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Reel Opportunity: towards a strategic partnership between the film archive and exhibition sectors

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Reel opportunity:
Towards a strategic partnership between the film archive and exhibition sectors

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ABSTRACT

The film archive and exhibition sectors in the UK do not currently work in a joined-up way, with archives focusing their outreach programmes on other platforms and exhibitors focusing on showing new films. Yet screening archive film in cinemas presents a huge opportunity – both for film archives to raise the profile of their work and for exhibitors to present an exciting programme which broadens and deepens audience engagement. This paper outlines the practical and attitudinal barriers to screening archive film, as well as the opportunities it presents, as identified by professionals working in the two sectors and in strategic organisations. The recent transition of leadership of the UK film sector to the BFI offers an opportunity to reassess the disconnect and reconcile the two sectors so they work together for mutual benefit. The paper concludes with suggestions for a number of practical strategies to foster collaboration between film archives and film exhibitors – cross-sector skills sharing, coordinated programming and dissemination of impact – to ensure that archive film is more regularly seen and valued by the UK public.

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SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

“Archive film” can mean different things to different people. The BFI National Archive focuses on “the art of film” and the regional film archives’ collections mainly comprise social history through non-fiction film. Contemporary archive film programming could be delineated into three major (although not comprehensive) strands: restorations of major films, often fiction; silent films, often fiction, set to live music; screenings of non-fiction “social history” film, often local. This project does not focus on one kind of archive film over another, firstly because there are overlaps in the issues they face, and secondly because the recent Screen Heritage Strategy sought to unite the national and regional archives and thus different kinds of archive film.

The film archive sector in the UK is comprised of a disparate range of public sector archives, museums, libraries, colleges, community groups and private collections. The focus of my research was the public sector national and regional archives.

I believe independent cinemas should be a priority for archive film programming. I do, however, also use the more generic term “film exhibitors” so as not to ignore the role and valuable contribution of festivals, pop-ups and non-theatrical venues.

INTRODUCTION

> The word 'archive' rings with a deathly sound in the world of cinema, which is so young and vital and dynamic, eager for the future and impatient for the past. [1]
>
> – Ernest Lindgren, first curator of the National Film Library (now BFI National Archive), 1948

> Who's going to miss archives when they're not around anymore? [2]
>
> – Rick Prelinger, pro-access archivist, 2011

In 1935, the newly formed British Film Institute established the National Film Library, the first dedicated film archive in the UK. Despite the connotations of public access implied by the word 'library', the facility's mission was to act more as a protected 'repository for films of permanent value'. Indeed, it was later renamed 'archive' to more accurately reflect this role, in spite of the reservations of the curator Ernest Lindgren himself, as expressed above, of how the label would be received by film exhibitors. It was partly, in fact, the exhibitors from whom the archive was aiming to distance itself. The purpose of the archive was to *save* films from being destroyed by distributors who saw no value in them beyond their life on the cinema circuit, and, as Penelope Houston explains, the name change was undertaken to reassure the film industry that the archive could be trusted not to commercially exploit the films in its care through further screenings.[3] The process of projecting films can itself also cause physical damage – scratches, splices, wear and tear – to the print. The archive movement was established to accord films heritage status as cultural artefacts, to stage an intervention to avert the crisis of destruction and overuse, and to safeguard them for posterity.

With Lindgren at the helm, the approach of the British archive movement became particularly preservation-focused. He took his role as custodian and carer of the collection very seriously, and the viewing copy collection was not a priority. In sharp contrast, his peer and rival across the channel, Henri Langlois, has gone down in history as the maverick archivist figure who prioritised screenings over storage, inspiring the Nouvelle Vague generation of *cinéphiles* and *cinéastes* in the process, but the consequences of whose slapdash approach came to the fore in 1959 when a fire ravaged his uncatalogued collection. Lindgren, meanwhile, secured himself the opposite reputation as a zealous gatekeeper, guarding the collection carefully, and coming to regard the archive as 'a fortress under siege' from rogue forces trying to wrestle the collection away from his protection and onto the screen.[4] Critics regarded the archive at the time as 'a kind of long-stay prison for films, a place into whose recesses they disappeared, never to be seen again'.[5] Even the programmers of the BFI's own cinema, the National Film Theatre – which was only established 16 years after the archive – reportedly experienced difficulty screening films from the collection, claiming that it was easier to book films from

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[1] Erne st Lindgren, 'The importance of film archives', Penguin Film Review 5, 1948, pp.47-52, quoted in Penelope Houston, *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives* (London: BFI Publishing, 1994), p.2

[2] Rick Prelinger interview

[3] Houston, p.2

[4] Houston, p.44

[5] Houston, p.45

Langlois instead.[6] In the process of according film heritage status, it was as if cinema had inadvertently become the enemy.

Contemporary archival discourse has changed a lot since Lindgren's day. The archivists' job is no longer to systematically work their way through the collection, copying and preserving every item; rather it is to restore material according to strategic priorities for public viewing. The BFI National Archive's current Head Curator, Robin Baker, confirms,

> You have to take preservation and access as equal partners, you have to work on both of them simultaneously. Our preservation programme in the past was not driven by public need or requirements. It has changed completely in terms of access.[7]

This shift in approach is echoed by the Directors of both the Yorkshire Film Archive and Media Archive for Central England (MACE), two members of the Regional Film Archive network which emerged from the later decentralised restructuring of the sector:

> I don't see any point in doing any of the work that we do unless we maximize the accessibility of the collections, now and in the future. It's the opposite of what I was taught when I first started at the BFI in the late 1970s, when it was all about preservation for posterity, and no one ever talked about when posterity might start.[8]

> The whole ethos at the Yorkshire Film Archive is that these films were not made so that we can put them in a vault. The films were made so that people can watch them.[9]

Access is now firmly on the agenda, and titles in the collection can be seen on a variety of platforms – on television, on DVD, at community screenings, in dedicated BFI Mediatheques, and on YouTube.

