
BFI INVOLVEMENT IN DISTRIBUTION

1. During the last five years, the Regional Programming Unit (formerly in FAS, now Distribution Division) has gradually evolved a policy of assistance in the film distribution market. This has been less a matter of deliberately setting out to achieve preconceived aims than a series of responses to problems, initiatives and opportunities, out of which has emerged a relatively sophisticated and cost-effective practice. However since distribution is probably the least understood sector of the film industry, this subsidy activity is rarely perceived as a whole, either inside or outside the Institute - and the officers responsible are inclined to think that it is best not too widely advertised. The purpose of this paper is to outline some of the work to date and indicate how it may develop in the future.

2. How does the need for intervention arise? Without a lengthy explanation of the general and specific problems besetting distribution in Britain, perhaps it would be useful to recount two actual cases that helped to launch the present practice. Some four years ago, I discovered to my amazement that there was no satisfactory 35mm copy of CITIZEN KANE available for screening at any BFI-sponsored cinema. The distributor, who had the rights as part of a group of RKO titles acquired on licence from another company, simply did not consider the outlay on a new print justifiable in terms of the business anticipated. Our view was that the BFI had an obligation to ensure that audiences, both specialised and general, should be able to see this key film in something like its original splendour. We therefore advanced £500 for the distributor to buy a new copy under an agreement which returned a proportion of revenues from BFI bookings to the budget from which the advance had been made, leaving the distributor with a share of these revenues and all receipts from non-BFI bookings. Eventually, as word spread that a new print was available, RFTs and commercial exhibitors began to programme the film again. The other case resulted from an independent distributor seeking support for the acquisition of a film considered highly speculative, in fact the condensed version of Syberberg's CONFESIONS OF WINIFRED WAGNER. Our response was to suggest that we would make a substantial advance only if the distributor would consider also taking Syberberg's earlier feature LUDWIG, REQUIEM FOR A VIRGIN KING. The distributor agreed and, aided by a £2000 advance, launched both films in due course; thereby effectively introducing Syberberg to British audiences (beyond the Edinburgh and London Festivals attenders).

3. Subsidy for prints and for the 'strategic' introduction of new (or forgotten) work have become the cornerstones of the assistance policy. The essential mechanism is a 'rotating' budget which enables advances to be amortised by box-office revenue from BFI-sponsored cinemas. But helping to bring 'risky' films into distribution is pointless unless there is also some way of ensuring that they are actually shown. Often exhibitors have proved even more cautious than distributors and a number of earlier subsidised titles have remained relatively unseen. The second vital mechanism was the Regional Consortium, which now ensures that at least a proportion of films subsidised at the distribution stage are promptly shown by nearly thirty cinemas - even if only for one day at each - which yields a minimum 'renter's share' of some £300.
4. As this policy and its mechanisms have developed, the range of work assisted has grown considerably. For example, new or additional 35mm prints have been provided of: PIERROT LE FOU, and DEUX OU TROIS CHOSES QUE JE SAIS D'ELLE (Godard), L'ECLISSE (Antonioni), SUGARLAND EXPRESS (Spielberg), THX 1138 (Lucas), MACBETH (Polanski), ERASERHEAD (Lynch), LA COMMARE SECCA (Bertolucci), DEATH IN VENICE (Visconti) and recently, both MIRROR and STALKER (Tarkovsky). Among the major directors introduced - or in some cases re-introduced - to British distribution have been Max Ophuls, Pasolini, King Hu, Syberberg, Francesco Rosi, Marguerite Duras, Mark Rappaport and Chantal Akerman (all four of the Akerman features being shown at the NFT this month were acquired by The Other Cinema with the help of BFI advances). Important historical revivals have included L'AGE D'OR (Bunuel), BIRTH OF A NATION (in a special tinted 16mm version), Lang's M (in the restored version), ONE SIXTH OF THE EARTH and KINOPRAVDA (Vertov), SALVATORE GUILIANO (Rosi), STORY OF THE LAST CHRYSANTHEMUMS (Mizoguchi) and WITCHCRAFT THROUGH THE AGES (Christiansen). Assistance is not limited to what may be conventionally termed 'art cinema': deals have also been negotiated with major distributors to make available shelved works by established filmmakers - such as Huston's WALK WITH LOVE AND DEATH and Scorsese's MEAN STREETS - and groups of 'commercial' films which distributors are having difficulty in dating widely through normal commercial channels after their first run - such groups have included BAD TIMING, BLOOD RELATIVES, CHANT OF JIMMY BLACKSMITH, EAGLE'S WING, LA LUNA, THE HUMAN FACTOR, NORMA RAE, NOSFERATU THE VAMPYRE, THREE WOMEN, DAY FOR NIGHT, BLUE COLLAR, DAYS OF HEAVEN and A WEDDING.
5. As a matter of policy, assistance is conceived as a means of supporting normal commercial distribution, by simultaneously lessening the financial risk to the distributor and opening up new possibilities for the exhibitor. Experience has shown that the best results are achieved by co-operation between the BFI and an effective distributor; without the distributor's commitment there is a danger of merely going through the motions. But what if no distributor is willing to take even a subsidised risk? Increasingly, as cinema profitability declines, distributors are forced to be cautious, and the BFI is obliged to act as a distributor itself. In these cases, the assistance subsidy is 'offered' to the BFI Film and Video Library more or

