programme series that larger societies ran for groups of serious enthusiasts.

As an exhibitor, a film society's proximity to its audience determined its conception of film art. Moreover, a film society mode of organisation implied that activities aimed at encouraging film appreciation had to be reconciled to a method of funding that was entirely dependent on membership subscription. The smaller the society, the more vulnerable it was to fluctuations in membership and the more circumscribed their ability to assert a sense of aesthetic value contrary to the existing taste formation of their members. The Federation of Film Societies were rarely moved to reflect on the contradictions between a conviction that theirs was a movement in advance of public taste and knowledge, 'a force in the cultural and educational life of Britain as it relates to the art of film' equivalent to the BBC's Third Programme (as one unsuccessful grant application put it), whilst at the same time advising novice programmers to avoid using the words artistic or educational in their promotional literature for fear of scaring off their members.⁶

Throughout the movement's geographical and social expansion, the function of conferring artistic legitimacy on films and creating a discourse of value in relation to them was being exercised with ever increasing authority by international film festivals. Professionally managed and well-resourced, the network of international festivals, regardless of the conflicting demands that defined their operation, were able to exercise judgement at one remove from the perennial state of tension between a self-defined responsibility towards an artistic definition of the medium and the demands of a membership that was a defining feature of film societies. Festivals cultivated their reputations on the basis of their ability to define the value of new artistic trends and movements, specifically identifying and creating knowledge related to new examples of authorial expression in film. Given the institutional power of film festivals, film societies could scarcely avoid feeling the weight of those discourses of authorised knowledge on the art of film although a significant body of

⁶ "Memorandum on Aid for the Federation of Film Societies," July 1955. BFFS Archive. BFI Special Collections.

critical opinion actively resisted their force and were vocally hostile to the values that underpinned them.

Conflict over the definitions of the relationship between film and art became even more pronounced with the emergence of an avant-garde film culture in Britain centred around new modes of self-organisation and activism on the one hand and public funding through the Arts Council and the British Film Institute on the other. That some of these new organisational forms had their embryonic form in film society exhibition (Bob Cobbing, a founder of the London Filmmaker's Co-op had previously run the experimentally inclined Hendon Film Society) shouldn't obscure the fact that new forms of organisation anterior to the film societies were required in order to foster this avant-garde self-consciousness. These avant-garde institutions fostered radical aesthetic exploration and approached film's relationship to art in ways that the film society movement had repressed. Specifically they helped to create the conditions for making and thinking about filmmaking that possessed a rigorously adversarial and critical relationship to industrial cinema. As Lupton notes periods in which the film industry was in a state of crisis or transformation have historically coincided with a flourishing avant-garde practice. In Britain, she notes, the rise of avant-garde and independent filmmaking in the late sixties and seventies coincided with a major crisis caused by the withdrawal of US production finance.⁷

The late sixties and early seventies saw the incorporation or dissolution of many of the larger film societies due to the expansion of a subsidised regional exhibition network, a development regarded with ambivalence by many film society activists. Other urban societies found it difficult over the long run to compete for films and dwindling audiences with specialised cinemas. As early as 1958, the magazine *Film* had published extracts of a range of writings appearing across the international film society movement in Germany, Italy, America and India diagnosing a worldwide crisis among film societies, caused by the rise in the number of specialised cinemas. What should be the response of film societies? The German Federation's public relations officer argued that in large cities the activities of film

⁷ Catherine Lupton, *Discourses of Avant-Gardism in British Film Culture 1966 – 1979* (University of Sussex, PhD Thesis, 1996).

clubs were changing from an extensive to an intensive phase characterised by a much greater emphasis on teaching and education. The membership numbers may go down as a result of such a shift but the level of commitment would be qualitatively improved. With some notable exceptions the film societies in Britain failed to follow this trajectory towards an intensive phase, a failure that has much to do with the specific development of film studies. British activist Heini Przibram concluded *Film's* symposium with a question 'How can one best combine the "amateur enthusiasm" of the dedicated cineaste of a film society with the professional educator?...Or should the two develop in parallel?'⁸ The answer to this question has proven difficult to find.

Membership as the founding basis of film societies was at the root of the movement's insistence that the reception of a film ought to be a properly social occasion. The social habit of reception was an organisational imperative of the film society, and it differentiated the voluntary associational form of film exhibition from the individualised, anonymous and silent forms of spectatorship of other exhibitors. Addressing fellow film society activists on the subject of the National Film Theatre, Rupert Butler of Hammersmith Co-operative Film Society wrote, 'seeing movies is, as we all know, only half the pleasure of film appreciation. There comes a time when intelligent talk – friendly nattering – is needed.'⁹ The reference to intelligent talk also indicates that participation ideally took the form of rational argument and discussion. Again this served to sharply distinguish the social dimension of film society reception from a residual working class exhibition culture based around participation in communal acts of a more corporeal nature.

Butler's call for intelligent talk was made as part of a criticism of the NFT where he noted the paucity of opportunities for participation in discussion. NFT members, he argued, can queue up, see a film and return home 'without getting out of their systems, in simple conversation, their opinion of the evening's entertainment. In addition, and this is more of consequence, they have lost the chance of gaining some

⁸ Heini Przibram, "Why Film Societies? An International Symposium," *Film*, March/April 1958, 8.

⁹ Rupert Butler, "Letters: The NFT," *Film*, January/February 1956, 30.

knowledge that might have been had so easily and pleasantly.' Butler's main point concerned the lack of interaction between the professional writers of specialist film periodicals and ordinary NFT members. He asked 'How many NFT members have met, or know, the writers and critics of such publications as *Sight and Sound* and *Monthly Film Bulletin*? Are there not hundreds who would like to discuss some of the issues raised in these journals or is this sort of exchange to be confined to professional critics at press shows. In short, the British Film Institute needs to be a lot less impersonal, to bridge the gap between writers and their readers.'¹⁰

With the growth of film studies, that gap between a professionalised intellectual cadre, the product of a highly specialised training, and a broader, educated public, has become a chasm. Very little of the vast quantity of critical, theoretical or historical writing that is produced in higher education circulates outside of this non-public sphere or addresses that wider public. The final meaning we can attach to film appreciation is that it was the name that the film societies gave to efforts to promote public participation in a discussion of cinema's value. What strikes us now as so unfamiliar about this earlier period of voluntary associational film culture is how deeply embedded a concern with the state of cinema was in civic life. A vigorous conversation about the art of film was taking place throughout a movement that was in the process of liberating itself from the conventional space of the cinema, and from the limited consumer role it prescribed, occupying local civic institutions as it branched out across the country. Where does that conversation take place now? Following this era of amateur civic cinema, the latest phase in the liberation of the film image from the movie theatre is domestication: shrunken film images consumed in private. The question the postwar film society movement poses to the radically changed circumstances of the present is simply this, how is appreciation of these film images fostered now? That is to say, a collectively articulated concern with facilitating the broadest social participation in discussing what film images should be valued and why.

¹⁰ Ibid.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 – Rommi Przibram

14th September 2006

Rommi and Heini Przibram joined the Tyneside Film Society in 1939. They were active within the Tyneside People's Theatre which helped to revive the film society in 1944. Both played an important role in the Federation of Film Societies in the 1950s as members of the Executive Committee representing the northeast region. They regularly wrote reviews for *Film News*. Heini was also the Federation's film supply officer during this period. In this capacity he visited film festivals organised by the German Federation of Film Societies and sought stronger international links between national film society federations.

RM: Perhaps we could start where it begins for you. How did you become interested in the cinema?

RP: Ah well, of course –

RM: Or was it theatre first?

RP: It started in college actually in 1938. I met Heini, who I ultimately married. He had been very interested in film in Vienna, and when he came as a refugee to Britain, his host was a member of the original Tyneside Film Society, and so he took Heini along to the shows. And eventually Heini took me along to the shows and it just went on from there. Interestingly, I think the film society, certainly in Newcastle on Tyne, was largely peopled by people who were interested in The People's Theatre.

RM: Tell me a bit about the People's Theatre.

RP: Oh the People's Theatre is a fantastic organisation really. The People's Theatre started out from the Socialist Society and the Clarion Clubs. They decided that it might be an idea to put on plays, so they started with very

slender means and grew and grew and grew until they had their own theatre which, as so many of the Little Theatres are or were – was a derelict chapel. So they created a theatre from that and they – well they started in 1911 so it was a very old organisation and is still going strong. Finally, the old chapel – it was in a slum area of Newcastle anyway and was due for demolition and they found a large cinema which they converted into a theatre. That was a bit scary because from having, I think it was 350 seats in the old chapel, we suddenly had 900 seats and an enormous stage. It was really frightening to set foot on that stage for the first time. And of course, why don't we have a film society? We had the problem that it didn't have its own projection. All the projection equipment had been taken out. Then we managed – at first for a while we actually borrowed the equipment, I think it was from the University and then we discovered that a 16mm projector was going cheap, so we bought that so we had our own projector, but only one.

RM: And then of course you have to stop and change reels.

RP: Actually we did for a while and then we managed to get a much bigger reel so the job was to splice the films together when they came from the BFI, reel them up and then un-splice them before they had to go back again. And as happens with so many organisations, they dwindle and of course partly due to the increased accessibility of foreign films commercially and of course television had a lot to do with it.

[...]

RM: Was it to escape from the rise of Nazism that Heini came to Britain from Austria?

RP: He was half Jewish. His parents realised – he was due to come to England to study anyway – they realised that the sooner they got him out the better. So in

fact with the aid of his grandfather who was a famous Austrian actor they took him to Eisenstadt and put him on a train to Prague the day before Hitler walked in. Then eventually his sister came over about a year later, and my father-in-law was an atomic physicist and they wouldn't let him go. Eventually he managed to get as far as Belgium with my mother-in-law, who was a very good Lutheran German. They were due to come to England and Hitler invaded Belgium. So they were in Belgium all during the war and of course Heini was in Newcastle [...] That is how Heini came to England.

RM: Was he a physicist as well? Was he following in his father's footsteps?

RP: No, no. He went into engineering. He was studying engineering.

RM: What were you studying?

RP: I was studying science, physics and chemistry and it just so happened that the engineers and the scientists all took physics together in the first year. That's how we met. We have been back in Newcastle several times of course because we had relatives and lots of friends up there, but we hadn't been back for about twenty years I suppose, and never into the University. So about six years ago we were in Newcastle and we decided to have a look at the old University. We could hardly find our little red brick building.

RM: Has it totally changed?

RP: It's an enormous place now. When we were there it was still part of Durham University, it wasn't a University in its own right. We thought, oh well, we'll see if we can get into the Physics corridor but the door was locked. But it was something of a sentimental journey.

