

## **‘Ars Gratia Artis?’: Cultural Cachet and The Birth of the Regions**

When the newly built Hull Film Theatre (HFT) opened on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1969, London essentially came to the city. Presented as ‘new and exciting addition to the city’s amenities’, the rhetoric used to promote the opening of the film theatre concentrated upon the provision of a service for the population of Hull rather than on this as the twenty-fifth regional film theatre to open through the initiative instigated by the BFI three years previously.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless the presence of the BFI and all it signified remains discernible. Through concessionary rates for *Sight and Sound* and *The Monthly Film Bulletin* and the chance ‘to attend the National Film Theatre and other regional Film Theatres’ the notion of a culture outside Hull was raised.<sup>2</sup> This was a culture that the film theatre, akin to other regional film theatres to greater or lesser degrees, traded upon to promote itself and its own conception of ‘culture’.

By association with the BFI and ‘other regional film theatres’, the HFT can be seen to be participating in the creation of a public sphere that, following Habermas, Sylvia Harvey calls ‘that set of cultural practices and institutions which, taken together, provide the means for the sort of public communication that is required for the development and maintenance of democratic societies’.<sup>3</sup> This ‘public sphere’, the space afforded the debate over the best interests of the public, has, according to Habermas, undergone a ‘re-feudalization’ whereby,

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<sup>1</sup> Hull Film Theatre (HFT) promotional leaflet (Autumn, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Harvey, ‘Doing it My Way – Broadcasting Regulation in Capitalist Cultures: The Case of “Fairness” and “Impartiality”’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 20:4 (1998), p.539.

‘the exchange of ideas has [...] given way to the exchange of commodities’.<sup>4</sup> Participating in this debate, the remit and role of both the BFI and HFT can be seen to function to a large extent to maintain the democratic ideals of the public sphere whilst at the same time reifying the notion of art cinema as a commodity employed as a signifier of ‘cultural enlightenment’.

Whether as a marriage of convenience, an attempt to raise the level of cultural participation in the city, or a response to changing trends in cultural provision, the link between Hull Corporation and the BFI developed out of the history, remit and policy of the BFI. Due to this, a great deal of the HFT’s ensuing character was impacted as much by shifts in social and cultural priorities as by its stated desire to serve the film-going public. As ‘the oldest “public body” involved with support for the arts’, the BFI began with the specific statement of intent ‘to promote the various uses of the film as a contribution to national well-being’.<sup>5</sup> Yet as will be addressed in this chapter, the space between intention and outcome is very often filled by circumstance.

From its formation in 1933 until the opening of the National Film Theatre [NFT] in 1952 the overwhelming emphasis the BFI placed on film took the form of educational instruction; later conceptions of the Institute shifted towards provision however. Such provision took the form of the NFT and the regional film theatre (RFT) initiative, signalling a change in its original remit. Nevertheless criticism of this shift in emphasis, seen as abandoning the core values of the Institute, misses the subtlety of this repositioning. With the advent of a new policy which turned away from direct stipulation towards greater, and wider, provision, there is an attempt to educate the nation, not through film, but *about* film.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Great Britain Education, Science and Art Committee, *Eighth Report from the Education, Sciences & Arts Committee, Session. 1981-82: Public and Private Funding of the Arts* (London: HMSO, 1982), Section 6.31, p.85; The Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, *The Film in National Life: Being the Report of an Enquiry Conducted by the Commission on Educational and Cultural Films into the Service which the Cinematograph May Render to Education and Social Progress* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932).

Presenting what it considered ‘the best in world cinema’, the Institute sought to train potential audiences in how to appreciate a type of cinema that had the ability to do more than entertain.<sup>6</sup>

Due to its origin at a specific moment in British social, cultural and political life, the BFI was moulded by a 1930s progressive mentality that sought to use film as a tool for social reform. Dealing with this initial period of educational focus, this chapter will address the governmental structure and influence the BFI operated under, and which, to a large extent, conditioned and curtailed the policy decisions taken. The chapter will next address the consideration of the film audience the BFI made when it acquired the NFT for film exhibition. A combination of factors, not least of which was the glaring disparity in provision nationwide of *National Film Theatre* representation, then led to the proposal of a regional film theatre initiative. This initiative sought to empower the regions but, it will be argued in the next section, implemented instead a cultural colonisation of these regions by a London-based initiative.