less as it would be to an outside distributor; a 'deal' is struck, and the distribution pattern agreed between officers of the two sections. Recent deals of this type include THE HERD and TWO STAGE SISTERS, from Turkey and China respectively and both BFI Award winners; Sembene's CEDDO from Senegal; and an important early Ophuls title, LA SIGNORA DE TUTTI. In most of these cases the filmmakers or rights holders have made it clear that the status of the Institute was a key factor in their acceptance of very modest terms.

6. Despite the practice of assistance as outlined here, there are still vast areas of world cinema which remain almost wholly unknown in Britain, and many new films from major producing countries which are not quite important or unusual enough to qualify for special subsidy. We have tried to tackle this problem by developing the idea of touring 'packages', which can be assembled with the help of various co-ordinating bodies and imported en bloc to tour a number of regional venues. Our first such experiment was 'The Other Australian Cinema', a six-programme package which included a range of short and medium length independent films by directors who have since become established names. Another more ambitious venture was 'New Soviet Cinema', the first independently selected survey of Soviet cinema for ten years, which opened at the NFT last April before going on to tour over fifteen regional cinemas during the last twelve months. For this large season of ten features a special arrangement with the British Board of Film Censors was used to minimise certification costs (which would otherwise have been over £8000). Planned for the future are a tour by New York Super-8 filmmakers (in May of this year), a package of French independent features (many unseen even at British festivals), an African and another Australian package.
7. One other area of activity should be mentioned briefly. In the current downward spiral, short films are suffering even more than features. Many exhibitors are cutting costs by simply abandoning shorts, while the commercial industry has lowered standards to an unbelievable degree. The Programming Unit has recently started to acquire short films on a non-exclusive basis, paying a small advance for the use of a print over two years. The films are being supplied to BFI cinemas at low rates in an effort to re-establish the practice of showing shorts and, perhaps understandably, many makers of shorts have welcomed this practical approach to the endemic problem. A contract for ten Polish animated films has recently been signed and a Brazilian deal is pending; meanwhile a number of British independent titles have been acquired under this scheme.
8. What will the role of BFI distribution assistance be in the future? The signs are that there will be a steadily increasing proportion of (especially) foreign-language films unable to achieve commercial distribution in the UK. This will throw an even heavier burden of responsibility upon

the Institute to provide subsidy for a reasonable representation of world cinema. Three main strategies will be pursued to help meet the challenge:

- (a) The creation of a more effective BFI 'release network' to enable new films to achieve larger audiences and depend less on subsidy;
- (b) greater emphasis on short-term circulation of 'packages' as a viable alternative to long-term distribution for many types of film;
- (c) co-operation with television - especially Channel 4 - on the purchase and release of new titles, and on the 'remedial' representation of third and second world cinema in Britain.

Three further lines of development are likely to be:

- (d) The production of more contextual material in the form of short films - like the recent GODARD 1980, a 20-minute short commissioned to accompany the release of SAUVE QUI PEUT - videotapes, sound tapes for radio, trailers and other forms of promotional documentation.
- (e) The possibility of liaison with 16mm non-theatrical exhibitors, as represented by the BFFS, to create a 16mm co-ordination scheme similar to the Consortium. Apart from the obvious economies of scale, this could dramatically improve 16mm print quality.
- (f) Closer co-operation with British independent producers to devise more flexible distribution and exhibition patterns for their work. The Consortium is anxious to find ways of supporting British independent cinema, and has already had a considerable success with RADIO ON, but there is clearly a need for fresh and realistic thinking in this problematic area.

Distribution may be all but invisible to the public, but it plays a vital part in determining what we see, and what we don't see. Already we in Britain see too little from abroad and from the past; and so the need for responsible, cultural assistance in the distribution market can only grow. To some extent the capacity to respond depends upon central BFI budget provision for this work, but it will also depend increasingly on maintaining close and influential links with the commercial distribution sector and improving the revenue-earning capacity of 'specialised' distribution.