RM: So you went to those film society screenings before the war, Heini and you were going there, what do you remember about those?

RP: Not a lot to be honest. I suppose one of the few films I remember of course is *Battleship Potemkin*. I think there were a couple of French films. It was only a short season of about - I think it was six films and of course that was 1939-1940 so it was only 12 films or so that I saw. Then of course the film society closed.

RM: Then it gets started again by the People's Theatre –

RP: It started again through the People's after the war.

RM: Were you political at the time? Did you identify – because you said it was a socialist –

RP: The People's, yes. Oh yes.

RM: Is that something you would have identified with? Would you have called yourself a socialist?

RP: It had ceased to be called – at first it was called the Clarion Players and then it became the People's Theatre, but they still had a policy that most of their productions must have either a high theatrical standard or a socialist – a somewhat, shall we say, social message. As a result, during the war we did some fascinating plays. We did all Peter Ustinov's plays, his earliest plays. Over the years we have done all of Shaw's plays, some of them more than once. Shaw, Shakespeare, Harley Granville Barker, with a slight levelling of something humorous if we could find it. And of course a lot of Russian film, a lot of French film. I think the French film that had most effect on people was *Orphée*, the Jean Cocteau film. But there were lots of other ones;

Fernandel was great fun. I remember one occasion, it wasn't a Russian film it was a Yugoslav film called *Fra Brne*. It was set in monastery and it was about a young monk and his relationship to the village girl who he couldn't marry, but she was unofficially his wife. That was one of the few films – because the Federation would sometimes bring films in under their own cover not necessarily to be submitted to the censor. That film had not been submitted to the censor so in fact it had to go before the Newcastle watch committee. That was quite a hassle to get it past the watch committee. I wouldn't say it was a terribly good film but it was an interesting exercise. But when commercial films started to be shown and some of them got into the – dubbed into the commercial programme - I remember another occasion when a Fernandel film, because it was making fun of the church, the local Catholic community were up in arms and they were demanding that it should be removed from this cinema. We had shown a lot of Fernandel, he was a great actor.

RM: Did the film society get embroiled in those kinds of controversies?

RP: No because we were a private – we were closed. The time we did have to be careful was on the 16mm series which we ran. That started because we wanted to have a lecture series. Heini had been lecturing, giving a series of lectures on film for some time in the University and thought it might be an idea to open it up. So we used the lecture room of one of the News Theatres that we used and started a 16mm series. That ran in conjunction with the film society seasons and we always managed at least one major visiting lecturer; Anthony Asquith came once, Basil Wright, the composer Anthony Hopkins visited us. We even managed to get C.A. Lejeune up once. That was fascinating because if they were coming from London they would come on the day train and go back on the night train. The lectures ended about nine o'clock, half past nine. And we would take them out to dinner afterwards and put them on the train at 11 o'clock and that was really fascinating. We

enjoyed that very much. And another thing we did, at Christmas we always had a children's film show and no adult was admitted without a child. It was surprising the number of children that got borrowed to come to the children's film show. Another lecturer who came, I didn't actually meet him, I can't remember why and I can't remember his name but he was the Russian filmmaker who made, he did three Shakespeare plays.

RM: Kozintsev. He did a Lear and a Hamlet

RP: The Hamlet is wonderful. The Othello is magnificent. And Shakespeare in Russian.

RM: It's crazy.

RP: No, it's wonderful. It's such liquid and it translates much better. Shakespeare in French is dreadful. Shakespeare in German – Heini always used to laugh, because he had seen his Grandfather play in most of the Shakespeare roles in German, he could never get used to Shakespeare in English, it always sounded wrong. But Shakespeare in Russian is magnificent.

RM: I'm trying to follow the chronology. You and Heini become involved in The People's Theatre. Through the People's Theatre you are organising film society events as well. What sort of role were you playing?

RP: I was usually the dogsbody. It was very useful. Heini always had an official secretary. There was an official secretary, sometimes it was me but if possible it was someone else. Pillow discussions are very useful. We usually had a committee of perhaps eight which is the wrong number because you don't have the casting vote. So if we could be quite sure that we would have 5 to 3 we usually got our own way. Getting a balanced season was always very

tricky. That was the first thing. Getting a committee to agree on a balanced season was the first thing.

RM: How were you finding out about films?

RP: The reviews in papers first of all. You would read about them. The good papers, the London papers, CA Lejeune and at the beginning, of course, James Agate too and all the other film reviewers. You'd look at those reviews and then if you were lucky you would go down to the Viewing Sessions in London, they were held in the spring usually on 16mm and 35mm and representatives of the society would go down. If there were societies that couldn't afford to send a representative we would then hold regional film viewings and they had to be organised too of course. There was a lot of organisation. A lot went on behind the scenes that people didn't know about. This is one of the things, Heini and I – at that time we had a daughter so we couldn't go together but one of us used to go to the 16mm and one of us used to go to the 35 and write reviews for the Federation. It used to get to the point where they didn't know whether it was H. Przibram or R. Przibram so they put in A. Przibram. That was interesting because there you met representatives of other film societies and knew their problems and it was a community in a way. And it was interesting the number of film societies that had evolved through theatres.

RM: Is that right? That's interesting.

RP: Manchester did. Bradford did. Bradford was a very big film society.

RM: The Civic Playhouse.

RP: Yes they showed in the Playhouse. But that evolved, the film society evolved from the Playhouse. Their Secretary both of the theatre and of the film society

was a wonderful woman called Margaret Hancock, I'm sure you've come across her name.

RM: Do you remember her?

RP: Oh I remember her vividly. She died '96, '98. It must be ten years since she died. She was a gorgeous person – lovely person. Oh a lot of people I remember.

RM: There are very few people who have a direct memory of Margaret that I've met, so it's interesting that you knew her well.

RP: She was very, very – what would you call her – what's the word when somebody's good at everything. There's a special word.

RM: A polymath?

RP: A polymath in a way. She was interested in everything. She was interested in politics. She was interested in film. She loved opera. She'd married late and was widowed fairly soon. I think they were only married for ten years. So she was already a widow by the time we knew her.

RM: She was originally a teacher with the WEA.

RP: Yes, she taught with the WEA.

RM: She basically ran the Federation in terms of administration.

RP: In terms of the influence she had on the professional administrators. They respected her very much. Up to a certain point. Things became – it was the old, old problem of the amateurs and the professionals. And this – it never

works. It never works. I've seen it in several organisations. Amateurs do their best. But the professionals of course – I don't know whether they resent the amateurs or not. I don't know, but it doesn't quite work. It certainly doesn't work in the theatre.

RM: Do you recall how that antagonism came in with the Federation?

RP: Well by that time I wasn't as involved. Heini was on the Federation committee and he was more aware of it. I just got it second hand. But there was a certain resentment. Oh they're taking over. You know, the Federation had been run by amateurs for so long and suddenly they were taking over.

RM: Tell me a bit more about this idea of the balanced season.

RP: A balanced season?

RM: Yes. What does that mean?

RP: It's trying to get a mix of preferably new films, foreign films and English speaking films; at least one comedy. Perhaps – well towards the end we always tried to have films like *Fra Brna*, from new nations coming in. One surprise. And then of course it wasn't only the feature film; it was choosing the shorts to go with it. And that was fascinating because some of the work that was done in short films was – One thing we always made a point of, Heini was very keen on this, one show we always had short films that were advertising films. And some of these films were beautiful, no relationship to the product being advertised. And then of course there was usually a viewing session of advertising films. But the shorts viewing session – for the viewing sessions, we would go down on Friday night and come back on Sunday night. So there was usually one session which was nothing but shorts.

RM: In putting a season together did you have in your mind the need to be sufficiently appealing?

RP: You had to have something so that you could sell the season. This was the thing; you had to be able to sell the season. And because it was closed you had to sell the season ticket. As far as the theatre is concerned we do sell season tickets at a reduced price, but people can come in and see the film, see the shows.

RM: So there is quite a bit of showmanship going on in a way.

RP: Oh yes, you've got to be able to sell the season. Heini was very good at that. He was very good at that indeed. Otherwise we would have had six films that nobody would have wanted – not everybody wants to see every play. Not everybody wants to see every film. It was interesting to hear the comments when they came out. Some of them were controversial. I think one of the most controversial films we showed was *Los Olvidados*. *Los Olvidados* really caused a furore.

RM: Yes, there is some violence in it.

RP: Oh yes, very nasty indeed in places. That was the beginning, really, of violence in films. People take it for granted now. Nudity was rather shocking too. How things have changed.

RM: As a committee you must have been aware that you couldn't push people too far in these areas.

RP: Oh no. This was the skill of balancing a season. You didn't want all foreign films. English speaking films and of course most of those went commercially anyway. Just occasionally something tricky that didn't get in to the

commercial cinema. But there again, we tried to keep a balance among the languages. Too many French films and people would say 'oh no its another French film.' Russian films were always popular. Things which were very little shown. I remember a particularly beautiful one, *The Cranes are Flying*. And of course the old classics were always good.

RM: You devoted - the pair of you devoted a great deal of time to it.

RP: Well we loved it. As I said in my first letter, you don't do it unless you are a little bit crazy. And it is the same with amateur theatre; you meet the same sort of people. You've got to be a little bit mad. Anyone who is dedicated to anything which you are going to do as a group - I mean people can be dedicated to tennis or to golf or to bridge even, but that's an individual thing. But if you are working with other people and for other people then you've got to be a little bit - and you've got to make concessions all the time. Well, you know, it's all right, okay, we'll put it in. We've got to sweeten the season somehow.

RM: That's the nature of working in organisations.

RP: Yes and that's where the five to three was rather important. There was always one casting vote. It worked most of the time. I don't think we ever had a season that didn't go. Of course Sunday cinemas hit us very hard partly because people could go - they didn't have to buy a season ticket. If they wanted to see foreign films, well yes, they came to us. But if they just wanted to see films on a Sunday they went to the commercial cinema. And then of course television hit us even harder.

RM: Coming back to this dedication, what is it a dedication to? What did you feel you were achieving?