Far from being a force that brought the ‘gift’ of world cinema (a term not yet to accrue its modern meaning) to the ‘cultural wastelands’ of the provinces, changing political imperatives in the mid-1960s led to what Colin McArthur has called a ‘totally *ad hoc* expansion into the regions [...] driven more by the availability of money than by cultural policy’.<sup>7</sup> From this position, the last of the sections in this chapter will address the regional film theatre initiative as perceived by an institution guided more by events outside their control than by premeditated policy from within. This discussion will therefore highlight the extent to which the BFI was formed and moulded by circumstances outside and beyond its control when social and cultural imperatives came into conflict with policy.

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<sup>6</sup> HFT programme (January-March, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Colin McArthur, ‘Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Cultural Struggle in the British Film Institute’, *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, 4 (2001), p.115.

## Educating the Nation

Officially established on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1933, the BFI was born at a time when new technological innovations wrought many changes in the way society functioned. Recovering from the First World War, Britain changed in ways made possible by both the innovations developed by the conflict and the austerity suffered because of it. Whilst improvements in transport (both the means of travelling and the attendant infrastructure to do so), industrial conditions and growing retail options catered to those with the means to take advantage of them, the majority of the country suffered less than acceptable conditions made all the worse by the depression that affected much of the world in the early 1930s. When the BBC became a public corporation in 1926 (having begun as a company in 1922), there was a chance to, as the Director-General of the BBC John Reith said, ‘inform, educate and entertain’ the public on a much wider scale through the new technology of radio.<sup>8</sup> Conceived by those professing to know what is best for others, this paternalistic notion of ‘educating’ the public constituted an intrinsic factor in the remit of a ‘public’ institution and one that finds a correlative in the creation of the BFI.

Whilst not as forward thinking concerning the role of film as ‘art’ as in France, where ‘the *film d’art* was a recognised category’, the realisation that film could be more than a medium for entertainment took root in the education establishment.<sup>9</sup> With the interest in film in other countries as either an art form (France, Germany) or a tool of persuasion (the Soviet Union) evident in the flow of product to the film society movement, the British Institute of Adult Education’s (BIAE) conference of 1929 recommended the formation of a commission

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Crisell, *Understanding Radio* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.45. This paternalistic attitude towards the provision of services persisted throughout much of the period under discussion with the idea of ‘culture as commodity’ only taking root late in the period with the deregulation of national provision and the move towards a more global and open market.

<sup>9</sup> *Eighth Report from the Education, Sciences & Arts Committee, Session*, p.85.

to investigate the merit of film as an educational tool. The report that the Commission on Education and Cultural Films (the title of the Commission itself highlighting the direction the results would take) produced in May 1932, entitled 'The Film in National Life', recommended several measures be taken. Not least of these recommendations was the formation of a national 'Film Institute' to 'promote the various uses of the film as a contribution to national well-being'.<sup>10</sup> The language used here is significant in its call for 'national well-being' and the belief that film possessed the capability, in its most artistic and (middle class, middlebrow defined) form, to ameliorate the condition of the country. This last is also relevant in an era when successive Labour and National governments had begun a process of nationalisation designed to rescue a failing economy (and in turn the British Empire).

Also prefiguring the educational emphasis of the BFI, the BIAE founded *The Quarterly Review of Modern Aids to Learning* in early 1932 (later to become *Sight and Sound*), and as such inaugurated the policy of the future BFI as one geared towards the use of film as a 'modern aid to learning'. With the recommendations of the commission resulting in the official formation of the British Film Institute on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1933, the mandate of the new institute was to encourage 'the use and development of the cinematograph as a means of entertainment and instruction'.<sup>11</sup> It is from within this conception of film as an educational tool, to be utilized by those with the requisite skills, that a confirmation of the taste hierarchy contained within the terms 'highbrow', 'middlebrow' and 'lowbrow' can be found. Recognising that the new mass media of film, radio and, from the early 1950s, television could also be seen as vehicles for the transmission of significantly more serious intent and content the institutions involved in catering to audiences that took the 'middle' ground.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Film in National Life*, p.45.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Typical of the ‘arms length’ approach by successive British governments to cultural matters, wherein direct control of issues the government deems itself inexpert in is ceded to bodies with a specialist knowledge and remit, the BFI (alongside the Arts Council, the BBC, the British Council and the Regional Arts Associations) operated what Lawrence Napper has noted as a ‘balancing act between the cultural demands of government and critics and the need to address and entertain a popular audience’.<sup>12</sup> With control of the BFI vested to nine governors and a General Manager (a post later renamed Chairman) the choice of specialisms to represent the board of governors is significant in its emphasis upon certain interested parties. Equal representation on the board was ceded to the film trade, the general public and, most significantly, educational interests, with the Duke of Sutherland appointed Chairman and J.W. Brown from the BIAE becoming General Manager.<sup>13</sup> It is in the conception of film as newly liberated by the conversion to sound that renewed concern for the dangers of ‘mass entertainment’ was voiced. Added to the attempt to assuage such fears was the adoption of film into the realm of what Bourdieu would later call ‘symbolic assets’; a bid to ‘inculcate [...] a *cultivated disposition* as a durable and generalized attitude which implies recognition of the value of works of art and ability to appropriate them by means of generic categories’.<sup>14</sup> Irrevocably tied to the social and political environment which fostered its birth, the middle-class gatekeepers were ‘anxious to consolidate a hard-won, but precarious, improvement in social position and living standards’ that came with such (self-granted) responsibilities as