However, I would suggest that there remains a huge gulf between the archives and their original antagonists – the cinemas. The tension between the sectors that Lindgren himself was all too aware of, and the impression cinemas had of archives as a mausoleum for films, is echoed today by the sentiments I regularly hear from many exhibitors through my work at the Independent Cinema Office. For some, archives are considered 'mysterious' storage facilities, 'a place where films go to die'. From their perspective, accessing films is still fraught with difficulty, and some believe archives have a 'blinkered mentality' which favours safeguarding the collection over getting the films seen. For their part, archives explain that the access opportunities they can offer are severely restricted by a multitude of legal, technical and financial barriers; moreover, they highlight the sheer lack of demand from cinemas for booking their films, leading them to focus their priorities on platforms they consider to be more commercially viable.

Screening films is the whole *raison d'être* of the film exhibition sector, the big screen and communal space offering an immersive experience and sense of occasion which cannot be replicated by small screen platforms. With cinemas rapidly making the transition to digital projection, and archives

[6] Houston, p.44

[7] Robin Baker interview

[8] James Patterson interview

[9] Sue Howard interview

struggling to find the investment to digitise their vast celluloid collection, the gulf between the two sectors is set to widen further. Very little archive film is currently seen by the public – according to the recently published Film Policy Review, only 1,500 British feature films held in the BFI National Archive are currently commercially available for the public to see out of 60,000 fiction films and 120,000 non-fiction titles.[10] While the archives were originally established in order to avert the crisis of over-screened films, the pendulum has arguably swung too far in the other direction. In distancing the films from cinemas, a new crisis has emerged in which the large majority of the collection is on course to realise Lindgren's critics' concerns that, once in the vaults, in the vaults it would remain, never to be seen again.

This paper will set out the barriers to collaboration – practical and attitudinal, real and perceived – between film archives and film exhibitors which have evolved out of this disconnection between the sectors, as reported by professionals working on both sides. Having brought together the views from the two camps, I want to propose a shift in approach which recognises the opportunity presented by the two sectors regarding each other as natural allies, strategic partners in accomplishing their respective – and joint – missions. With the recent transition of leadership of the UK film sector to the BFI, itself the keeper of the national film collection, we have reached a critical moment of opportunity to reconcile the archive sector with the rest of the film industry. I will suggest practical, low cost strategies to begin bridging the divide and to facilitate mutually beneficial collaborative working in the long term to ensure that film heritage is more regularly seen – and valued – by the UK public.

(image courtesy of Yorkshire Film Archive)

[10] UK Film Policy Review Panel, commissioned by Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *A Future for British Film: It Begins With the Audience*, January 2012

THE PROBLEM

First, let us examine the disconnect between archives and exhibitors.

Independent film exhibitors are predominantly focused on new work, and show very little cultural heritage, particularly compared with the rest of the arts sector. 29% of exhibitors responding to the ICO's National Film Exhibitor Survey had shown zero archive films in the last year, 30% had shown one or two, and only 16% make it a regular part of their programme with 20 or more screenings.[11] When they are shown, archive screenings tend to be sporadic rather than an established part of the programme, and often relegated to a weekday afternoon slot. Even when the UK Film Council launched its £3 million Digital Film Archive Fund in 2008 to support public access programmes for screen heritage, only £124,000 of that funding went to cinemas or venues.[12] Noteworthy DFAF screening projects outside of traditional exhibition include a show of films about London in Trafalgar Square and Yorkshire Film Archive's *Stadium Legends* screenings at sports arenas. While it is undeniable that these projects will have had a huge impact by reaching large numbers of new audiences, it seems a missed opportunity that the existing circuit of venues dedicated to showing specialised film did not become more involved.

Working with cinemas is not a priority for archives either. With little demand from cinemas, the Regional Film Archives focus most of their screenings on the alternative non-theatrical network of village halls and community centres. James Patterson, Director of MACE, reports that while they occasionally work with cinemas, it is not a large part of their work. His colleague Phil Leach explains, 'We can't get funding to do anything considered to be as old fashioned as a cinema screening'.[13] Archives identify the biggest opportunity for themselves online, a platform through which they believe they can have the biggest impact and through which they are more likely to be able to access funding.

The Screen Heritage UK strategy (SHUK) did not accord much focus to exhibition either. Starting in 2007, this was a £22.5 million investment programme into national and regional film archives, funded by HM Treasury and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, led by the BFI. Demonstrating public value through access played a vital role in the proposal. The original recommendation from the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee which initiated SHUK clearly spelled out that 'an over-arching national strategy promoting both good curatorship and increasing accessibility should be vigorously pursued'.[14] The vision of the strategy itself was that,

[11] The survey was conducted in November 2011, with responses to the section on archive film programming from 63 professionals from independent cinemas, film festivals, cross arts venues and film societies across the UK working in roles such as management, programming and marketing

[12] BOP Consulting / Olsberg SPI*, Monitoring and Evaluation of the Digital Film Archive Fund: Final Report*, September 2011, p.14

[13] Phil Leach interview

[14] The British Film Industry House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2002–03, 9 September 2003

> The public are entitled to access, learn about and enjoy their rich screen heritage wherever they live and wherever the materials are held.[15]

Yet it was argued that before the archives could start thinking about access, they needed to focus on preserving the material itself and identifying what was in the collections. Ruth Kelly, BFI Head of Collections, explains the rationale:[16]

> Of course you can't demonstrate public value if you're struggling and there's not enough money to make anything accessible – so how do you break that circle? The majority of [the government investment] went into conservation rather than access – we ended up mainly doing the 'back end' stuff rather than the 'front end' stuff. By investing in these back-of-house things it ultimately facilitates public access, and that's really what we were trying to achieve.[17]