- RP: Pure selfishness. It was enabling us to see the films we wanted to see.
- RM: What was it about those films rather than the films you could see in the commercial cinemas?
- RP: Because there was something extra to them. It was something which opened different windows. It let you see what other nations were like, other people's problems. *Diary of a Country Priest*, that was controversial. Some of the German films, particularly the postwar German films were very tricky. And of course a prewar German film, which was always very popular when it was brought back was *Kameradschaft*, particularly in an area like Newcastle it just hit home.
- RM: I don't know the film.
- RP: Oh it's a - when was it made, it was probably made about - made in the early thirties and it's based on a mining disaster. It's a mine which runs across the border between France and Germany and the only way to get to the trapped miners who are German, no who are French, is by going through the mine from Germany. There's one extremely dramatic scene when the trapped men see this gas masked figure coming towards them speaking in German and of course they attack him because by that stage they have been in the mine for about six days and they are not quite sane anymore. But of course it all works out in the end because - *Kameradschaft*, friendliness, you know, the miner is a miner, doesn't matter what his nationality. But that's a very - not a long film by any means but very, very good. Some of the early thirties films were quite extraordinary. Why does anybody do anything? If you are working in a community, why do you do it? I don't think everybody is completely so unselfish to do something for goodness of heart. You get something personal out of it.

RM: But neither could it be called something completely selfish because it is trying to create something that doesn't exist in your community, with others, as you say, there is this very collective sense to what you are doing.

RP: Oh it's not purely selfish. You have to give your time and effort and sometimes it's not always convenient but you have the feeling, okay, but I've contributed to the community. You've made a contribution.

[...]

RM: Were there differences between the People's Theatre philosophy and the film societies?

RP: It's different because you see with a film society, once you've selected your films it is purely administrative. With theatre once you have selected your plays it becomes creative. That's the big difference. And of course with the film society there is one show, with the theatre you are doing it for nine nights.

RM: So does that mean that the theatre work is more creatively satisfying?

RP: Oh yes.

RM: Well if you are in a film society you are exhibiting something that somebody else has done the creative work for.

RP: It is creative but you are criticising somebody else's work. It isn't your work. You used to get really heated discussions about the camera angles and lighting. And really heated discussions too. I remember – I can't remember which film he was talking about but Anthony Asquith came and spoke to us once and we showed this particular film at the time. And he said, 'do you

mind if I don't watch it. There is always one bit where every time I watch it, I think perhaps it will be different this time. I think it was *The Way to the Stars*. One sequence that he was never happy with. Perhaps it will be different this time. He was a sweetie.

RM: Heini, you said, gave some lectures on film.

RP: Yes, oh yes. He lectured in Newcastle but on two occasions he went out. He lectured in the University but on two occasions he did a series of lectures outside in Northumberland travelling to – one was a Women's – I can't remember what it was, two small organisations who did series of lectures.

RM: Do you recall what he spoke about or how he approached it?

RP: Well it was usually about the history of cinema and illustrations of what he considered good. He would take cinema clips along with him. Also his very favourite film the one he used for most illustrations was *Odd Man Out*. He loved that film.

[...]

RM: Did you have an artistic childhood?

RP: No.

RM: Were your parents –

RP: Actually it's one of those things - my background was rather odd. My father as a fourteen year old had gone into the drawing office of a printing works and from there he was transferred. He moved to another printing works when he was twenty-two I suppose. And he married, had one child, joined the army, though never went abroad for some reason or other – Well he was an

excellent shot and was kept in Britain training riflemen. And at the end of the war he happened to have met one of their clients who was living in the north-east just before he went into the army. And this client said when you come out of the army, if you need a job come to us. And that's what took him to the north-east. And of course it was 1921, Tyneside depended on shipbuilding, mines, 1923 everything fell, everything collapsed. This firm actually made – the firm was Barbours, you may have heard of Barbours, still going strong with their wax coat. By that time he was sales manager. It would never have happened these days but the first person allowed to go was the sales manager. So with his advertising experience and his printing experience behind him he set up in business on his own. There was a rival small business in Newcastle; this was South Shields on the coast. And these two, Tully and Crabbe, decided it would be a good idea if they combined the businesses. So my background is really, I suppose, in advertising. My sister went into the business but I was supposed to be the brainy one so my father wanted one of us to go to University at least. So I went to University. But I - as a result the background was business rather than artistic.

I grew up being socially adequate. You know, how to behave in public and knowing a bit about theatre and reading the right newspapers. And of course Heini's background was totally different. On one side it was the artistic background of his grandfather and on the other side it was the scientific background of his father. And when we met he introduced me to a new world. We went to the theatre – we used to go to the theatre up in the gods on Saturday afternoons, sixpence, climbing six flights of stairs. But it was theatre and it was music and it was film. He introduced me to a new world. And he introduced me to politics. His background had always been socialist in Vienna. And of course my father who always maintained the vote is secret, one always assumed that he was Conservative and as a result when I wanted to join the People's Theatre I wasn't allowed to. *They* were all communist. So

it wasn't till I was twenty-one that I could join the People's Theatre. And then I did.

By that time of course the war had broken out. We both belonged, Heini and I, we weren't married till '43, belonged to what was known as the Free Austrian Movement. And they were more or less based in a large Victorian Terrace House in one of the suburbs of Newcastle which was known as the International Club. Now the International Club had been established long years before because we had a lot of foreign sailors coming into the city and it was sort of a place where not necessarily the sailors themselves but the Officers could go, it was a social club and it became the base for all the Austrians. There were quite a lot of Austrians in Newcastle too. I was very useful because I was British and if we were having visiting lectures or visiting artists I could get permission from the police for them to come to Newcastle and that went on until I married.

Of course all the foreigners had restrictions, they had to register with the police and gradually a lot of restrictions were removed. Heini was allowed to have his radio back. He was working in industry at that time. He could have his bicycle back. He could move more than ten miles out of Newcastle without asking permission to go. We married and of course I lost my British nationality. I became German because he was officially German, because Austria didn't exist. So suddenly there was I – we had a radio of course, but it wasn't my radio, I couldn't ride my bicycle. It was extraordinary. Suddenly I became German. And then we thought it would be useful if I got my British nationality back because it was beginning to look as if the war was turning in our direction. And one of these days it might be useful if we could travel abroad, find out – we knew where Heini's parents were but we didn't know how they were. So I applied for British nationality and the Home Office were very kind and they said, yes, British nationality granted on the grounds of being married to a German. Now Heini was furious because he had never

been – he had never had a German passport. So we wrote to the Home Office and he said I'm not German, I'm Austrian.

[...]

Another thing we used to do of course was go up to the Edinburgh Film Festival and there once again in the film club you used to meet all nationalities and the group of about ten of us sitting around one evening, having a drink, discussing films. There was a South African girl there and she had been in Europe for six months, she loved Europe. But she had been in Britain for six weeks. So I said what do you think? And she said, 'I want to get out of Britain. You British are so arrogant. You wear freedom like a skin. You don't know you've got it.' And of course, I suppose in a way you have to have lived outside Britain or at least know a lot of Europe and the feeling of being close neighbours. And it's something that the normal run of British don't know.

[...]

RP: Of course the character that we always remember - and that was another funny story, Heini and I were in London some years ago, it was shortly after the National Film Theatre had opened. And we were walking up the stairs at the National Film Theatre and we heard – I said to Heini, that's Leslie Hardcastle in front of us and he must have heard my voice because he said, 'that's right Rommi but the film's on the way.' Because that was another thing, will the film arrive? That's right Rommi the film's on the way. I don't know if Denis Forman is still alive.

RM: He is. I'm seeing him next Monday.

RP: Oh. He might remember the name.

RP: There you are. Life goes by and time goes by. I hope I've helped.

RM: You've helped a lot.



Figure 24: Planning the season at committee. Still from Tyneside Film Society Jubilee Film, 1959.



Figure 25: Heini Przibram. Still from Tyneside Film Society Jubilee Film, 1959

APPENDIX 2 – Victor Perkins Interview

2nd August 2007

Victor Perkins, Visiting Professor at Warwick University, was a teenage member of The Exeter Film Society in the late forties. At Oxford he joined the film society and became its vice-president. Later, as a film critic writing for the magazine *Movie*, he and Ian Cameron led a discussion following a screening of the film *The Lusty Men* at a Federation of Film Societies film study weekend.

VP: I was a member of the Exeter Film Society and I saw things there that I would not otherwise have seen and not just the more recent subtitled movies like *The Wages of Fear* or, what was one seeing then? *Bicycle Thieves* and so on but also I saw - things I can remember seeing are *Ninotchka*, *The Navigator* and *The General*. So silent cinema was also part of what I was, not exactly introduced to, but that the Exeter Film Society made available. In that case though, I think it is interesting, grassroots involvement is a slightly questionable concept because that film society was run by two guys who had a projection service that they took around Devon.

RM: Was that Stuart Keen?

VP: Yeah and his brother. And I have no sense that they did anything other than completely control the programme, obviously with their own sense of what the audience was and so on. But I went to an annual general meeting once, I remember, of the film society and I was extremely precocious. I guess I was about fourteen when I was doing this and again my sense wasn't that there was any culture of democracy involved.

RM: I wonder how typical that scenario is.

VP: No idea. My two points of contact with the film society movement, before the stuff that you've come across, were as a young movie fan in Exeter, somehow discovering, probably with the assistance of one very helpful and stimulating

schoolteacher that I had – discovering the existence of the Exeter Film Society and discovering the possibility of seeing things other than what the three chain cinemas in Exeter showed.

RM: So it was a teacher at the school?

VP: Yes, who also introduced me to *Sight and Sound*. So in Exeter there was that, and when I got to Oxford I fairly rapidly became involved in the Oxford University Film Society as well as the Oxford Film Society which was the town organisation but I didn't have any involvement in that other than quarrelling with the man who ran it. But I can't remember what I got – I think I was something like vice-president in the University Film Society and that then involved one in contact with the Federation and in particular the most effective contact was through the viewing sessions that they used to hold in London.

RM: So you used to go to the viewing sessions?

VP: Yes and one got quite a strong sense there of the culture. And probably didn't realise – and this is a sort of running theme of my memory of that period, that it was very much less monolithic than it seemed. That it struck one as monolithic but in fact was not. And a lot of history wouldn't be explicable if in fact it had been monolithic. The other thing I wanted to mention, because your visit was coming up I was thinking about such matters, was the whole business about silent cinema. Silent cinema had a remarkable after life that is, as far as I know, absolutely unchronicled. I was seeing silent movies well into the fifties and I was seeing them in the village hall, Christmas parties and so on. And you would see, not just the Chaplin's, I knew *The Adventurer* and *Easy Street* more or less back to front from these occasions, but also much less celebrated silent comics and I don't know if they were made silent but certainly I saw Betty Boops silent. This was largely on 9.5, which has more or

less disappeared off the radar now, but it was quite important to me. At one time the thing that I most in the world longed for was a 9.5 projector and I wouldn't have minded having the basic model which you wound the film through. But in a friends living room I saw all sorts of strange things. The German Cinderella I remember quite vividly. *The White Hell of Pitz Palu*. And a British silent movie about sabotage between rival transport companies, can't remember what it was called now, but it was fairly basic melodrama. People think of 1929 as the point when silent cinema ended, here was I in 1946, 1948, I think into the early 50s still watching silent movies and really not thinking there was anything weird about it. The person whose house I was watching it, one of my school friends, they were anything but film buffs. I was a fledgling film buff from about the age of three. So I might have a special interest in watching old movies and so on, but these were just ordinary people deciding to hire – because you could go to the local pharmacist who had a large stock. Is this familiar stuff to you?