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Napper, ‘British Cinema and the Middlebrow’, *British Cinema: Past and Present*, eds. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Routledge, 2000), p.115.

<sup>13</sup> Representation on the board of governors was equally split between the general public (F.W. Baker, Lady Levita and Thomas Ormiston), the film trade (R.S. Lambert, J.J. Lawson and C.M. Woolf) and education (John Buchan, A.C. Cameron and C.J. Cleland). Along with the Duke of Sutherland and J.W. Brown, Reginald V. Crow, a previous president of the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association, became Secretary. Ivan Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film: the Story of the British Film Institute* (London: Robert Hale, 1971), p.18.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Outline of a Theory of Art Interpretation’, *International Social Science Journal*, 2:4 (1968), p.592; original emphasis.

introducing film to the public as an aid to education.<sup>15</sup> While the constituency of the board of governors and class-based notions of hegemony explain, to a degree, the concerns and operation of the BFI in its early years, the funding mechanism used to sustain its endeavours is perhaps more telling in its origin and influence.

Cultural matters not featuring on the list of priorities of successive governments (who were preoccupied with arguably greater issues such as housing, welfare, education, health and industry), the responsibility for film rested with various intermittently interested governmental departments. From early in the history of cinema, British governments took a protectionist stance to film legislation with various acts designed to either limit the influence of foreign (i.e. American) film, or to foster an indigenous film industry (not 'culture'). It is in this vein that the majority of decisions concerning film were made by the Board of Trade (with the Film Department inaugurated/created within the Board of Trade to deal specifically with such issues). Having enacted legislation in 1909 (the Cinematograph Act 1909) that ultimately led to the establishment of permanent exhibition premises, renewal and amendment of the act saw the creation of the Sunday Entertainments Act 1932, which established a Cinematograph Fund which permitted a percentage of the profits from Sunday exhibition (not more than 5% of takings nor more than the overall Sunday profit) to be ring-fenced for 'encouraging the use and development of the cinematograph as a means of entertainment and instruction'.<sup>16</sup> Already enshrined in legislation as a medium in need of 'encouraging' in order to better exploit its potential, monies from the fund were used to establish and operate the BFI from its conception.<sup>17</sup> As controlled by the Treasury and the

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<sup>15</sup> Napper, 'British Cinema and the Middlebrow', p.115.

<sup>16</sup> The Sunday Entertainments Act 1932, HMSO (London: Public Records Office, 1932).

<sup>17</sup> Aside from the main revenue stream from the Cinematograph Fund minor monies were obtained from the subscriptions of members, revenue from the sale of publications, film hire and small grants from the Home Office and the Ministry of Education. Later years saw revenue increase through a number of policy shifts (for example for the financial year 1964 the BFI received £107,250 from the Treasury, £19,000 from Department of Science and

Board of Trade, the financial fortunes of the BFI were monitored with great concern for value. It is in this climate of control by, and deference to, the establishment that the early focus of the BFI took an educational route. Major concerns began to foment around the idea of a national organisation, speaking from a position of political and social power, attempting to prescribe its own tastes to others.

Fulfilling part of its *raison d'être*, grants in aid to film societies were given by the BFI, whose recipients occasionally sought reflected prestige by adding the word 'Institute' to the end of their film society names.<sup>18</sup> With branches of the BFI nominally set up around the country to better liaise with the film society interests, a tentative consensus regarding appreciation of cinema was inaugurated to further the education of the public in the use of film. Restating its aim in 1939 as to

continue the increase in the use of films in teaching, to continue the National Film Library, stimulate film appreciation, maintain information, and in general to see that the British film industry was not allowed to languish and die as in the 1914-18 war

the BFI again reiterated its intention to see that film was treated as a commodity to be used in the classroom and an art to be elevated out of the domain of the lowbrow, working-class masses.<sup>19</sup> The policy of following an educational agenda for film appreciation was significantly altered, however, by the hiatus in proceedings caused by the start of the Second World War. Adding to this setback was the decision by government in 1946 to divest the BFI

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Education, £6,000 from Cinematograph Fund and earned £70,000 itself through various initiatives). Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film*, p.18.