The majority of the funding was spent on the BFI's Master Film Store, a state-of-the-art deep storage facility (known affectionately by some interviewees as 'the Big Fridge') essential to keep film in the correct conditions to prevent deterioration. User-friendly cataloguing was also a big focus – the BFI is building a new Collections Information Database (CID), crucial for modernising the research process by enabling the public to search the entire collection online rather than by physically rummaging through index cards. Investment was also allocated to Search Your Film Archive, a combined online catalogue which allows the public to search across 11 national and regional public sector film archives' collections and watch clips of some of the films.[18] Some of the funding was intended to be spent on digitising films and, according to Sally Joynson, CEO of Screen Yorkshire who ran the Revitalising the Regions strand of the programme, there were plans early on to put together programmes for the big screen. However, during the financial crisis the government cut the SHUK budget by £2.5 million, and it was the digitisation and access strand that suffered. 'I just don't think [the programmes] were a priority for the project after that.'[19] Initiating and securing funding for the Screen Heritage Strategy was a huge achievement for the film archive sector, but a significant impact on public access through cinema screenings is yet to be felt. Sue Howard from Yorkshire Film Archive confirms this, 'New access opportunities may be part of the legacy, but they certainly weren't part of the project itself.'[20]

[15] Oliver Viccars-Harris, *Screen Heritage UK Programme Overview*, BFI, February 2009, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/about/policy/pdf/shuk_programme_overview_09.pdf>

[16] Ruth Kelly interview

[17] Ruth Kelly interview

[18] Each archive has own database but SYFA mapped them to common standard so they could be aggregated and searchable simultaneously across Regional Film Archives and the BFI National Archive

[19] Sally Joynson interview

[20] Sue Howard interview

THE BARRIERS TO SCREENING ARCHIVE FILM

What do exhibitors and archives think the barriers are to them working together to get film heritage onto the big screen? While the interviewees were well aware of the factors restricting their own position, they were often surprised and interested in those mentioned on the other side of the equation. In this section I will outline the barriers as reported by each side, many of which are interrelated and mutually dependent.

BARRIERS: THE EXHIBITORS' PERSPECTIVE

1. Little audience interest

58% of independent exhibitors responding to the ICO's National Film Exhibitor Survey in November 2011 ticked 'lack of audience interest' as a barrier to screening archive film, making this the most common factor cited. Later I will outline evidence to suggest the contrary is true, but as a perception it is understandable. Contemporary Hollywood cinema overwhelmingly dominates at the box office, with celebrity casts and large marketing budgets helping to raise public awareness. With around 12 new films being released every week competing for screen space, choosing to screen an old film that no one has heard of is a risky strategy for a venue. Commercial pressures and lack of subsidy available to encourage programming risks means cinemas are more inclined to 'play it safe' most of the time with films that are easier to promote and have more obvious box office potential.

2. Exhibitors do not understand archives

The world of film archives is a mystery to many exhibitors. For practical reasons the majority of archival work must take place hidden from the public eye, often in bunkers and vaults in remote locations. In 2008 I arranged a tour of the East Anglian Film Archive for a group of 30 cinema programmers attending a training course. For the overwhelming majority of them, it was the first time they had ever stepped inside an archive and offered a valuable insight into what was previously an enigma – an opportunity that most exhibitors never get. Tom Vincent, Film Programme Manager at the National Media Museum in Bradford, concurs:

> I don't think [archives] are well understood, even in the exhibition and distribution sectors, both of which naturally have much more of a sales/new films focus. Perhaps more could be done by archivists to explain what they are doing, and why.[21]

As a result of this disconnection, Jay Arnold, Head of Film Culture at Creative England, explains, 'Archive film is not on exhibitors' agenda, it's not something they're chasing to be part of'.[22] Sue Porter, a cinema programmer who often screens archive film, has encountered resistance from some colleagues at venues she has worked with despite sell-out shows. 'It's a programming problem that needs to be overcome,' she says – many exhibitors have little understanding of archive film, have little experience of its potential with audiences, and perhaps even 'fear' it.[23]

[21] Tom Vincent interview

[22] Jay Arnold interview

[23] Sue Porter interview

3. Archive film programming is resource intensive

Programming new release films is a relatively straightforward process, with information about the films made available at industry screenings and festivals, through reviews and recommendations, and bookings made through staff at distribution companies who are dedicated to the task of selling the films. Some archive films are made available to book in a similar way – BFI Distribution reissues celebrated films such as *Ordet,* and the ICO occasionally tours individual titles such as *La Grande Illusion* and packages of pre-programmed films such as *Bombs at Teatime*. If a programmer wants to show something that has not been prepared for rerelease, however, it is a different story.

Researching films, clearing the rights to screen them, and putting together a programme is intensely time-consuming. The BFI National Archive holds 60,000 fiction titles and 120,000 non-fiction films. With the regional film archives the picture is even more complicated – MACE Director James Patterson pointed out that unlike the BFI they do not have 'titles', rather a less well-defined collection of around 70,000 'pieces of film', much of it short, soundless clips made as television news inserts or amateur movies. With such a huge amount of material, it is difficult to know where to begin and, as the overwhelming majority of the films will be unfamiliar to programmers, it takes a lot of work to sift through it to create the perfect programme. Ian Francis, Director of 7 Inch Cinema and Flatpack Festival in Birmingham, explains,

> Archive projects can be endless. You can keep delving forever and be led down different paths.[24]

Moreover, many exhibitors complain that finding out what is available for booking in the first place is a struggle. While new release titles are actively promoted by the distributor, archives' catalogues of holdings are perceived by exhibitors to be 'hidden away', and some exhibitors say that their requests for information or bookings go ignored. 59% of those surveyed requested a list of useful contacts at film archives – basic yet essential information which they do not think they already have access to. 49% said that the research time involved was a barrier to programming archive film and 42% had experienced difficulty in clearing rights or perceived this as a barrier. Interviewees who did have experience programming archive film concurred – while Ian Francis found great satisfaction from researching 7 Inch Cinema's *Landmarks* project of Philip Donnellan documentaries, he admits, 'It was a massive amount of work, much more than we bargained for'.[25] Many independent exhibitors simply cannot afford the time involved, whether they are paying their staff or relying on the good will of volunteers:

> I have been trying for two months to organise screenings from 35mm prints of ten Paul Verhoeven films… It has taken an amount of time and effort that seems excessive and I've still only tracked down three out of ten of the films.[26]

> We are a voluntary organisation. Committee members don't have the time or energy to show films additional to our main programme. We'd love to do it if we could![27]

[24] Ian Francis interview

[25] Ian Francis interview

[26] Tom Vincent interview

[27] anonymous respondent to the ICO National Film Exhibitor Survey

4. Lack of specialist skills

As programming archive film is no simple task, it requires specialist knowledge and skills in research, rights clearance, programming, marketing and audience development. Training for film exhibitors is currently severely underfunded in the UK, with only £40,000 available in 2012/13 for film exhibition-specific professional development from the sector skills council, and very few cinemas having a dedicated training budget to make their own investment into staff development. Exhibitor training courses therefore currently prioritise more generic programming, audience development and fundraising skills, with not enough investment available to deliver cross-sector training which would bridge the divide between archives and exhibitors. The demand for such training does exist though - 52% of exhibitors surveyed asked for advice on putting together a programme and promoting it to audiences; 43% requested information on the practicalities of sourcing archive film and clearing rights.

5. Exhibitors do not feel involved

Some exhibitors complained of not feeling involved in archival decisions about what films to restore and release. Jay Arnold hypothesised that, since archives have their own curators, they may be reluctant to work with or seek advice from cinema programmers. One programmer said, 'They never ask us what we're interested in'. To him it felt like a one-way relationship in which he would be pressurised to book a film for a week, but that the archive was not interested in listening to his expertise on how the film would play to an audience. He got the impression that the archive was not concerned with box office returns at all, a consideration which is at the forefront of programmers' minds. In contrast, he was more inclined to book archive films from international archive film distributor Europe's Finest, as he felt involved, listened to and ultimately had a 'good relationship' with them.

BARRIERS: THE ARCHIVES' PERSPECTIVE

1. Shortage of films in a screenable condition

Archive collections may be vast, but the viewing copy collection is a smaller sub-set as the majority of film materials are not in a suitable condition to be screened. The films submitted to archives have often already done their rounds of the cinema circuit and often arrive worn and torn. Moreover, over time being kept in the archive, celluloid will decompose, and can be reduced to powder if left in sub-standard conditions. Even if a film is in a pristine state, it may not be loaned out for screening as standard archival policy dictates that only duplicate copies be loaned out to avoid the risk of the originals becoming damaged or lost, which would prove costly both in financial and cultural terms.

2. Rights restrictions

Perhaps the biggest restriction to public access cited by most film archives is intellectual property. Archives do not usually own the rights to screen the films in their collection – they are merely the custodians of the physical material and are restricted in what they can do with the films, which could be withdrawn by the rights holder at any time. This is a particular issue for the BFI, who owns less than 1% of the material it holds.[28] The licence to screen the film, therefore, must be cleared elsewhere.

[28] http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmbis/writev/1498/m13.htm; Yorkshire Film Archive, on the other hand, perceived intellectual property to be less of a barrier as much of their collection is amateur footage and they clear the rights with the donor whenever films come in to them

Identifying, locating and securing clearance with the rights holder can be a long-winded and complicated process. Licences are often passed on between film companies acquiring each other's catalogues or between descendants of the filmmaker. In some cases the rights holder cannot be identified at all. As well as the film itself, it may feature music or images which are also copyrighted and need to be cleared separately.

The recent Hargreaves Report, commissioned by the government to make recommendations on how to update copyright laws in the internet age, made progress towards opening up access by recommending that 'orphan' works whose rights holders are unknown could be made legally available. Other issues have not yet been resolved – for example, it is not permitted to change the format of a film that one does not own the rights to, so the regular archival practice of copying a film onto a different medium is technically illegal. As lead agency for film in the UK, the BFI is now in a stronger position to influence the government on legislation revision, which could potentially expand public access to film archives in the future.

3. Format divide

A large – and rapidly expanding – division between the archive and exhibition sectors is related to film formats and the technology required to show them. The vast majority of moving image material held in archives is on celluloid. It may come in a range of gauges, the most common being 35mm. Archives will want to ensure that the cinemas screening their material have the correct equipment and staff expertise to handle the fragile film prints. For example, to avoid the damage which may result from splicing different reels of a film together, they will require cinemas to use a twin projector system. Most cinemas, however, replaced this equipment with the more compact and convenient long play tower unit in the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, many cinemas do not have a 35mm projector *at all* anymore, nor a projectionist trained to use one. Since the inception of the UK Film Council's Digital Screen Network in 2005, film exhibition in the UK has been rapidly converting to digital projection. It is estimated that by 2013 all cinemas will be digital, with only a handful of specialist venues retaining their 35mm projectors.

4. High cost of digitisation

With celluloid heading towards obsolescence, archives are under pressure to digitise their material or risk increased marginalisation. While digital technology is often cited as a facilitator to access – including by eradicating the problem of damage through over-screening – it could be argued that, ironically, digital projection constitutes a barrier if it prevents analogue content from being seen. Ruth Kelly articulates the urgency for archives to digitise their material:

> The implications of digital have just really hit home as of this year. The phrase that's being used in the film industry is, 'Unless something is digital, effectively it doesn't exist'. Archives are going to have to catch up with that.[29]

For small screenings in non-theatrical venues, a DVD may suffice, and many venues are happy playing BluRay. For big releases on the big screen however, digitisation is expensive. Restoring an old

[29] Ruth Kelly interview

film to a suitable condition, plus creating the digital transfer and producing a Digital Cinema Package (DCP) hard drive, can cost upwards of £60,000. Robin Baker explains,

> We might have endless negatives or master materials from which we could create viewing copies, but we have no money to actually do it. With large swathes of the collection, we're preserving them very nicely, but we're not making them accessible because of the investment required to get us to a state when we can do that.[30]