RM: So chemists and pharmacists had little catalogues of 9.5mm films?

VP: Yes and I think they were on 9.5 because it's smaller; it's a lot more portable. I'm not aware of anyone operating on 9.5 sound, although the equipment existed. Anyway, that's just by way of saying that in my experience through 9.5 there was a sort of widening of the accessible pool of movie.

RM: And as you say these are not only the films being put in circulation by the National Film Library.

VP: No, it's a commercial enterprise. How financed and rewarded I've no idea. You paid a rental to the local pharmacist from whom you borrowed. Some of the others it was a postal operation, Whatso for example, but insofar as these were very local operations, you just got on the bus and got something.

RM: A bit like the precursor to video rental.

VP: Very much more like that. Yes. Yes. Anyway, I don't know how interesting that is to you.

RM: There's a tendency to think that the National Film Library created that entirely itself. There is very little talked about this other - enthusiasts with projectors doing it themselves.

VP: I remember some titles from the catalogue and with great regret that there were Murnau's available, *Faust* I think was one of them. Later on I thought I wish I had seen that. So it was quite an interesting catalogue and primarily German material but then there was also all this Chaplin and Mack Sennett and god knows what.

RM: I'm interested in what you said about the culture of the film society movement and your acquaintance with it through the Federation viewing sessions and so on. You said it struck you then that it was a lot less monolithic. What do you mean by that?

VP: It struck me subsequently really. What I've come to realise is that when you see yourself in a pugilistic relationship with institutions you think of the institution as solid. What has become apparent to me is that that is not the case and there are always people within the institution to whom your attack is actually rather welcome because they are fighting their own battles inside. There is something similar in the history of *Sight and Sound*. One thought of *Sight and Sound* as the establishment but actually *Sight and Sound* was fighting it's own battles too and had fairly recently under Gavin Lambert - in the Lambert post-*Sequence* era was very much having to fight its patch against people that thought that they were mad radicals, cultural anarchists or whatever. Because there still was even in the time that I was involved, an

element that really thought that the Grierson style documentary and the Russian classics was the art of film and anything else was a bit of a, at least a distraction and possibly a degradation of that. But again –

RM: They were mostly in Scotland in think!

VP: I think I met a few of them. In Exeter – the two experiences are fairly separate – but in Exeter, the film society crowd – interesting for instance that none of my school teachers were there. Some of them were people of real culture and strong artistic interest but it didn't occur to them that a film society was something they might go along to and I suppose that that is something representative of English culture at that time. It was relatively freakish people that took cinema seriously. Probably the most important person in my education was my history teacher and he went to the movies ever so occasionally and it was almost always for some literary adaptation. I do remember that he saw *Anatomy of a Murder* but again it was because he had read the book and he was really interested to see what they had made of it. And of course because there were differences from the book he thought the book was better. Whereas nowadays I think it would be hard to find someone who thought the book was superior to the film. I'm just trying to indicate that the audience for the Exeter Film Society was not as it were drawn from the whole pool of people in Exeter who were interested in the arts. But one did meet there, it's one of those interesting convergences, very much people who in their other weekly activities might well involve some involvement in the Workers Educational Association, The Quakers were well represented and the Peace Movement generally was well represented. So I acquired other involvements through my involvement with the Exeter Film Society.

RM: So a sort of left-identified, internationalist -

VP: Yes, that sort of stream was definitely there. It was partly that thing of, you would see someone there and then you would meet them at a peace meeting. So anyway, by the time I got to Oxford, or by the time I got to the middle of my period at Oxford, I was a fairly transformed person and the film society as represented by the audience at the viewing sessions and writing in *Film* - What are the dates of *Film*?

RM: It starts in '54.

VP: Yes. So that's right. That struck me as having all the intolerable English cosiness of English culture that I had come to be very cross about, and that the area of taste represented by what was shown at the viewing sessions seemed to me to be very narrow and very self-satisfied. There was for me, not for me uniquely, there was a sort of typical Academy cinema-film societies movie which would almost certainly come from Eastern Europe and would almost certainly be stylistically blunt and so that reactions to – we were also involved in programming and trying to insert things. I remember one of my triumphs at the Oxford University Film Society was getting *In a Lonely Place* on to the screening list. But there too, there was a sense of, what will the audience buy? What do they come to the film society and sit on hard benches to see? So that event that you are referring to, the presentation of *The Lusty Men* at a film society session, that very much related to the sense that what the film societies were involved in was a view of cinema that was impossibly narrow and a very strong divergence of taste from what seemed to me - us - at the time to be typical film society fare.

[...]

But...as a twenty-three year old or whatever – we were older in those days because we had all done damn National Service, or most of us had – as a twenty-three year old you would have a sort of youthfully arrogant contempt for the views of these middle-aged people and, yes, part of this whole discontent with British film culture embraced the film society movement. I

would say the film society movement as a whole still took the Roger Manvell books as the bible, and once one had rebelled against that, because if you wanted to read about movies what could you read? You could read Roger Manvell, you could read Paul Rotha, you could read Ernest Lindgren and that was about it. Marie Seton's biography of Eisenstein was available but really there was very little. Then there came the contact with the French and a discovery really with two important dimensions. One was the absolute disgust at the way some films that seemed important to me, us, had been received. *Touch of Evil* was one and *Vertigo* was another and you look at the criticism those films received at the time they came out, including *Sight and Sound*, though *Sight and Sound* was always better disposed towards Wells than the generality of critics. But given what an extraordinary achievement, what a thrilling achievement *Touch of Evil* was, to see the sort of tepid response it received and the lack of organised support for the film, one got very angry and one thought the film society movement is part of this. It should be showing *Touch of Evil* every second programme.

RM: I suppose the difficulty there is that *Touch of Evil* was being shown commercially and film societies, the role that they had carved out for themselves was -

VP: An alternative. Yes. I remember one oddity, I'm not sure where it came from but they showed *Brewster McCloud* at one of the viewing sessions. That presumably was because MGM were not putting that out into the cinemas.

RM: Yes I guess that would happen from time to time. Something would come their way that hadn't got on to the circuits.

VP: Or that they wanted to promote.

RM: I sometimes think – coming back to your point about things being monolithic or not, it's a thing I'm wrestling with methodologically – sometimes you would see the bigger, well organised, well run film societies, they would have their magazines and they would write very enthusiastically about the films being shown in the cinemas, *Touch of Evil*, Hitchcock and so on, they just didn't show them. It wasn't part of what they did. But it didn't mean that they weren't enthusiastic about those films.

VP: That the magazine couldn't find people enthusiastic. That is the question. If you get a review article how broadly does it represent the consensus and I would guess that a lot of the time, people are always looking for decent material that they can publish. It doesn't have to be that the editor agrees with the opinion it expresses but if on the other hand it seems insanely out of line with what anybody could possibly think it wouldn't get published either.

[...]

RM: Do you remember *The Lusty Men* experience? I think that was a Federation AGM. I think you showed that and an extract from *Bandwagon*.

VP: Really? Now that I've completely forgotten. Now interestingly at that time the version of *The Lusty Men* available would have been quite drastically shortened, edited for the British market version. But it was a very strategic choice. I still think it is one of the world's great movies. The more I've grown to know it, the richer and deeper it has seemed to be. I saw it again in Chicago only a few weeks ago. But a rodeo movie starring Robert Mitchum, you know. Mitchum was not recognised as the extraordinary performer that, more or less, there is a consensus now that he is a very fine film performer. But he made so much dross and even if all the films he had made had been masterpieces, his acting was so kind of invisible, which is partly what makes it so wonderful. The whole idea that he was doing any acting seemed kind of

absurd to people who gained their criteria elsewhere. And one could not imagine any film society at that time thinking that *The Lusty Men* might be something to put into its programme alongside other classics. You know, Garbo, you could programme *Queen Christina* or *Ninotchka*, rightly so, but the idea that this ordinary looking semi-Western with Robert Mitchum and Susan Haywood might be something that the cultured and intelligent might take an interest in. We could predict that it would be shocking, though not as shocking as *Pick Up on South Street*.

RM: That was mischief making.

VP: Very much so. It was bomb throwing. I'm sort of interested in my own motivations there, but showing *The Lusty Men* seems more straightforwardly honourable. What one needed was something incendiary but on the other hand where you could fairly plausibly show that there were points of interest here, intelligences at work. Where you could hope to convince people. Because this was the other thing, looking back now - I don't think I conceived of it in such grand terms then, but looking back now, what I think was partly going on is we were trying to invent film criticism. Obviously, 'invent,' nothing starts. But to find a way that film criticism could be other than a celebration of taste; could actually provide some textual backings for its enthusiasms and understandings. So that was what we were up to. So the films that we chose to celebrate and to use as banners tended to be films where you could point to things that they might not have noticed and surprise them with the intricacy and the detail; a sense of a deeper intention than just to make a movie that would pass ninety minutes of somebody's time and get the money at the box office. What would be interesting to know would be when did I first see *The Lusty Men*?

RM: Not in a film society.

- VP: Certainly not in a film society. We had various ways of getting access to movies but I don't have a memory. I have a memory of an extraordinary double bill of *Wild River* and *Pick Up on South Street* at the Tollmer Cinema, but anyway, dates have gone all to pot with me. So when was *The Lusty Men* event?
- RM: '63. It's interesting what you say about the strategy of picking that film because in the report written up on the event it says, 'it is a pity that the opportunity of sparking off such a reappraisal was thrown away by the choice of films.' So turning that on its head, accepting in principle that they needed to think again about American cinema, but not these films, sorry.
- VP: Something to remember is we were not experienced public speakers. I don't know how good a fist we made of this.
- RM: Were you nervous about things like this?
- VP: Oh always. I'm still nervous to this day when I give a lecture. But I do think youthful arrogance carries one through a lot. You don't realise how ignorant you are. It's only later that the more you get to know you realise how much you don't. It is astonishing to me that I was able to be so polemically assertive on the basis of such thin knowledge.
- RM: How can we understand the obstacle towards seeing something of value in *The Lusty Men*? Why is it so hard to shift –
- VP: I think habits of thought; the pressure of the community, almost not to have a vocabulary for - it's ever so much easier to appreciate a film as thoughtful if the characters are thoughtful. I think the ideal way to make a bad movie is to take a problem and then to make a film about a man who knows he's got that problem, terrible movies result from this. But on the other hand, it is

absolutely stark. You can see what it is immediately, because it tells you. Whereas a film whose philosophy is embedded in words like, 'chicken today, feathers tomorrow,' which is a quote from *The Lusty Men*, people don't realise that this is philosophical thinking. More or less inarticulate characters. I think one of the interesting things about *The Lusty Men* is that the characters are in various ways highly articulate but they don't carry it through intellectually. I don't know where I was going with that. But it means that the characters have been very thoughtfully conceived and on the other hand not to leap out of the film at you.