<sup>18</sup> From a pre-war total of eighteen film societies, a number were created during the war to total forty-eight in 1946, rising steadily to number 230 in 1955, 400 in 1958 and 750 in 1970. Membership of the BFFS would enable the use of a number of facilities through its connection with the BFI such as: discount on hire of film prints from the Distribution Library and use of the Central Booking Agency for non-BFI film hire and programming advice. Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film*, p.23 and pp.178-180.

<sup>19</sup> Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film*, p.23.



of certain of its responsibility (and hence focus) with the creation of a separate body with emphasis on visual arts and education.<sup>20</sup>

The National Committee for Visual Arts in Education was newly charged with the promotion and administration of film in schools, which therefore dramatically altered the institutional role of the BFI, whose focus on education had moulded its operation since 1933. With the decision during the war to limit the Institute's role in the promotion of film as propaganda (this being overseen by the Ministry of Information), and the concurrent removal of responsibility for artists and film technicians caused by the creation of the British Film Academy in 1947, the role and usefulness of the BFI was thrown into serious doubt. It was in this climate that the Lord President of the Arts Council, Herbert Morrison, commissioned a committee to investigate the operation of the BFI.

The resulting 1948 Radcliffe Report (named after the chairman of the Committee, Sir Cyril J. Radcliffe) made numerous recommendations, not least of which was a call for the decentralisation of BFI activities.<sup>21</sup> While not couched in such exact terms, the report hinted at the need to augment its geographical bias in the last of its recommended 'executive responsibilities', namely:

1. The administration of the National Film Library;
2. The conduct of a first-class information service;

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<sup>20</sup> The establishment of the National Committee for Visual Aids in Education in 1946 and the British Film Academy in 1947 continued a tradition in which independent bodies were charged with the delivery of 'culture' in a number of differing conceptions that can be seen most evidently in the creation of the BFI in 1933 and the British Council in 1934 (overseeing the promotion of British culture abroad).

<sup>21</sup> The report praised the Institute for a number of initiatives instigated in its fifteen years of operation: the establishment of a National Film Library intended, amongst others aims, to, 'serve as a record of contemporary manners', the creation of an information service and work that has, 'promoted appreciation of film as a form of art and the specialised use of film – largely in the field of education – through its publications, and by lectures, by summer schools and courses, and by the encouragement of allied societies'. Cyril J. Radcliffe, *Report of the Committee on the British Film Institute: Presented by Lord President of the Council to Parliament by Command of His Majesty* (London: HMSO, 1948), pp.3-4.

3. The development of a central and regional organisation to promote appreciation of the film art and new or extended use for the cinema<sup>22</sup>

The ambiguity inherent in the advocacy of a ‘central and regional organisation to promote the appreciation of the film art’ may go some way towards explaining the gap between recommendation and reality, but the shift in emphasis for the BFI’s future was clear. In the language of the report, which stated that ‘we are impressed by the need to extend the Institute’s influence outside London’, there is a recognition of the lack of representation for the Institute outside the capital (albeit seemingly wrapped in pride and justification of the Institute’s successful operation), warranting a move beyond London.<sup>23</sup> This candid acknowledgement of the BFI’s over-reliance on a middle-class agenda and the need to cater to a population that had changed unequivocally during a world war was tempered by the need not to alienate those in charge, while granting that the social function of film was of a different kind in 1948.

Still suffering rationing, the incremental dissolution of the Empire and the devaluation of the pound, the economic stability of Britain was far from secure.<sup>24</sup> Primarily designed to strengthen the economy rather than rescue an ailing industry, a 75% *ad valorem* tax imposed on the import of foreign films that lasted from August 1947 to May 1948 was further proof that the state of the film industry was of small concern when weighed against the more pressing concerns of the nation as a whole. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the Radcliffe report stated that the BFI should in future:

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>24</sup> After the Second World War Britain suffered a long period of reconstruction that saw much of its previous overseas influence necessarily lost to the more pressing concerns of national recovery. Many of the measures imposed were to have a lasting effect upon the identity of post-war Britain and its influence overseas. For a thorough consideration of the social, economic, political and cultural landscape of post-war Britain see: George L. Bernstein, *The Myth of Decline: The Rise of Britain Since 1945* (Pimlico: London, 2004).