5. Limited bookings from cinemas

The high costs associated with digitisation mean archives require a critical mass of bookings in order to make the work commercially viable. Yet they report little interest from cinemas. Robin Baker revealed that the BFI sometimes struggles to secure many bookings from cinemas:

> You are torn between the desire to make things available and thinking, 'How can we recoup?' How do you justify making that huge investment of subsidy where it could almost be the case of subsidising by £1,000 or more per screening, which feels like it's not economically viable? That's the tough one.[31]

Yorkshire Film Archive and MACE also said they receive few requests from cinemas wanting to work with them. Instead, they respond to the demand where it exists, which is mainly from village halls and community centres in rural locations, where they will screen a bespoke package of short films of local interest. Responding on an individual basis to the requests they do get, however, is not financially sustainable either. Phil Leach from MACE explained that putting together a programme from scratch can take up to five days' work – researching and curating the material, editing it together, adding caption titles for footage when needed, writing programme notes, introducing the screening at the venue. In return they can only expect to receive £100 or 30% of the box office from a cinema screening, or as little as £25 for a DVD hire from a village hall. 'Screenings can't work as a commercial venture,' he maintained.[32]

6. Shortage of funding

Film archives in the UK receive very little funding compared to other countries and to other sectors. The BFI as a whole receives £14.5 million grant in aid and the BFI National Archive's core budget is £6 million, a fraction of the £96.3 million that the British Library received in 2012/13.[33] In the US, the Library of Congress Audiovisual Conservation Centre has an abundance of resources funded almost entirely by Congress, and is churning out high definition transfers at top speed – the archive's Head of Moving Image, Mike Mashon, refers to the facility as a 'digitisation factory'.[34] In France too the government is ploughing public money into making their film heritage available to the public. Heather Stewart, Creative Director of the BFI, warns,

> If we're not careful, British cinemas will be able to show French films all the time but they won't be able to show British archive film. We need imaginative public and private funding to support

[30] Robin Baker interview

[31] Robin Baker interview

[32] Phil Leach interview

[33] Heather Stewart interview; http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/foi/pubsch/pubscheme2/10.10.20%20Spending%20Review%20Letter.pdf

[34] Mike Mashon interview

> digitisation of significant British film collections, which is very much what the CNC has pursued in France.[35]

The film archive sector was recently successful in securing a £22.5 million investment from the Treasury and DCMS. As explained above, however, the digitisation strand of the programme suffered heavily from the government funding cuts.

Regional Film Archives are in an even more precarious state, as identified by the Film Policy Review, which stated that funding was 'a critical need if the long-term future of access to these collections is to be secured'.[36] According to James Patterson, the RFAs are 'wearing themselves out just to keep afloat'.[37] His archive receives only £40,000 of core funding to deliver in the Midlands:

> We exist here on the basis of one member of staff – that's not sufficient. You can't run an archive on £40,000.

Sue Howard from Yorkshire Film Archive affirms that a shortage of resources is the main barrier preventing further access to their collection, as they do not have the staff capacity to put on any more screenings:

> My dream scenario would be to be able to focus on getting the collections out to the people who want to see them rather than having to constantly focus on making sure the resources are here simply to keep caring for the collections. That's the dream scenario.[38]

While film archives are struggling to survive and maintain their collections, access projects are not their main priority.

7. Lack of audience-facing skills

While exhibitors lack the research and curatorial skills required to programme archive film, on the other side archivists may not have the audience-facing skills required to make a programme appealing to audiences. One programmer gave examples of times when archives had tried to dissuade them from showing films which the programmer believed would work with audiences – a belief which turned out to be true at the screenings:

> The trouble with archivists is that most of them aren't presenters. They don't understand the full potential of what they've got.

Without regular contact with audiences, it is not always obvious which films will work well in an exhibition context. As well as programming skills, archivists may not have the strongest audience development or marketing skills. Indeed, many archivists assert that they struggle to reach a younger, non-traditional and diverse audience. One interviewee admitted they do not even attempt to reach a younger audience for their screenings (even though they were planning to pitch to younger audiences online), highlighting their poster design as 'proof' of their lack of appeal to anyone under 60. Later I will

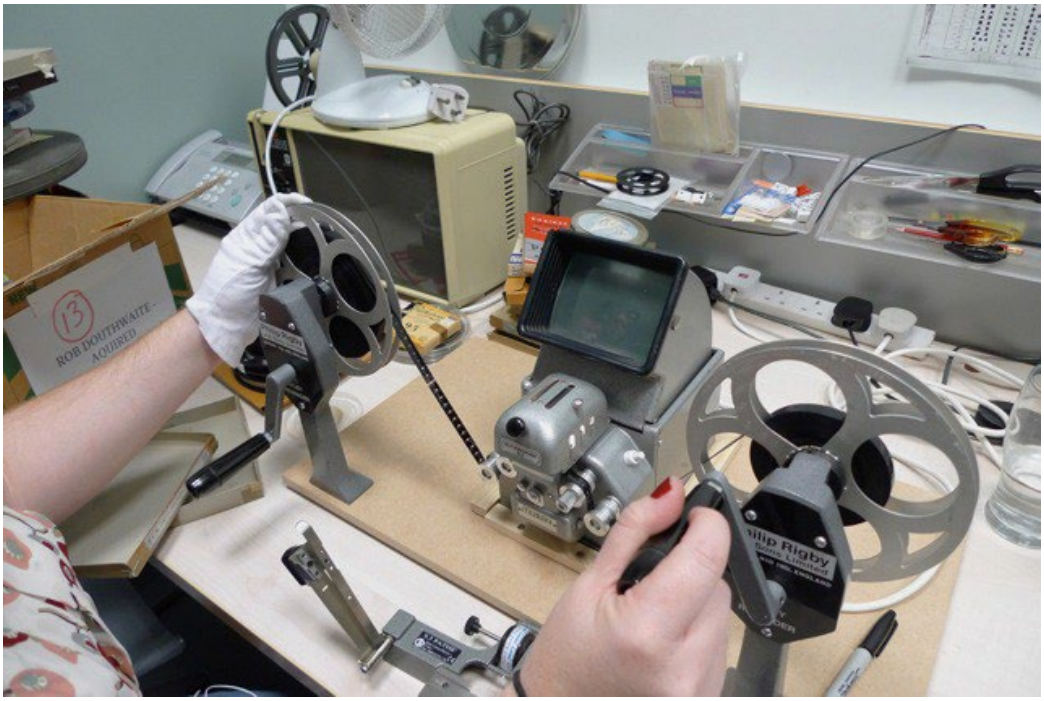
[35] Heather Stewart interview

[36] Film Policy Review Panel / DCMS, p.76

[37] James Patterson interview

[38] Sue Howard interview

outline evidence that, pitched in the right way, archive film can in fact be very popular with younger audiences.