[...]

RM: Let me take you back to the distinction you made earlier between film study and taking film seriously. The term that I've come across in doing this research, but I don't think I was familiar with before, is film appreciation.

VP: That's a much earlier term.

RM: Yes, pre-film study. What distinguishes film appreciation from film study? What did film study have to invent that wasn't there before? What did film appreciation lack?

VP: I'm not going to answer the question directly but come back to the question and poke me some more. To go off on a slight tangent, part of the history of the period is the history of the setting up of the Slade, the MA under Thorold Dickinson. So there was the initiative that the Slade took to appoint Thorold Dickinson, to have an appointment in film and that was, who was the guy at the top of the Slade, the painter who was also top of the British Film Institute?

RM: William Coldstream.

VP: Yes, Bill Coldstream. Evidently that was his initiative and Thorold Dickinson was a typical appointment coming out of the kind of thinking that would be involved there, but nevertheless it was a bold move. It was an important move. And I think two of the very first students were Charles Barr and Ray Durnat, right? And through them one got a certain amount of access to the facilities of the Slade too, like seeing things on viewing machines, which to me was one of the crucial discoveries. That is to me tremendously important in the development of what I felt I could do with film. And I've always felt to a degree that the interesting things that I've done I did through the luck of the encounter with the Editola. But...I guess another biographical approach to your question is that when I first started writing stuff, at that time, I had no idea I was involved in film education. I didn't know what my future would be. I had various hopes in terms of becoming a filmmaker. So I wasn't posing myself the question, how do you study film? A point at which one had to pose that was when the opportunity of an MA at the Slade school came up and obviously I was at the end of my Oxford career so I applied for that, didn't get it and I don't think made an application that would have merited it. I think it was a very fortunate or very wise set of decisions that took Charles and Ray Durnat in at that point. So my move in to education was so much a product of happenstance. Originally I was teaching in London to earn money, supply teaching, while hoping that something would come up in relation to film and then –

RM: Using films in your teaching?

VP: Using film to some degree in my teaching. Film that I had access to partly through working on *Movie* and other things. I remember showing *The Ransom of Red Chief* in my English class in Bermondsey, what was it called, Creedon Road School Bermondsey, entirely because I was writing an article on Hawks's comedies and happened to have these films on loan, on free loan from Ron Harris for the occasion. So, yes, one was using film very, in a very

primitive way. But even then it was different from the standing notion of film appreciation. But my becoming more a product of film education was a product of happenstance. I was teaching in schools, then jobs came up at the education department of the BFI and a post was created for me, and again the politics of the British Film Institute was involved in that. And then I was faced with the problem of what do you teach and how do you teach it, because I was supposed to be advising teachers. And again, one of the resources that the education department offered was one of these machines (pointing to film viewing equipment) and I spent a good deal of time working on movies that were available cheaply, that was a crucial consideration, that I would be trying to provide teaching materials so that you would have something to say in the classroom about these movies. So I think from various directions, Charles and Ray had the question, what do you research and write about movies from within the resources of the Slade school? *Movie* having made its big challenge to the deadness of film criticism had to come up with something that was manifestly different and arguably better. So that involved again being able to say things about how the film worked that were at least open to discussion, where there was a possibility of getting something wrong if you say I found so and so's performance thrilling or repulsive. If you say the actress hesitates before saying the word love and we should take note of that, then that's something people can, you know, does she hesitate, I can't see any hesitation. You are making a statement about what is in the film and then about what it means that is open to argument. So in those ways we, we meaning the people who had associated with *Movie*, had put ourselves in a position where we had to come up with some goods or fade out with red faces. And for me that machine was absolutely crucial. I got further use of it when I got invited to write a series for schools television about movies. Again a larger history is involved there because what's that report called *Half our Future*. No? A very crucial moment in British film education. The report which Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel had had an important impact on because it actually specified that kids in school needed education about the

media. At the time of its appearance it was a very vital document. Oddly enough it coincided with the first popularity at any rate of Marshall McLuhan, and people were asking, well, what are you going to do about McLuhan? The sense that there ought to be a film education was strong and then the imperative to provide a content for it was there as well. Interestingly in the education department of the BFI alongside me and before me was Peter Wollen and Peter's view is that it really had to be top down. What you had to establish was university research, that really scholarly and intellectually respectable work really started at the top and then found its way through whereas film study rather than film studies seemed to be happening in entirely the other way. The activity was happening in the schools and even in the colleges of further education, with Roy Knight and the initiative that I became involved in at Reading. And so I was working as it were at the teacher level and Peter was trying to seed a higher-level academic activity in relation to film and then obviously there was Slade going on at one side.

RM: And at that point in the education department was there any responsibility towards the film societies.

VP: No. One of the things that was happening towards the end of my time at the BFI, which was quite short, was the Regional Film Theatre movement. And I thought that was quite disgraceful. I thought it was an attempt to bureaucratise and centralise what I had experienced as quite a vital local phenomenon. One of the things that made me really hostile to the BFI was the unscrupulous empire-building way and institutional politics motivated way in which the film societies were being given the kiss of death. Whether that was a reasonable view I wouldn't now know but that was certainly how it appeared at the time.

RM: So there wasn't a part of you that thought it wouldn't lead to a sweeping out of some of the older reactionary forms of programming in the film societies?

- VP: I don't remember having any such thought. I don't believe so.
- RM: You didn't think it would be better run that way?
- VP: No, because I had a standing view that the establishment taste in cinema had always been wrong. That popular taste had been more perceptive than allegedly cultured taste. So the idea that some group of persons and bureaucrats in London might be in a position to tell the world what it needed was not something I was responsive too.
- RM: It did lead to the collapse of the big provincial film societies.
- VP: Whether they were going to collapse anyway would be another question. Obviously they were under the same sort of pressures that were effecting movie houses generally and leading to the decimation of the Isoldo circuit and so on. So that one can't know that but certainly as I witnessed it, because there was an attempt to recruit the Education Department into this expansion, and we, I think all of us within the education department, saw this as a diversion from what we really should be doing.
- RM: So you would in principle always have supported facilitating locally-determined programming?
- VP: Absolutely. Another important part, a point of sort of convergence between film society work and the BFI education department were the summer schools that we ran, which were very crucial annual events because someone teaching English decided they wanted to do something about movies, how did they start? How did they themselves get to know more and discuss with other interested persons. And so the fortnightly summer school that the BFI ran, had been running for a long time – Max Ophuls actually appeared at one, long

before I had any possibility of being involved. But the summer school was a very important point of convergence and I imagine that there would be film society people there, but the people that one mainly noticed were the young and interested teachers, many of who were in further education rather than in schools. And again it posed you the question, what do you teach? What do you do to make this teachable? And I remember again one of my successes - you do a lot of things, some of them are utter flops, others are successful, so that creates a path that you continue down - one of my successes was doing a presentation on, whatever it might be, the first ten or fifteen minutes of *The Left-Handed Gun*, a film which had been completely ignored when it appeared and I had been able to do some analytical work on the Steenbeck and again found all sorts of things that you could point out about the way this film was constructed and the way the performances were being offered and so on. And it was evident that work at that level of detail was not something that the summer school were used to because it was very warmly appreciated as something new and 'oh my.' So for me the sense of what was teachable was very much bound up with personal discovery.

RM: I find this very interesting, the question of what is teachable and what is discussable and trying to move beyond expressions of taste to something more concrete.

VP: The other thing that went alongside expressions of taste was assessments of socio-political acceptability. Is this film progressive, within the given terms of the progressive? Which is why showing *Pick Up on South Street* is –

RM: Outrageous. The question then is how is that different? Lindgren's book contains all sorts of ideas about what you might discuss in terms of film technique, and they are readily taken up by people who want to do precisely that, to find ways of talking about film. How is the way he talks about film technique different from the way you wanted to talk about film?

VP: In the specific sense that everything in Lindgren depends on the Russians. Everything in Lindgren depends on editing, depends on a view of art that says that what should count as a work of art is definable in advance. Now I didn't know that was what my problem was with Lindgren at the time, but I think it was what my problem with Lindgren was. And again, not mine alone. It didn't allow for you first to be thrilled by a movie and then to find out why. If it didn't obey the rules of juxtaposition as more or less invented by Pudovkin and Eisenstein then it didn't count. He was very influenced by an Oxford aesthete whose name I can't immediately place who had a very strict understanding of by what criteria something could be recognised as a work of art. So Lindgren had the straightforward formula that if it doesn't count as a film then there is no film to discuss. What counted as a film was available to a technical definition. So if it starts as a difference of taste, if you want to be able to justify your enthusiasm for *River of No Return* then you can't begin by saying, I am going to investigate the ways it uses juxtaposition through editing. You have to begin elsewhere, which leads you to a broader sense of the relationship between technique and artistry: a sense of how variously the techniques of film can be employed with equally salient impact. So that's part of an answer. But again I think some of it is also in the area of taste. The tastes represented in the Lindgren/Manvell bibles, to me they're very tepid. They don't really take in anything really robust. I'm not a great Michael Powell admirer, but what Michael Powell does has a kind of punch to it that is outside that world of sort of David Lean-y kind of polite restraint. I think some of the vigour of American cinema, whether it's in Preston Sturges or in the performances of Barbara Stanwyck in practically any movie or whatever, somehow the Manvell/Lindgren band doesn't really encompass that. So even when they will use a word like vigour as a term of praise – certainly *On the Town* is a film cited by Manvell with approval - That reminds me, saying the name Manvell reminds me, that another element in the film societies and education thing is that the BFI – before I was employed in the education

department, I was already occasionally employed by the lecture service and I remember a weekend school on Hitchcock that I did for a film society group and there I found people far from stuffy, very willing to be interested and to discuss the interest of, I can't remember what I showed now, I think *Shadow of a Doubt* was one of them. But certainly a willingness there to engage in a discussion that didn't assume from the start that Hitchcock was a person of technical skill but limited sensibility or whatever, and given that, I've no doubt my own terms of criticism in that teaching were pretty limited, a willingness to collaborate on trying to arrive at ways of understanding these films that could be mutually satisfactory. On the other hand the cosiness of the atmosphere was always there. And if you ask me now what else did I want, did I want an atmosphere that was distinctly unc cosy, I don't know.