Encourage the development of the art of the film, promote its use as a record of contemporary life and manners and foster public appreciation and study of it from these points of view.<sup>25</sup>

This presented the BFI with a dilemma. Considering that the responsibility for the promotion of film in schools was officially now the province of the National Committee for Visual Arts in Education, and that the training of future artistic and technical professions was now under the control of the British Film Academy, the Institute had to find new ways of discharging its (reformulated) remit. The reformulation of this remit, and the generally accepted explanation of financial privation that led to the lack of action regarding the proposed expansion 'outside London', was nevertheless undermined somewhat by a committee meeting with the Lord President of the Arts Council held before the official publication of the Radcliffe Report.

Essentially curtailing any chance of a dialogue that might result from the recommendations, the meeting noted that 'the [Radcliffe] Committee had [...] recommended that the Institute should establish a regional organisation' but, with cursory explanation, the Lord President 'was not sure that this would be desirable and thought that no action in pursuance of this recommendation should be taken for the present'.<sup>26</sup> In essence barring any discussion of, let alone action regarding, the expansion out of London, this pre-emptive strike against the suggested expansion effectively killed any meaningful consideration of the regions as places of need in favour of London as a place of provision.

The divestment of responsibilities that the Institute suffered in the 1940s was further compounded by the creation of the British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS) in September 1945, where what could have been tentatively called an informal exhibition network was placed at a further remove from the BFI. Established to amass better bargaining power for an

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<sup>25</sup> Radcliffe, *Report of the Committee on the British Film Institute*, p.8.

<sup>26</sup> Lord President's Committee Meeting, minutes, 'Future of the British Film Institute' (9 April 1948: BFI Library).

ever-increasing number of film societies, the BFFS became the intermediary between individual film societies and the BFI. Yet, while the creation of the BFFS no doubt aided the film society movement in its quest for a greater voice in the exhibition sector, this buffer placed between the BFI and exhibition outlets that primarily dealt with the type of films the BFI championed only highlighted the neglect of the Institute in relation to the screening of film. The brief history of the BFI detailed so far illustrates the way in which policy decisions were enacted from reaction to changes often beyond the Institute's control. The desire to spread the work of the BFI beyond London was severely curtailed by these policy decisions however.

## **Second Lesson: “How to Watch a (Good) Film”**

The BFI's finances, and the British establishment's tendency to attempt control from a distance, are potential reasons why the Institute did not act upon their knowledge about restrictions in the exhibition of their championed types of film. With funding for the BFI coming in the main from the Cinematograph Fund (with ancillary earnings from members' subscriptions, hire of film prints and revenue from publications amounting to a small percentage), the potential to invest in any substantial programme of film exhibition was limited.<sup>27</sup> Echoing the forced decision to pursue alternate ways to fulfil its remit due to the divestment of its core roles, the BFI's eventual move into the exhibition sector came about due to yet another external factor.

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<sup>27</sup> Grant aid from the Cinematograph Fund can be synthesised thus: ca. £9,000 in 1933-43; £14,000 in 1944; £18,000 in 1945; £22,100 in 1946; £31,500 in 1947-49. By 1965, the time the implementation of new funding and policy measures brought about by the change in government caused a shift in revenue streams, the grant from the Cinematograph Fund had shrunk to £4,000. Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film*, p.27.

Having proposed ‘a new Great Exhibition, to echo that of 1851’, during the war, the Royal Society of Arts set into motion what was to become the 1951 Festival of Britain.<sup>28</sup> Dually designed to foster pride in Britain’s past and post-war reconstruction as well as acting as a trade show intended to rejuvenate export potential, the festival was as much heralded for its architectural innovation as the former aims. Using land on the south bank of the Thames heavily bombed during the war, the plans for the many buildings and exhibitions included an exhibition space for the demonstration of ‘the latest technical developments in film, such as 3-D and multi-stereophonic sound, and in closed circuit television’.<sup>29</sup> Eventually called The Telekinema, in order to exploit its potential in multiple media formats, the experiment came at a time in the BFI’s changing identity when, as a constituent body of the Festival, it was perfectly poised to capitalise upon this exhibition outlet. The site of the Telekinema was ideal for the BFI’s purpose and suited the transition to a National Film Theatre (NFT) for the British Film Institute. As membership of the BFI had been declining gradually since 1949, securing of a future revenue stream to sustain the BFI was a major motivation of the committee charged with the change of status to the NFT.<sup>30</sup> Mirroring this new departure for the Institute, the newly appointed director of the BFI, Denis Forman, saw as amongst his priorities a need to:

1. Greatly enlarge the membership and thus provide additional finance by increased subscriptions.
2. To obtain a public building to show films.
3. To enliven and streamline *Sight and Sound*.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Culture in Britain Since 1945* (London: Blackwell, 1991), p.53.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film*, p.28.

