

DOES SUBSIDISED CINEMA HAVE A FUTURE?INTRODUCTION

On 12 August 1985, the Cannon Group, already owners of the Classics chain, announced a successful outcome to their bid for the Leeds-based Star chain of cinemas. For £4.4 million Cannon completed a remarkable sequence of events affecting British theatrical exhibition which had begun in 1984 with the announcement by American Multi Cinema (AMC) of a ten screen site in Milton Keynes.

The Cannon take-over splits the Rank/Thorn-EMI duopoly numerically in two and AMC's Milton Keynes complex has provided a prototype for similar developments in Bristol and Gateshead as well as the multi-ABCs of Thorn-EMI.

For thirty years the British Cinema Industry has been in terminal decline, caught in a stranglehold of cynical duopolistic control, government indifference and public rejection. For six months, it has, through a combination of external pressures and internal changes, set about a programme of renewal and rebuilding as unlikely as Derek Jarman winning a British Academy Award.

Suddenly, and who could have predicted it six months ago, theatrical exhibition is big business again. Or so it seems.

Against such a background, and this is the substance of this paper, what is the role of subsidised exhibition in Britain and what forms of investment will it require in the future if it is to retain a distinctive and progressive role?

SUBSIDISED EXHIBITION: THE CHANGING ROLE

The first Regional Film Theatres were established in 1965. Initially charged with extending the National Film Theatre's mission to bring the "best of World Cinema" to the regions they maintained an identifiable product profile until the mid-seventies. Most of the original RFTs were voluntary organisations, operating membership schemes and selling the idea of cinematic high culture by emphasising European films and serious auteurs.

By the mid-seventies a range of factors saw some of the RFTs move towards a second phase. Commercial cinema's steady decline had accelerated towards near collapse and in London the only signs of good faith in the theatrical economy of cinema came in the form of independent exhibitors and distributors. At this time, the key funders of subsidised regional exhibition - the BFI, and, to a lesser extent, the RAAs - engaged in a lengthy debate around the subject of cinema programming. Appointments were made in a number of 'key' locations of film programmers able to translate this debate into 'structured', 'thematic' and 'coherently contextualised' seasons of films with appropriate documentation.

The effect of this mid-seventies shift was not only to call into question the 'best of world cinema' approach to programming but also to gradually professionalise the exhibition sector.

The inexorable tightening of the arts funding belt from the late seventies onwards, the continuing vitality of the London independents and the reality of having to attract audiences as well as peer-group approval for programmes, has led to the emergence of a third phase: a complex and varied exhibition sector responding as much to local priorities, economic reality and their own initiative as to central policies and single arguments. In the early 1980s the commercial cinema continued its disastrous decline, compromised by weak management, poor investment and an inability to change. At the same time, the subsidised sector increased its audiences, its profile and its cultural productivity.

In 1985 there are over 30 subsidised venues, ranging from city centre film and media centres to small town film theatres. In several areas funded cinemas are the only source of theatrical exhibition, while in certain major cities film and media centres are the focal point not only for cinema but a whole range of complementary activities as well. Most of the writing and debate about subsidised exhibition over the last ten years has centred on programming. The complexity and potential of the present situation must set programming as one priority in a much longer list.

Against a background of high unemployment, increasing non-work hours and the rapid privatisation of audio-visual culture through video and television, subsidised cinema must aim to provide access to ideas and choices in media exhibition which go beyond the constraints of commercial exhibition whilst maintaining and developing potential audiences and users.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

i. Programming

There is no single, prescriptive programming model for subsidised exhibition that will work in all circumstances. The overriding aim is to provide as wide a range of films as possible from a wide variety of production contexts, to introduce material overlooked by the major distributors and to make public a commitment to the vitality and importance of theatrical exhibition.

During the period of the 'structured programme' debates, ingenious and, in many cases, perfectly valid contexts were found for new material, but the rigidity of the programming model that evolved inhibited the size of audience for individual films and their revenue potential.

The present, more flexible, forms of programming which combine first runs of new releases with repertory programmes and retrospectives give opportunities for the strategic placing of obvious 'hits' with less obvious material. Exploiting revenue potential and acceding to audience demand whilst maintaining a commitment to expanding the range of cinema available theatrically.

Programming is an activity concerned with building as well as maintaining audiences. The feature film is a 'flagship' around which to build other activities and forms of address. Over the last ten years the following forms of exhibition-based activities have developed in several cinemas and centres.

ii Television and Video Screenings

An apparently 'natural' extension of film exhibition without a natural form of screening or reliable audience. At present most screening of television takes place in an overtly educational context. "Non-smoking", "non-drinking" cinema auditoria designed for big screen exhibition of the highest quality are not the most sympathetic context for small-screen or low-quality big screen video screening. Most subsidised cinemas have a commitment to showing television and video, but most rarely, if ever, show it. Research is needed into effective methods of screening television and video material.

iii Educational Work

One of the most rapidly growing areas of work around exhibition. Most of the work that takes place - courses, seminars, debates, training - challenges the academic orthodoxies of the formal education sectors and refuses the 'right' lines of set theoretical texts. Many educational ventures are collaborative, undertaken with other educational bodies, workshops, social and community services, politically active groups and so on.