RM: What do you mean by the cosiness? Can you describe it for me?

VP: Well there is a polite limit to the degree to which people will provoke one another. And a polite limit to the range of thinking, I suppose. I don't know if this is a new thought or not, I suppose a lot of it had to do with sexuality.

RM: Well that's an intriguing thought. Unravel that one for me.

VP: Well I'm just trying to think of the sorts of discussions that one had and nowadays you would think it more or less impossible to discuss Hitchcock without discussing sexuality, the sexuality of the characters in rather detailed terms. And I don't think any such thing was possible in the outer suburbs of London. I can't remember where that particular weekend took place but it was somewhere like High Wycombe. I would think now that it was pretty well impossible to have an interesting on the bean discussion of *Shadow of a Doubt* without discussing what the Theresa Wright character wants sexually. And no such discussion would have been conceivable, probably not even conceivable by me, in the film society environment of those days. Again, one

of the reasons why *Pick Up On South Street* was such a strategic bomb was, not just the politics, it was also the way the woman is treated. There's a lot of sexual detail in *Pick Up On South Street*, almost from the opening shot. That wasn't part of what we discussed but it is clearly part of what makes the film outrageous, the particular kinds of sexual kick that Widmark is getting out of his work on the subways and so on and the sadistic dimensions in the treatment of the woman are part of what make the film unacceptable but are also part of what make it really interesting.

RM: The discussion had to wait for feminism.

VP: Feminism? That I might find more disputable but insofar as feminism was part of the whole movement towards sexual liberation then, yes, I probably would agree.

By Email after the interview:

On Film Appreciation. I now think "appreciation" is a wonderful word, and that there ought to be more of the stuff around. However, back then "film appreciation" was a horribly official term. It embedded the sense that there already existed a film wisdom which cultured persons were in a position to hand on - DOWN - to the youthful or benighted. It was largely a matter of teaching correct taste. Thou shalt prefer Bicycle Thieves to Red River!. There was too much cultural colonialism in it- which I was helped to see because my own enthusiasms were so often at odds with approved taste. At the risk of some crudity, one can discern two orientations in education: one aims to indoctrinate (enslave); the other to liberate (enable). Film Appreciation had too much to do with indoctrination. I think back to my own school experience of "musical appreciation". I'm very grateful for the introduction to Haydn and Schubert, but I had to find my own way to Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington, and I had to learn for myself that Bing Crosby also had musical value. So, "raising the taste of the film public". There was not ONE taste and ONE public, and no one was in a position to adjudicate on what would constitute an

uplifting. What you could hope to do was to develop the means for people to articulate their own understandings, experiences and enthusiasms. In part that meant that film criticism had yet to be invented, and was to be invented as a possibility of conversation not as a body of received wisdom.

APPENDIX 3 – Gwen Bryanston

28th February 2006

Mario and Gwen Bryanston started the Solihull Film Society in January 1958 after moving to the area from north London. Due to Mario's organisational skills and commitment Solihull Film Society is now one of the oldest in the country. It recently celebrated its 50th anniversary with a screening of their first ever film *Brief Encounter*. Mario was still actively involved as Chairman up to his death in 2002 aged eighty-five.

RM: So how did you and Mario meet?

GB: Mm, gosh. I was working in Germany with the control commission after the war. I was there for about a year, 1946, 1947. Then I came on leave and met up with friends in Hampstead where I had lived before I went to Germany and met him there. He was part of the same little group. We met and then we corresponded when I went back to Germany and then eventually I came back home to England. I wanted to – I sort of had in my mind that I was going to go to Japan actually. I thought, all those long years during the war, frustrated, to go abroad was the most wonderful thing in the world to do in those days. Having been to Germany I thought I would try Japan as well, seeing as that was somewhere I could easily go by belonging to the civil service and joining their commission.

RM: Mario was born in Poland and spent his childhood during the war in France or was it before the war?

GB: Before the war. He was born in 1917, so around 1920 his mother together with one or two other – his aunts, a small family group - left Poland because conditions there were very difficult, very hard, and his mother had seen some very hard times in Poland and had herself not had much of an education. She came to – took him out of Poland, into Europe and eventually they ended up in France. She in fact was a very talented dancer and the sisters between them had formed a sort of dancing troupe and they were very successful. So Mario

was sent away to school to, oddly enough, an English school in Biarritz. A small English school run by – I think he was a Colonel or Major or something of the sort. He was very much an Englishman, taught them to play cricket amongst other things. So that was his education and that was where he started to learn English. He enjoyed English very much and was very good at it.

RM: What then brought him to England?

GB: At the age of around fifteen he went down with TB. He was then living, I think, in Biarritz, I'm not sure but he may have been somewhere in the South of France. But his mother was by then quite comfortably off and she immediately packed him off to a sanatorium in Switzerland and he was there for three years. And he was in effect cured as far as we know. He emerged from there cured. He gradually built up his health from then on and he was fine. He was very keen on the English language and he wanted to perfect his English still further and in the sanatorium he had made friends with an English family, a mother and daughter, and he came and stayed with them and stayed in England and that would have been about 1938 and of course he got caught over here when the war started.

RM: Was he working then during the war?

GB: He was working and studying at the same time with this English family who were fond of him and who had sort of adopted him.

RM: I gather you were both regulars at the Everyman.

GB: Yes that's right. The Everyman cinema.

RM: What was it like in those days?

GB: Well I think we were aware of it being a special place. The Hampstead Everyman cinema was always a special cinema and yes we saw *Citizen Kane* there which made a great impression. Goodness, I wouldn't like to sit through it all again. But no, in those days it seemed like the most amazing wonderful film. What else did we see? I can't remember now. *Les Enfants du Paradis*, could we have seen that? Yes we were regular attenders at the Hampstead Everyman. We didn't have much money and it was quite cheap so that was another good reason for going.

RM: You were living in that area were you? Hampstead, North London.

GB: Yes, yes.

RM: Were you both very keen on cinema?

GB: I think it was mutual. He had the advantage. I didn't have any French. I had a bit of German at that time but no French, so he could really appreciate French films to the full where I had to sweat my way through the subtitles. It came gradually together I think.

RM: How do you think that developed? How did the pair of you become interested in the cinema?

GB: I think mainly because in those days it was the only cheap form of entertainment you could have. Remember we didn't have television. So how could you spend – a once a week visit to the cinema was the thing that most of us did. It wasn't expensive and it was the thing you could afford.

RM: You weren't going to the local Odeon or whatever was the equivalent at the time.

GB: No hardly at all because we were close to The Everyman, we could walk to it, so that was our place to go. I can't remember whether we ever went anywhere else. It was a long time ago.

RM: When did you move to Solihull?

GB: We moved to Solihull in 1954. By then I had two small children and Mario had by that time become a British citizen. His naturalisation papers came through and so on. He had started out in business and was doing very well but it was built up slowly. And then so much of his – he had to travel of course as a salesman – he started a manufacturer's agency business, that is representing the manufacturer to the wholesale trade and he started to do very well in that. He was working extremely hard and more and more of his business seemed to concentrate by sheer chance around the Midlands area rather than London. So gradually it became obvious that the sensible thing for us to do was to move to the Midlands. And by then we had saved up enough money to put a deposit on a house. So that was what we did.

RM: What was the area like culturally and for cinema when you moved?

GB: When we moved to Solihull in 1954, we enjoyed the countryside aspect of it. We found a house, a very nice house and it seemed to be to us to be more or less in a country lane with gas lighting in the road. We were delighted to have saved up enough money to be able to buy this house. It was quite a large one, it was a detached four bedroomed house, but as I say Mario had worked extremely hard and done very well. But of course you could in those days. One of the difficulties was not getting the business, it was getting the supplies. Had we been able to get all the supplies in to fill all the orders we would have been doing very well indeed. We were happy enough in Solihull. It was like living in the country. But certainly there was nothing by way of films, theatre. It was a cultural desert. It was always just a desert. There was

nothing at all. We felt – I felt moving to the Midlands was the most dreadful disaster in my life. And the only good thing going out of Birmingham was the train back to London.

RM: So it took a while to get used to it?

GB: Yes. There you are.

RM: You don't recall going to the cinema much before the film society?

GB: No. There was a local cinema and we used to go to that but we had a great job finding the films we wanted to see. We used to faithfully read up CA Lejeune and Dilys Powell in those days, the two great film journalists. And you longed to see some of these films but found them very hard to find. Hence Mario eventually caught on to this idea of a film society. How he heard about the existence of such things I don't know but he did. And there was in those days a film society at Bourneville, you know the Cadbury chocolates are at Bourneville, but that was quite a long way for us to go. We did go over there a couple of times for their film society. There was also a film society in Birmingham. How we found those I don't know but we did in due course. It was out of that that he decided it was time to start one at Solihull.

RM: You describe him somewhere as an idealist with the film society?

GB: Um, yes, I think so. He was quite zealous in wanting to provide thought provoking films and educational films and that sort of thing. I think he saw the cinema being the ideal medium for persons like himself, who for one reason or another had missed out on their education, as had I: as being a form of education and acquiring knowledge and understanding, yes – which was all for international understanding. Way back in my far distant youth I belonged to a group for – what was it called world government, you know the sort of

thing HG Wells was involved with, that sort of thing, we were sort of leftist, leftist blue stocking, that sort of thing.

RM: And some of those ideas got channelled into supporting the values of the film society.

GB: Yes, definitely. Yes, yes, yes it was education for the workers. Very much that sort of thing.

RM: Looking around do you think that the other people that were drawn to film societies shared those feelings?

GB: Some of them did.

RM: Were you yourself involved in the setting up and the running in those early years?

GB: Yes, but of course I had two little girls to care for. And of course as a female it fell upon me to cart in the milk and the tea and the coffee and the stuff so that during the interval we could provide our audience with a cup of tea or coffee or whatever. So yes, I was in charge of that.

RM: I was going to ask you about that. Whether men and women were equally involved and whether they played different roles in the film society.

GB: Yes, well, it followed the stereotype. Being the wife and mother so I had to do the tea and the coffee (laughs). Yes that was how it was. Somebody had to do the – the men always looked after the projector of course. You didn't have any female projectionists. I think they would have come from Mars if you'd had anyone like that. That was a male prerogative. But Mario was never very technical minded, not in the very least. In fact if there was any DIY to do at

home I did most of it. He was not in that sense practical at all. But he was very clever at recruiting people who were, so we had a devoted team who would run the projectors and see that they were in good order. They often used to break down of course.