<sup>30</sup> At the end of the war BFI membership stood at 1,643, an increase of just over 600 since 1939. From a high of 2,297 members in 1949 membership numbers decreased steadily until 1953 (the first full year of the NFT) when 4,633 members (and 13, 353 ‘associate’ members, a category introduced to accommodate those wishing to use the NFT) were noted. Full membership increased steadily over the next 15 years so that at the time of the opening of Hull Film Theatre in 1969 it stood at fewer than 14,000. Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

The decision about how to operate the newly acquired cinema, whether as a commercial cinema, a commercial continental cinema, an art cinema open to the general public or a subscription-only cinema specialising in ‘the best in world cinema’ was crucial to not only the immediate success or failure of the cinema but also to the format that subsequent incarnations and imitations would adopt. The choice of the latter option, the establishment of a ‘club cinema, free from censorship, and [...] able to import films without paying duty’, echoed the film society movement and hence all the associations with such premises.<sup>32</sup> The significance of such a choice should not be underestimated as in this lie the origins of not only the regional film theatre movement that welled from its template, but also the modern practice of art cinema consumption in dedicated exhibition venues distinct from mainstream commercial consumption and the film society operation. The connotations and connections that were thus forged between a specific exhibition building (the NFT), a culturally-inclined institution (the BFI) and the programming of non-mainstream films could be seen to be mirrored later in regional expansion. It is here that the notion of consumption as envisioned and coordinated by the institutions and programmers of such venues can be put forward as distinct from consumption by individuals. It is from the intention to foster a unique experience that much of art cinema exhibition, as well as museum planning, theatre patronage and art gallery design, takes its lead. This in turn influenced not only the type of audience such a venue attracts but the consumption of its ‘products’.

With regard to such matters, here mainstream commercial consumption can best be thought of as that which the NFT, and previously the film societies, sought to distance themselves from. A model of exhibition practice had accrued over many decades in which the main combines extended their influence over much of the country and thereby set a trend that revolved around a broadly standard method of booking, programming, promoting and

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<sup>32</sup> Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film*, p.97.

distributing films. It was therefore not only the films themselves but also the whole infrastructure from booking through to consumption that the burgeoning art cinema exhibition market sought to distance themselves from. This is where the idea that commercial cinema, that which is deemed to have a fair chance of reclaiming any production and promotional expense in the marketplace, is the antithesis of art cinema exhibition, that which requires subsidy because it is less popular with a mass audience, came from. In this vein what became popular with a mass audience became part of the mainstream in so much that social, cultural and economic forces conspire to recreate experiences for the continued benefit of those with the most to gain. In this instance this refers to the film combines. Of the approximately 4,700 cinemas operating in the UK in the late 1940s and early 1950s (ABC owning 443 cinemas, Gaumont 304 and Odeon 317), only a small percentage of these screened foreign and experimental films.<sup>33</sup> The vagaries of the distribution industry and competition practices often negated attempts at operating successful commercial continentals and independent art cinemas. The circumstances leading to a 'British Film' Institute operating its own cinema therefore seemed ideal, if not a little belated.

After its transference to BFI ownership in late October 1952 the programming of the Telekinema as the NFT was designed around legitimating films that had already been in distribution, exploiting a style of cinema that could secure the continued interest in such films, therefore directing the future of art cinema by showcasing traditionally marginalised films. By screening repertory cinema, strands of the best in current world cinema and experimental films, the NFT created a system whereby a lineage of an alternative cinema history could be suggested and endorsed by a national institution.

Having committed to the adoption of the film society model and the presentation of art cinema from an institutionally authored perspective, the role of the exhibition sector was

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<sup>33</sup> Allen Eyles, 'Exhibition and the Cinemagoing Experience', *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 1997), p.221.

altered forever. The characteristics identified by Bordwell that have become accepted as synonymous with 'art cinema' - thematic connection over a range of films, authorial intent, national cinematic output and the privileging of form over content - were all factors used in the programming of the NFT. The shift away from the application of film in an educational context, and the elevation of taste brought about by the divestment of BFI responsibilities, had therefore resulted in a significant change in priorities leading to the creation of the NFT. Nevertheless this is not to say that the programming implications of the NFT were in fact no less educationally directive. The decision (circumstances would claim that it was a necessity) to secure dedicated premises for the NFT further compounded this perception.