Working on a film at Yorkshire Film Archive

THE OPPORTUNITY

OPPORTUNITY: WHY SHOULD EXHIBITORS WORK WITH ARCHIVES?

Why should cinemas work with archives? When there are around twelve new films being released every week, featuring the latest celebrities or cutting edge visual effects, why should cinemas bother screening the old ones?

1) Audience interest

Despite reservations of many film exhibitors that audiences are not interested in archive film, there is much evidence that demonstrates the contrary. Recent years have seen a burgeoning public interest in genealogy, with programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* on primetime television, and BFI collaborations with the BBC to show social history films such as *Mitchell and Kenyon, The Open Road* and *The Home Movie Roadshow* reaching millions of enthusiastic viewers. The popularity of *The Artist,* a contemporary silent movie set in 1920s Hollywood, presents a golden opportunity for archive fiction film too to capitalise on nostalgia for cinema's past and audience curiosity for silent movies.

Indeed, every exhibitor I spoke to who has shown archive film attested to its popularity and how good it was for the box office. They talked with excitement of sold out shows even at daytime screenings, eager audiences they did not want to turn away being crammed into the aisles. Flatpack Festival in Birmingham always finds that archive screenings are one of the most popular parts of their consistently exciting programme. Yorkshire Film Archive spoke of 70% of a whole village turning out for their rural touring programmes and not being able to keep up with the demand. The Little Theatre Cinema in Bath

repeated its programme of local archive films eight times, grossing over £6,000, after it turned out to be one of their 'most lucrative operations ever'.[39] Sally Joynson affirms,

> There is absolutely no question about audience appreciation and appetite for archive film. Instead of seeing it as some dry and dusty resource that you only watch in specialised conditions in a darkened room, actually putting it out in places and in front of people, it captures people's imagination.[40]

As programmer Sue Porter declares, 'I don't think any cinema manager or programmer these days can afford *not* to do it.'[41] Presented and marketed in the right way, with a commitment to integrate it into the regular programme, archive film can build audiences, loyalty and ultimately income, to become a financially sustainable programming strategy for venues – and thus a worthy investment.

2) Reaching new and young audiences

Showing something unusual can bring new audiences into a venue too – people of different ages and from different backgrounds who may not usually attend arthouse cinemas but are attracted by the historical angle or the 'event' factor – and who, once initiated, may return to the venue again and again.

The screening of *King Coal* at the National Media Museum, for example, a compilation of documentaries about Britain's mining industry from 1901 to the 1980s, brought many people into the Bradford museum for the first time.[42] 7 Inch Cinema brought a diverse crowd to their *Landmarks* screenings of Philip Donnellan documentaries from the 1950s and 1960s, relatives and neighbours of people featured in the films about working class communities and the Windrush generation of Birmingham, who found out about the screenings through outreach events in the local market and posters pinned up in pubs and launderettes. Half of the audience at Showroom Cinema's screening of *Before Midnight* was young Indian women interested in learning about their culture.[43] Jay Arnold explains the appeal of social history films:

> It gets to people who may not normally engage with specialised film. It's not perceived as anything specialised or difficult – it's their history, community history, on screen… 'Come and see how your street looked 30 years ago' – it's a very effective way of engaging people with your cinema.[44]

The quirky, unusual and anachronistic angle of archive film can be extremely appealing to younger audiences, not only the 65-year-old railway enthusiasts often cited as the classic audience member. There is a huge potential audience of fans of vintage styles, who attend vintage-themed events and love watching the past come to life in the moving image. Last week I was sitting in a pub full of people in their 20s to 40s, a screen above the bar showing short films from the Central Office of Information

[39] Martin Jennings-Wright interview

[40] Sally Joynson interview

[41] Sue Porter interview

[42] Tom Vincent interview

[43] Ian Wild interview

[44] Jay Arnold interview

public information films from the 1930s, followed by Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*. Often it is about the way the content is described or presented – for example, Chris Wild, founder of The Retronaut blog, which has over 45,000 friends on Facebook and which often features BFI films, insists the sources for the website's content are 'not archives but time machines'.[45] Some exhibitors understand and take advantage of this opportunity, creating a unique and exciting atmosphere at their screenings. The Flipside, a highly successful strand of the BFI's programme, celebrates oddball films from 1960s and 1970s with cult appeal. Secret Cinema lures hoards of young hipsters to watch films such as *The Red Shoes* and *The Battle of Algiers* through clever marketing and creating an ambience complete with costume and music which whisks them back to a time before they were born. Their now infamous *Lawrence of Arabia* screening, complete with recreated desert and souk, reached an audience of 15,000 people dressed up as Bedouins – plus a few camels.

Secret Cinema screening of Lawrence of Arabia (image courtesy of Future Cinema)

3) Deepening audience engagement

In the face of increasing competition from multiplex and chain cinemas, who now show arthouse films alongside their more traditional commercial choices, it is essential that independent cinemas define their point of differentiation. Offering a more interesting programme and engaging with audiences on a deeper level strengthens the public value created by independent cinemas, as well as developing commitment and loyalty from visitors. Showing unknown, unusual and engaging moving images from the past is a great way for exhibitors to do this. Archives are treasure troves of cultural and historical gems, films which can be entertaining, inspiring, informative, unexpected, hilarious and beautiful. By delving into them exhibitors can bring the past to life, presenting audiences with the opportunity to

[45] Chris Wild talk at The Media Festival Arts, 9th September 2010

travel back in time to be absorbed in the atmosphere of a tea party in the 1890s or the second wave of punk in Huddersfield.