RM: He must have had quite significant organisational abilities.

GB: Yes he did. He was a great organiser.

RM: Were either of you involved in other local organisations? Voluntary organisations?

GB: No not really. Not really, no. I later, as the children grew up a bit I joined pottery classes and things like that. I always had a creative streak and was very fond of music. Ah yes we did, we had a little group of music lovers and we used to get together for that.

RM: Oh right. Listening to records?

GB: And we acquired good facilities for playing records. I've still got a huge collection of Long Players that go back – in the cupboard over there.

RM: Did either of you have continuing political interests?

GB: We were socialists, I suppose, in the old fashioned sense of, you know, fair wages and all that sort of thing. So yes, we – but the film society was absolutely non-political. That was important. We had our personal views but we kept the politics well away. But in any case we were not that fervent. We didn't belong to any local parties. Nor did we take part in anything. But when it did come to voting, yes we tended to vote socialist. But we kept that well away from the film society.

RM: Why was that?

GB: Well we wanted it to be a broad based thing and we realised very early on we were different persuasions on our committee and that wasn't the important thing. Film societies were never supposed to have that bias. They were always – I think it is written in the constitution somewhere that you are non-political, non-religious and so on. So you are open to everybody and we always wanted to keep that sense of openness. We had members – a couple who used to come and she was Indian – an Indian doctor actually and he was white skinned – we made a great point that they were absolutely welcome which they might not have been in many circles because she had a dark skin and was an Indian lady, although she was extremely well-educated, a person of great culture. But in those days it wasn't like that. The racism thing was much stronger then than now.

RM: That leads on to the general ambience and ethos of the film society. How would you describe that to me as someone who wasn't around in that period?

GB: Yes, Mario always had a strong sense of – I suppose because he was Jewish, although he didn't follow the religion in any way whatsoever, in fact we were both of us at that time seriously ignorant of any of the observances of the Jewish faith. I could tell you some funny stories which wouldn't mean anything unless you were Jewish yourself. And I take it you are not.

RM: I'm not.

GB: No. So none of that meant anything to us but we were – Mario always hated the idea of trying to become a Christian just to fit in with society. He thought he should be accepted on his own merits. Of course there were people – there was – He wanted to join the local golf club at one stage and that was not

accepted because he was (*in a plummy accent*) of the Hebrew persuasion. So anti-Semitism was strong then on the social level. Did you not realise that?

RM: It's the kind of thing you read about but you never really –

GB: You don't know it. Oh it was very much so then. Yes – Oh yes – this - well you can put it in your thesis if you like but it still worries me slightly. We had a couple who joined the film society, a very nice man and his wife. And I became quite good friends with his wife. Then, I think this lady became a little bit strange. Something about Mario – she started being aware of his foreignness and his accent, that sort of thing. Perhaps she was jealous in some way of the film society. I don't know. I don't know. But she – we were working then with Birmingham University. Birmingham University were supplying us with lecture classes, the sort of thing you may be doing now, with teachers who were interested in film. So we were having sessions and discussion groups and lectures with them. She then took off a bit. This lady went a bit crazy let's face it and she wrote to the University Vice-Chancellor and said that he was a Jew and a Communist and the University had no business associating with him. Can you imagine such a thing? That created a bit of a hoo-hah. Of course the Vice-Chancellor quickly came on to us and said 'what's all this about?' So Mario was very calm about it all. I was really worried because I had made quite good friends with this woman, and they lived round the corner and we could meet up and have a cup of tea together. But then the husbands got together. They went to see the University – went to the University to see the people there and the whole thing got calmed down. It was accepted that this lady had gone off her head a little bit and she was – she didn't mean any harm, she just didn't realise what she was doing. That fizzled out. Fortunately it went away, but it will give you an idea of the sort of feelings in the background there.

RM: You were talking earlier on and you were saying that the film society was quite a big part of your lives. Could you give a sense of just how involving it was?

GB: Well it took place all through the winter, from the autumn to the following spring; that was meeting once a month. Of course you also had to make quite sure we were there and everything was in order and we would have a good show. And we worked hard on the publicity, getting the voice around sending our programmes out, all that sort of thing. So yes, it was a lot of work. Of course I did a lot of the work. Or I would go and help the secretary or we would get together and stuff things into envelopes and post them around and that sort of thing. And the whole thing had to be run on a shoestring. We used to have raffles every now and then to raise a few extra pennies. In those days one of the major costs was getting a projector, either hiring one or saving up to buy one. There was very little help so we used to raise money that way with raffles and all sorts of things of that kind.

RM: Was it rewarding to you?

GB: Oh immensely. Oh yes because we used to have the committee meetings at home and there would be a lot of chat, a lot of argument about what was a good film and what wasn't and what we should put on in the next programme. And meeting and making friends with all the people we met at that time. We had quite a turnover of committee members. Mario was always on the look out for somebody good for the committee and he would pounce on them, you'd make a good committee member, or if you were looking for somebody who knew how to run accounts or something like that. I used to write bits and pieces of articles for the local paper and the local paper in those days was only too glad to print whatever I wrote. So I remember writing reams of stuff about DW Griffiths and things like that and he printed every word wholesale. So things of that sort were quite fun.

RM: You were socialising with a lot of the people you were meeting through that.

GB: Oh yes, of course yes, yes. Oh yes it was – yes it was a really important thing for us.

RM: I'm sure it's a difficult question to answer but the people who become actively involved who were they?

GB: Oh gosh they were many and various. I mean, I look back, there was one gentleman who was the headmaster of one of the little schools which was just outside the main part of Solihull. He was the headmaster of a little village school that had one large room with several different age groups trying to cope in one large hall – large village hall. He was a devoted member and he had his own projector and he helped us. We used to borrow that in the early stages. He remained in touch with the film society for quite a long time and he had used his projector to show the children films about places abroad and things like that, educational stuff as far as he could find it. Then we had the manager of the local photographic shop because he knew about projectors and making your own films became the great thing with – what was it? 8mm – and Mario too had an 8mm camera and we had all the kerfuffle for making our own films and we did quite a bit in that.

RM: Within the film society or just at home?

GB: Well it was peripheral to the film society. A lot of people used to say, 'I can't join the film society I haven't got a camera.' Then we would have to explain. It's to see films. It's like a cinema, a club cinema. You don't need a camera. You just need to bring yourself and watch a good film. It seems absurd now but that was frequently – you would say join the film society and they

immediately thought that you were into 8mm films and that you were making your own films – Oh I haven't got a camera, I can't afford it.

[...]

RM: And your Honorary Treasurer was the manager of Lloyds.

GB: That's right. Mario, you know, would stop at nothing and he was banking with Lloyds bank Solihull and he marched into the bank manager's office and he said, 'How about it? You understand accounts, you can be our Treasurer'

RM: This is what you need to be successful as a film society. You have to have a good treasurer don't you.

GB: Oh yes, absolutely. Later on we had a lovely man. His name was Geoffrey Bridgeman and he and his wife – oh that's another thing, Mario liked husbands and wives to both join the committee together so that we weren't parting husbands and wives for committee meetings and things like that. Geoffrey came on as treasurer and his wife came on just as an adviser. She was a teacher. She taught Maths. I asked what Geoffrey did and he was a bit cagey about it. You know accounts or something. He turned out to be an income tax Inspector. But we remained friends with him and he died only last year. We kept friends with him all those years. He was a lovely person. Great sense of humour and the pair of them loved films. He moved eventually to Bath. (Looking through her scrapbooks on Solihull Film Society) Oh dear what's all this? By F. E. Pardoe. Now he was the Midland Group of film societies, the Chairman. He helped Mario an awful lot in the early stages. His first advice about setting up a film society was don't do it.

RM: Doesn't sound very encouraging.

GB: No. Don't do it.

RM: Was he being serious?

GB: Yes, he was being deadly serious. He said, for one thing you can lose money on the thing. That's why Mario went to his local bank manager and got him on. So there you are that's quite interesting. He was helping people all round the country with their film societies.

RM: (reading from the scrapbook) ... 'an example of do it yourself democracy in action.' Is that how you all saw it at the time?

GB: Yes, yes, yes. Exactly, exactly. We saw old films, foreign films, old films from the silent period or non-fiction films of any kind. The whole thing was education, provoking thought all that sort of thing.

[...]

RM: Did Mario retain an interest in Polish films in particular?

GB: No. Not particularly. Poland was always a very anti-Semitic country. My daughter just a few years ago visited Poland. I mean they are still strongly anti-Semitic in Poland. They always were and it hasn't changed that much. No, he was not keen on Poland. France, yes. He loved France. He loved the French language. French was his first language. They are our membership programmes. It hasn't changed that much we still have a very similar little card to that showing our membership with our films on the back.

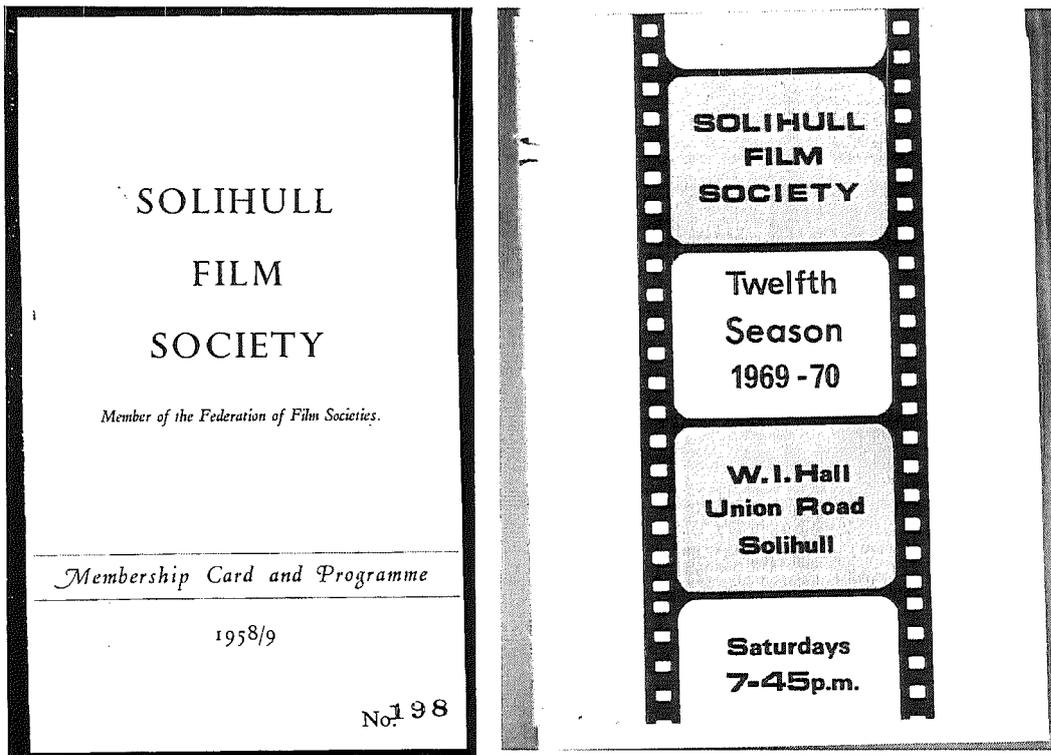


Figure 26 & 27: Solihull Film Society Programmes 1958-59, 1969-70



Figure 18: Gwen and Mario Brynaston (Left and Centre). Picture from "Solihull Film Society Celebrates 21st Birthday." Solihull News, 17 February 1979.