In the five years between the opening of the NFT as a BFI operated facility in October 1952 and the move to bespoke premises underneath Waterloo Bridge in October 1957, membership of the BFI had risen from 2,015 to 7,019 while associate membership (introduced to encourage attendance at the theatre) had correspondingly risen from 92 to 27,216.<sup>34</sup> Combined factors of limited lease on the original building, insufficient room for internal alteration and external expansion and the continued association of the building with that of the Telekinema caused the Institute to regard the design and building of a new film theatre, within budgetary restrictions, a necessity. With the NFT having to sustain its own operation with no governmental subsidy, the outlay for a new building had to be kept to a minimum with the subsequent problems experienced by the NFT all stemming from the financial climate and conditions in which the building was built. The launch of the London Film Festival to coincide with the opening of the newly located NFT provides another example of a strategy designed to further entrench the idea of a certain type of film being worthy of special attention in the mind of a potential audience.

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<sup>34</sup> Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film*, pp.28-29.



The route that future film theatres would take regarding subsidised provision is here exemplified by an institution caught between, on the one hand, catering to those not catered for elsewhere and, on the other, being a *National* Film Theatre claiming to serve a whole country. It is concomitant with concerns regarding the role of the BFI in the nation and the country that the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association expressed concerns in 1961 that the NFT was ‘attempting to popularise its programmes’ with a shift towards more mainstream exhibition.<sup>35</sup> Justification for this complaint came partly on the grounds that established directors known for the commercial potential and acumen of their films (Hitchcock, Hawks, Ford, Ray, etc.) were being lauded by the critics of *Cahiers du Cinema* with their work subsequently re-evaluated in retrospectives at the NFT. This re-evaluation of work previously thought purely mainstream subsequently led to the re-examination of other films, directors and studios.<sup>36</sup> As the NFT had to be self-sustainable due to the absence of subsidy, the temptation to cater to a larger demographic through the presentation of more mainstream films was understandably high. The answers to such charges perhaps lie with industry-wide circumspection and the BFI’s desire to educate through presentation and not direct intervention.

The rise in membership of the BFI in the period from 1957 to 1964 to a total of 10,123 full members and 20,376 associate members masks some dramatic changes in cinemagoing, leisure time and expendable income through these years. Suburbanisation, the increasing affordability of television sets, the creation of Independent Television (ITV) in 1955, the ‘British Cultural Revolution’ brought about by the novels and films of the ‘British New Wave’ and the creation of ‘The New Left Review’ in 1960 all played a role in creating an atmosphere whereby political change could occur.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>36</sup> For a thorough list of seasons of films presented at the NFT between 1953 and 1970 see: Butler, *To Encourage the Art of Film*, pp.187-90.

With the Labour government (under Clement Atlee) losing power to the Conservatives in 1951, the party had subsequently suffered from an image born of working-class ideals and austerity that did not chime with the more affluent, socially mobile population of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Yet with the rise of this more mobile and self-aware class came a move away from the excesses of the Conservative government, which trailed in the opinion polls behind Labour from 1961 to the general election of 1964. With Harold Wilson replacing Hugh Gaitskell as Labour's party leader in 1963 and Alec Douglas-Home replacing the ageing Harold Macmillan as Conservative leader shortly after, the general election of 1964 was underlined by a percolating desire for reform, with 'Wilson look[ing] much more convincing as a reformer than Home'.<sup>37</sup> When Labour subsequently won the October 1964 general election, motions were made to significantly alter the direction of the British economy and way of life, not the least of which was the reorganisation of the administration of arts subsidy.

Previously the jurisdiction of the Treasury, responsibility for subsidising the arts in Britain had naturally been overseen with economic rather than artistic considerations in mind. Harold Wilson had signalled his own feelings about the nature of the film industry during his tenure as president of the Board of Trade from October 1947 until 1951 when, responding to accusations of monopoly by ABC and Rank, he referred to the heads of the companies and the fact that 'we cannot allow national film policy, economically, morally or artistically to be dictated by these two Oriental potentates'.<sup>38</sup> The decision to reassign responsibility for the funding of 'the arts' from the Treasury to the Department of Education and Science (DES) therefore heralded the turning point whereby notions of the function of artistic endeavour rather than the mere use of it were judiciously considered. Alongside the shift in

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<sup>37</sup> David Childs, *Britain Since 1939: Progress and Decline* (London: MacMillan, 1995), p.139.

<sup>38</sup> Memorandum to R. C. G. Somervell, 25 September 1949 (London: Public Records Office, 1949).

administrative department, the fortunes of the BFI were significantly shaped by the White Paper, 'A Policy for the Arts', in which the ground was cleared for a systematic re-evaluation of arts policy in Britain.