Putting on a screening of non-fiction archive films gives programmers the opportunity to truly set themselves apart from the chains by unleashing their creativity and demonstrating their skills in showmanship. A regular screening slot can be transformed into a special event, perhaps with special guests introducing the film, a theme created with décor and costume, or live musicians accompanying a silent film. More than watching a film, it can create an exciting social occasion for audiences. Martin Jennings-Wright, Manager of the Little Theatre Cinema in Bath, enthuses about the atmosphere at their first archive show:

> On the night, there was a feeling of excitement that I don't think I have ever had as a cinema manager. The place was packed, the media was there, the mayor was there – it was a terrific buzz, a feeling that we were at the centre of the community, which is what I think we're all aiming at as local arts providers.[46]

Showing social history films can have a real emotional resonance with audiences and can spark up conversations between strangers. Emily Penn, who programmed North Yorkshire's archive film festival Contrast/brilliance*, says, 'It's a great way to make everybody cry!'[47] Sue Porter explains, 'It captures people's imagination because it feeds into their interest in their own heritage'. She tells moving stories of the impact of archive screenings that she organised in the Midlands for stirring up memories and building links to the past. *Calling Blighty: Wolverhampton* had particular resonance with one audience member who had come specifically to watch his father – who had conceived him while on army leave a few weeks before being killed – sending a filmed message home. Even a potentially dull-sounding film about Stanton and Staveley ironworks turned out to be a real crowd-pleaser, drawing in dozens of descendants of the company's workforce, who engaged in a lively discussion following the screening.

Film is traditionally a top-down artform, with the audience in the cinema spatiotemporally separated from the artists who produced the work. Screenings of social history films – particularly local ones – are a means through which cinemas can create more of a connection with their audience and deepen engagement and impact through a more participatory approach. Audiences will often be invited to provide commentary themselves, identifying people and places that they spot in the films:

> Audiences for archive film don't sit there in hallowed silence. They interact with the screen, shout out things like, 'That's my Auntie Gertrude!' [48]
>
> Our usually well behaved audience actually jeered in disbelief at the methods used in *Tea Making Tips*… Loud applause at the end and animated discussion said it all!
>
> *The Big Smoke* inspired a flurry of enthusiasm amongst the organisers and audiences… The most memorable of evenings.[49]

[46] Martin Jennings-Wright

[47] Emily Penn interview

[48] Jay Arnold interview

[49] Reaction from exhibitor screening the BFI/ICO Mediatheque on Tour programmes

Graham Relton from Yorkshire Film Archive points out, 'The audiences know more about the films than we do' – they are recognised as the experts and their contributions can directly feed back into the archives' records.[50] Furthermore, by showcasing amateur footage rather than multimillion dollar studio productions, archive screenings celebrate non-professional work which can be extremely empowering for an audience. The public may even be invited to bring in their own home movies. Jay Arnold recognises the impact this can have on people:

> Yes it's participatory, partly because it's their stuff anyway that they're reacting too, a lot of it came out of their attics… There's a huge sense of ownership about it.[51]

Archive film screenings can, then, position cinemas as not only centres of entertainment, but as community venues making a valuable contribution to social understanding, cohesion and well-being.

Image from my own family home movies, Cardiff, 1933

OPPORTUNITY: WHY SHOULD ARCHIVES WORK WITH EXHIBITORS?

Positioning preservation and access as opposing concerns can be a misleading dichotomy. Just as the SHUK programme recognised the need for preservation in order to facilitate access, it could be argued that access is required in order to create the conditions for preservation. Archives are currently locked into a downward spiral – they say they cannot afford to do more access work because they are underfunded; little of their work therefore reaches the public; thus it is difficult to demonstrate public value; so they remain underfunded. To break out of this cycle and make the case for further investment, they need to raise their profile, become more visible, and demonstrate the value of their work. Preservation for its own sake is not an easy story to sell – public benefit must be demonstrated in order to access tax payers' money, and sponsors, commercial partners and donors want to see their logo or credit on a film at screenings. Rick Prelinger, founder of the Prelinger Archive, believes archives should be 'noisy, proactive, promoting themselves like crazy', generating press coverage and thinking of themselves as 'cultural producers', in order to create public demand, public interest and

[50] Graham Relton interview

[51] Jay Arnold interview

funding.[52] If they do not do so they 'risk irrelevancy and increased marginalization'.[53] Caroline Frick, curator of the Texas Archive of Moving Image, agrees: 'Access-driven initiatives… [produce] a more powerful organizational justification than just saving the past for potential use.'[54]

Cinemas as a platform for access and connecting with the public should not be ignored. While the internet is a fantastic low cost method for reaching new and wider audiences, we are witnessing a parallel growth in interest in IRL ('in real life') events as people recognise the importance of the live experience. Watching a film on the big screen is a much more immersive – and arguably more impactful – experience than watching a video on the computer. Cinemas offer a communal space in which to bring together a large group of strangers as part of a social event, creating a public or collective sense of occasion that cannot be replicated at home. As well as responding to the demand from non-theatrical venues such as village halls and community centres, archives could take a strategic approach to access by working with the existing network of independent cinemas across the UK. In doing so they could take advantage of the audience-facing expertise of the venue's programming and marketing staff and potentially reach a much wider and more diverse audience.