The range of educational activities includes schools' screenings and teachers' meetings, day schools and weekend events, thematic and other forms of programming strategy, seasons linked to exhibitions and practical training.

iv Libraries and Publication

Several venues include book, periodical, slide, tape and video library facilities and small-scale publication.

v Special Events

The high visibility of many exhibition venues gives an ideal opportunity to promote festivals, personality speakers, major conferences and the like. It is a visibility that funding agencies and commercial backers should be encouraged to support as they regularly introduce new audiences to venues and enhance its public profile.

vi Gallery and Informal Exhibitions

Film and media centres usually incorporate gallery spaces. These encourage a throughput of people as well as offering considerable programming opportunities. An important area of growth.

vii Shops and Retailing

Specialist book, video and poster shops are beginning to appear in cinema-based venues. Modern galleries, theatres and arts centres have long featured this form of retailing to both cultural and commercial advantage.

viii Catering

The neglect in providing imaginative and inviting catering facilities by both the circuit and independent cinema trade is quite extraordinary. Gradually, subsidised exhibitors are

viii Catering (Cont/d)

realising that a cinema of social interaction necessitates adequate catering provision. The next step will be to design bars and restaurants as if they have a relationship to the present decade.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

The growth of the subsidised exhibition sector has been a haphazard one, an unplanned economy of enthusiasm gradually translated into a professional area of expertise and experience. This growth has been neither consistent nor consistently good. Diehard practices exist in this sector as with any other, with frequent refusals to go beyond the 'safe' and an unwillingness to accept the changing economic and cultural climate that affects all forms of independent exhibition.

Where planning has existed, it has concerned itself with programming or high profile building development. What is now needed is a strategy to rapidly professionalise the existing elements in the sector, a planned response to new initiatives and an investment programme which brings in funding and business partners to maximise present and potential resources. Development priorities, in no particular order, are listed below.

a. Marketing

A great inconsistency exists in the style and presentation of theatrical exhibition's image. Very few programmers have been trained in marketing techniques with the result that product often outstrips presentation and corporate identity suffers from inadequate design.

Given the highly sophisticated visual environment that most sections of the population expect to find it is unlikely that subsidised cinemas can continue to promote the theatrical experience according to twenty year old ground rules and expect a healthy future. What has to be sold is the pleasure, sociability and challenge of cinema.

Marketing and publicity training programmes and posts are a high priority and an important focus for new investment.

b. Staffing

Voluntary staffing is being slowly phased out and this should continue. A much greater problem is in the inconsistent numbers and levels of staffing in different venues. An urgent review of staffing is required.

The review should incorporate a comparability study and make recommendations regarding remuneration and responsibility. Management structures should be examined and training opportunities developed, paying particular attention to administration, marketing, fundraising, public relations and technical provision as well as programming functions.

c. Administration

Accounting and administrative procedures have grown as haphazardly as marketing and staffing. With turnover figures in the tens and, in some cases, the hundreds of thousands proper financial and

c. Administration (Cont/d)

administrative management is essential. Here again, training is virtually non-existent.

d. Technical Installation

Given the level of financial investment by statutory funding bodies and local authorities in film and media venues over the last four years, the level of technical expertise and back-up is extremely low. There is no more effective means of creating public disaffection than in technical breakdown and last minute cancellation. A review of technical installation and an investment in upgrading and expansion is long overdue.

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

As part of the BFI's public declaration of policy and development in 'the BFI in the Eighties' the Distribution Division unveiled a Five Year Plan for exhibition based on an annual upgrading to 'NFT/Media Centre status' of venues in 'key sites'. In addition the plan argued for provision to be made for strategic funding of culturally-sympathetic commercial cinemas in key locations. Given the proposed expansion of the commercial sector and the condition of those thirty-plus venues currently supported by BFI funds, this plan is unlikely to be followed in the coming five years.

It is clear that the renewed activity of the commercial cinema combined with the continuing vitality of the subsidised sector requires a development plan which is sensitive to the potential of all scales of operation.

Following a commissioned assessment, each of the presently funded cinemas should be required to submit development proposals with timetables for implementation. On the basis of these submissions, two to three sites should be developed each year, with agreed growth targets in the areas of audiences, public image, expanded programme, financial growth and so forth. Where appropriate entirely new sites should form part of these proposals, but must not be the only focus of attention.

What is particularly important is the extent to which proposals open up opportunities for business and funding partnership given the absence of adequate government subvention.

SUMMARY

Britain is the only country in Europe where the case for government subsidy of cinema exhibition is not accepted. As a result the commercial chains have been able to monopolise product and distribution to disastrous effect. Throughout the period of deepest decline for the circuits, subsidised exhibition has not only improved its box office performance but also its inventiveness and productivity. This brief paper has touched on some of the range of activities promoted in the subsidised sector over the last ten years and these have clearly had effect on enlivening theatrical exhibition generally.

In the face of a welcome revival of interest in commercial theatrical exhibition there will be a gradual redefinition of the role of the subsidised sector. That redefinition must take into account the cultural as well as commercial success of exhibition work and seek a role for the future which challenges and revitalises all form of exhibition.

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