APPENDIX 4 – John and Doris Minchinton

28th November 2005

John Minchinton started the Goldsmiths College Film Society in 1946 while studying in the Evening Studies department. Both John and his wife Doris also attended the New London Film Society in the Scala Theatre, Charlotte Street. He was co-opted on to the Executive Committee of the Federation in 1950. With Wilfred Bedford he compiled the first list of 16mm film availability in order to encourage film societies to book their films directly rather than relying wholly on the booking services of the BFI. For several years, until 1955, he helped organise the annual national viewing sessions at the French Institute. While working for Films of Poland he lent his office to Federation volunteers who met to pre-select films for the viewing sessions weekend. He now describes himself as ‘the old man of English sub-titling.’

The interview begins with a question about the head of the Evening Studies department at Goldsmiths when the film society was formed.

JM: John Gulland yes. J. A. Gulland I think. He was just immediately after the war of course. He came from the Air Force I think. I think he was involved in a mutiny in the Air Force, wherever it was in the Middle East, there was a sort of mutiny and he was one of the people there. It's probably – it will be documented somewhere. I don't know the details. It was one of the rare events of its type apparently. Anyway, Ian Gulland – I want to call him Ian rather than John actually – was head of department and was very vigorous indeed. The whole of the curriculum was interesting. Many clubs and things started up and the film society, we used to give the shows in the little hall down the corridor on the right hand side when you went down. There was a concert hall in the middle and past what was called the refectory there was Gulland's office tucked away and there was what was called a hall. Village hall size as it were where we gave the film shows.

RM: So what sort of character was he?

JM: Oh he was exceedingly good. He had a real talent for letting people organise and do things. You got the utmost help from him and because of that he attracted a lot of people who were good as it were. Not people who were just trying to make something for themselves and so forth. So we did the film society.

RM: Were you in at the beginning?

JM: Yes I started it, me and some other friends of ours. Film people and enthusiasts. It was very simple – 16mm of course and there wasn't a projection box or anything. I made a projection box, a wooden frame with a few blankets to cut the sound down a bit. People joined for a few bob or whatever it was and that was it. We were part of the Federation of Film Societies. Then I used to deal with other people at the Annual Viewing Sessions. Selecting the films and putting that on at the French Institute. This was before the National Film Theatre of course which was 1952ish. Because it took over the TeleKinema of the Festival of Britain which was saved by the pressure of the film society movement and the BFI because it would have been demolished otherwise I think. Then after a time we were doing various – it was the London Regional Group of the Federation of Film Societies and we were of course quite active in that. After a time the BFI wanted to sort of take over the Federation and there was a bit of a struggle went on. But I was only involved in the periphery of that, not on the centre of things. I was quite busy doing all these other things. But I know we resisted it all of us. But in the end the Federation did come under the Film Institute didn't it, I think?

RM: In '65. Much later.

JM: You see the Institute had its Central Booking Agency for films. We had a bit of a - I probably told you, because of the Booking Fees and them saying they couldn't get things, we did that 16mm film index, me and Wilfred Bedford,

giving some general information to the film societies about what they could raise under their own steam. But that was 16mm of course, 35mm was trickier because you had to deal with the Cinematograph Renters Association and I think that's where the Central Booking Agency was useful there. But for the mass as such, which was 16mm after the war, that wasn't so good. So we promoted booking yourself, which was partly why we had viewing sessions. But slowly it came within the Film Institute. But when I moved here I think it was still going fairly strong. If I've been here 50 years, I moved here in 1955, December '55 it would be. After that I wasn't particularly any use. Personally I was self-employed working in films since '52. In the 50s and early 60s I was doing the – one of the consultants to the Polish Cultural Institute. So I was involved with Polish film people. In the great days as it were; just a fluke. I've still got my connections with Poland; I still go there twice a year. But not many people are left now of that period and of course since the collapse of the comrades there isn't a state film industry anymore, which means it is just the same, try and find your own money capitalism as it is here. Film as a weapon of culture has gone in all of these countries. Under the comrades it was a form of resistance, national resistance, that's why you had, especially, Hungarian and Polish cinema.

RM: What were you studying at Goldsmiths?

JM: Oh, I just did Evening Classes. We were initially – Doris and I met at a class for Russian actually. And then I think Gulland himself put on a series of lectures on Diggers and Levellers and Other Dangerous Men, this sort of history.

RM: What made you want to study Russian?

JM: Well it was common, fashionable in those days from a communist socialist point of view as much as anything. But not particularly that side, but I was already beginning to deal with the literature and that sort of thing.

RM: So what else was going on in your life while you were running the Goldsmiths Film Society?

JM: I wasn't working in films then initially.

RM: Did you say you were a chemist?

JM: Well its all weird you know. I came back from evacuation in about 1942 or 3. Got a job down at Stone's down at Charlton. They were the people famous for making propellers for the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth. But in fact that was only part of their work. They did casting in magnesium and magnesium alloy for airplanes. So I went down there and I was in the laboratory there analysing fuel, that was for the furnaces. I did what I was told more or less. I was quite a good worker. I didn't cheat, didn't fudge the results. Anyway to keep their staff they listed me and several other young people there as analytical chemists which is a very grand title for the little job that I was doing but that was a reserved occupation.

RM: I see. So how old were you then?

JM: Well I left school at 16 you see. So instead of being called up at 17 and a half I was still there when the war ended. Then it was God bless you guvnor now we'll call you up. Now because I was an analytical chemist I had what was called a war office posting, which meant that some clown somewhere looked at the occupations of those people and decided what they would do with them. Obviously at that time anyone who was scientific put them for training as ammunition examiners.

RM: Where did you learn about projection? Was that in the army?

JM: No. Projection, anybody could do projection. Oh you just laced up a machine. Schools had them, probably at school. We did have a projector at school. It was a perfectly natural instrument for everybody in schools. You'd have propaganda shows in church halls in the war and that was all 16mm projector, so they were very common indeed. Probably you can't get them anywhere now.

[...]

RM: I was asking John just now why he thought the film society movement really blossomed after the war. What are your thoughts on that?

DM: I think there were a lot of young people out there who wanted something different from the run of the movies. There wasn't much on offer out there. There were some good things of course, there always have been some good things. But I think that they – I think a lot of them had come through the war and there hadn't been much on offer during that time and I think a lot of them were interested particularly because we – our contact with the Soviet Union, which we hadn't had much before hand, I think that possibly they began to hear of Eisenstein and so on and I think they wanted to know more about that. Actually, I think the film societies were the only place you could really see them. And I think after the war there was a terrific amount of French films. But again in most of England, not so much in London, there weren't places you could see these French films. They were also interested in the German. Of course there had been a terrific number of German films that had been made during Hitler but mostly before, and they thought well we ought to know something more about this. A lot of people had read things I suppose.

JM: Then we had Italian neo-realism come up and all that.

DM: Then we had Italian realism and I suppose it was all created out of that. But also you must remember that unlike today there were very few cultural – well there aren't so many now - outlets for youth to join and belong to and join, were there John?

JM: No. Well I said after the war there was an explosion in lots of things and foreign travel.

DM: Yes that's right, foreign travel.

JM: People became less insular in that respect. And people were more interested in evening classes and that sort of thing.

RM: Did it feel like a young persons scene?

JM: Well not particularly.

DM: Well I don't know John. I don't know if there were many old people amongst the film societies.

JM: At Goldsmiths College no.

DM: If you think of the clientele – even the New London Film Society – they are the only two I know anything about – it was largely younger people.

JM: Younger people yes.

RM: Was it something that your parents understood?

DM: Oh no.

JM: No, no.

DM: My parents had no cultural background at all. My father was a motor mechanic and my mother, well she had been a char and she had worked in a hospital but not as a nurse, a Ward Orderly and so on. She had done service. So there was no background in my family of culture at all.

RM: How do you think you developed your interest?

DM: Well I think it was partly because I was one of the lucky ones in those times that went to a grammar school. And I'm sure that my other sister who was two years older than me, she didn't have the same interest in cultural things that I had. In our day, the grammar school, it was very elitist – and of course there were very few scholarships – even though it was an LCC grammar school that I went to, there were very few, I suppose it was not more than a quarter, 25% were scholarship children, the rest were paying people and they came from middle class families a lot of them.

RM: So you were coming into contact with these people.

DM: That's right. At school you did too (to John), you had more doors open to you.

JM: Yes the Central School was much broader than the other schools.

DM: As I say I think I was very lucky. I mean my father was well read. He was very intelligent actually. He was adamant that I should go to a grammar school. So I was one of the fortunate one's because I don't think really there was many people off the Downham Estate – I don't know of anybody else

who belonged to a film society. There weren't very many people there who were interested in anything more than going dancing or football and things like that. I expect that in the Communist Party actually there were more people who were interested.

JM: Yes.

DM: Because you see the Communist Party was made up very largely of middle class people wasn't it John?

JM: Yes.

DM: And they had the same – the background. In that respect – that was, although I didn't join the Communist Party till I was about twenty – then you were mixing with people who gave you these ideas and so on.

RM: Were they doing much educationally and culturally during that period?

DM: Oh yes, I think so, yes, because they brought out these very intellectual books. The Arena and it was all connected with them.

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Interviews conducted by the author

Sid Brooks (20 September 2005)

Gwyn Bryanston (28 February 2006)

James Clark (13 February 2006)

John and Doris Minchinton (28 November 2005)

Victor Perkins (2 August 2007)

Rommi Przibram (14 September 2006)

Mansel Stimpson (22 November 2005)