JOINING UP THE SECTORS

There is real potential for archives and exhibitors to work together as strategic partners, in a joined up, coherent way for mutual benefit. One of the big successes of SHUK was that it brought together a previously fragmented group of national and regional archives to work together collaboratively. For many it felt like they were working as one sector for the first time, united by a single vision 'that the people of Britain should be able to access their screen heritage'.[55] While the Digital Film Archive Fund led to some partnerships between individual archives and exhibitors, as explained earlier only a limited number of cinemas got involved, and the legacy of the project was cut short when the UK Film Council closed. I would suggest that the next step to fulfil SHUK's vision would be to bring the film exhibition sector on board in a more concerted way.

[52] Rick Prelinger interview. The Prelinger Archive is a collection of 60,000 'ephemeral' – amateur, educational and corporate – films, collected by Prelinger and subsequently acquired by the Library of Congress in 2002

[53] Rick Prelinger, 'Archives and Access in the 21st Century', *Cinema Journal* 46.3 (Spring 2007), pp. 114-118

[54] Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.153

[55] Heather Stewart interview

RECOMMENDATIONS

What follows are suggestions – proposed by interviewees and myself – for practical, relatively low cost initiatives which together could form part of a coherent, multifaceted, national strategy to foster a collaborative approach between the film archive and film exhibition sectors. This strategy could have a wide reach, long-term impact and legacy to grow audience interest in and opportunities to watch archive film and make further access – as well as preservation – financially viable.

Cross-sector skills sharing

There is a wealth of knowledge and expertise within both the archive and exhibition sectors. Archive professionals have the specialist skills required to research the content of their collection and are familiar with the technical and legal practicalities associated with screening it. Exhibitors have the audience-facing skills required to bring a fresh eye to archive collections, identifying films of interest to different groups and presenting them in new ways which may not be immediately obvious to archive film experts. By combining forces and pooling their expertise, archivists and exhibitors working together could create exciting programmes which work on the big screen for a live audience. Initiatives to consider could include:

- Creative workshops to bring together professionals from both sides to demystify the world of archives, share knowledge, inspire each other and generate collaborative projects around presenting archive material to audiences in innovative ways.

- Cross-sector training courses and resources – archive programming for exhibitors, audience-facing skills for archives. Training could include innovative programming and marketing to reach a younger audience, looking to case studies of successful practice both within the film sector and other artforms.

- Job roles which bridge the two sectors, at a national or regional level, focusing on archival access through screenings.

Coordinated programming

The resource-intensive nature of working with archive film – including research, restoration, rights clearance, digitisation, curation, editing and marketing – makes it essential that projects are delivered to scale if they are to be financially viable. Initiatives for coordinating multiple bookings and generating sufficient demand from cinema programmers could include:

- Producing more ‘off the shelf’ packages of short films that are easy to book for exhibitors, curated around themed programmes to tap into special interest groups. A similar initiative, the Mediatheque on Tour project, delivered by the BFI and ICO in 2007-10, saw eight themed programmes of digitised short films from the BFI National Archive screened by exhibitors

nationwide. 100% of programmers said the booking was easy and 100% said the content was enjoyable. 340 venues booked the programmes, which screened to an audience of 29,418 people – 12,108 for Bombs at Teatime alone, a selection of films about everyday life on the home front during the Second World War. Exhibitors have requested more programmes like this with 54% of those responding to the National Film Exhibitor survey asking for compilation programmes of archive film available to book on DVD and another 40% asking for them on HD.

- Showcase archive films that are available to book through a dedicated preview event for exhibitors such as ICO Screening Days. As well as raising the profile of archive film distribution and offering exhibitors the opportunity to preview and select films for their programme, the event could include talks and workshops to share programming and marketing ideas and inspiration.

- One centralised point of entry for booking films from archives, with joined up fees and access policies, making it easier for programmers to find out what is available and to book films.

- Involve programmers in archives' decisions on restorations and releases at an earlier stage in the process. Doing so would take advantage of exhibitors' knowledge of what works with their audiences and, crucially, it would build a two-way partnership, increasing exhibitors' interest and sense of buy-in and ultimately encouraging more bookings.

- Coordinate cinemas around the UK to join up their programming and marketing of archive film. Mini-seasons or weekly archive film nights could be more appealing to both programmers and audiences than 7 day bookings, and a coordinated national press and marketing campaign could raise public interest.[56] Films could be preceded by recorded introductions (for example, 'Ewan McGregor introduces his favourite film'[57]) or live discussions shared between cinemas through a satellite or digital network.

Disseminate evidence and learning

Demonstrate the impact of archive film programming and ensure that film archives get onto cinemas' agenda by sharing evidence of popularity with audiences:

- Capture quantitative and qualitative evidence from cinemas, including box office figures, audience demographics and exit data.

- Publish and promote case studies of good practice and archive programming tips from previous projects to share the learning with other exhibitors.

[56] Ian Wild and Jay Arnold suggested a season of archive films for children, which in their experience can work well, similar to the Summer of British Film 2007 initiative by the UK Film Council and BBC

[57] Jay Arnold interview

CONCLUSION

Aligning the film archive and film exhibition sectors to work together as strategic partners could have a significant effect on the profile of film archives and the cultural impact of film exhibitors. Despite – or perhaps because of – the resource shortages they face, it is crucial that archives remains outward-looking and maximize opportunities for their collections to be seen and valued by the public. Exhibitors too can broaden and deepen engagement with audiences by taking advantage of the endlessly fascinating and inspiring resource that film archives offer.

The recent leadership change for film in the UK means we currently face a critical moment of opportunity to reassess the relationship between the sectors, address divisions and adopt a more joined-up approach. The BFI is a passionate advocate for archive film and, as the new lead body for film in the UK, may work on aligning the archive sector more closely with the rest of the film industry as part of its overarching vision. At the time of writing, the future strategy for UK film has not yet been set. The potential option of revenue support for exhibitors and/or archives may afford funders the influence to foster collaboration through financial incentives, as well as by offering advice and brokering relationships. Whether or not this happens, what is crucial is that the sectors themselves recognise the benefits of aligning their work. What is needed is a genuine willingness to work together to ensure that we create a vibrant, sustainable cultural film sector which presents the public with more opportunities to experience the rich resource of archive film on the big screen.

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