Compounding this commitment to reform of the funding and operations of those involved in all aspects of arts in Britain was the appointment of Jennie Lee as Joint Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the DES.<sup>39</sup> Now with a member of parliament whose chief responsibility was as custodian of 'the arts', the BFI's subsistence grant rose by a third (with a total rise in arts subsidy of £1,790,000 in 1965). This created a higher profile and effectively saw a third start for the BFI since its creation in 1933.<sup>40</sup> With William Coldstream as the new Chairman and Stanley Reed as the new Director, the BFI revised its mission statement as a desire to

Encourage the development of the art of film, to promote its use as a record of contemporary life and manners, to foster study and appreciation of it from these points of view, to foster study and appreciation of films for television and television programmes generally, to encourage the best use of television[...]<sup>41</sup>

This desire to 'develop' and 'foster' the study of the moving image (to use terminology later employed to these ends), found its most potent (and directional) manifestation in the next step towards fulfilling a remit aimed at 'encouragement' – the regional film theatre initiative. The

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<sup>39</sup> John S Harris, 'Government Patronage of the Arts in Great Britain', *Leonardo*, 5:4 (Autumn, 1972), p.62. As the first minister appointed with direct responsibility for the arts, Jennie Lee had no previous experience of such a role. Critics have suggested that it was because she was the wife of Anuerin Bevan that she secured a position and the policy that was criticised as, 'political window-dressing, an inexpensive way of wooing voters'. *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> In 1964 (the budget having been set the previous year) the BFI received £107,250 from the Treasury, £19,000 from the DSE and £6,000 from the Cinematograph Fund. After the appointment of Jennie Lee the BFI grant increased to £184,000 from the Treasury, £20,000 from the DES and £4,000 from the Cinematograph Fund with £11,000 to put towards a Regional Expansion Plan.

<sup>41</sup> James Quinn, 'Outside London: A Report to the Governors of the British Film Institute' (London: BFI, 1965), p.1.

regional film theatre initiative was about to become the primary means in which art cinema was delivered to the nation and its origin has been shown here to be rooted in, as so much of the BFI's past and future operation, the policy decisions of others.

## **The Province of the BFI**

Any attempt at discussing the origins of the regional film theatre movement can take divergent paths based solely on the emphasis placed upon two words that were frequently used in literature (both from the BFI and other sources) to promote the move outside of London: 'region' and 'province'. Connotations associated with 'the establishment of regional centres' as opposed to 'the setting up of provincial film centres' are perhaps best illustrated when considering that the former derives from the Latin *regiō* meaning 'to govern' and the later from *prōvincia* meaning 'conquered territory'.<sup>42</sup> Although used interchangeably and non-pejoratively throughout discourse on the expansion of the NFT template, the distinction highlights a possible counterview to the accepted narrative of a necessary and positive policy. Following the change in government (both political party and departmental responsibilities), the appointment of a Minister with responsibility for the arts and the change in BFI leadership, the ground was set for a significant move towards the Institute's new goals.

The perennial petition for an increased grant from government was now pursued with renewed vigour in a climate that had seen the decision over funding move from the Treasury to the Department of Education and Science, a department with concerns wider than expenditure. Previously the Deputy Chairman of the Arts Council, the new Chairman of the BFI, William Coldstream, had obvious knowledge of the frugality of central government to

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 10 and 12; *Concise English Dictionary* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 1244 & 1189.

the arts in Britain. Entreating the new Labour government to increase the grant to the BFI by £60,000 a year due to the Institute's wish to 'draw public attention to the film as a form of art, communication and education, not being fully exploited in Great Britain because of inadequate official encouragement and support', the BFI found itself with a new role to fulfil.<sup>43</sup> Receiving a grant increase of £51,750 instead of the requested £60,000 nevertheless meant that plans first expressed in the Radcliffe Report of eighteen years earlier could be not only considered but finally acted upon. The second significant change in BFI management, the appointment of Stanley Reed as Director (he had joined the BFI in 1950 in the newly created role of 'Film Appreciation Officer'), had obvious inclinations towards the dissemination of film to a wider audience coupled with the desire to educate that audience as to the best way to appreciate the BFI's conception of film. Now that the financial and governmental support was forthcoming, the possibility of 'regional expansion' was given fuller consideration.

Partly due to the decline in cinema attendance throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s in Britain and partly through not needing planning permission to turn existing cinemas into venues for any activity, the number of cinemas in Britain had reduced significantly, a fact not unnoticed by film societies and exhibitors of non-mainstream cinema. With a gap appearing in the exhibition sector and the increasing interest in film shown by educational institutions and new film literature appearing from France and America, the BFI decided to commission a report into the possibility of establishing 'equivalents of London's National Film Theatre in other centres'.<sup>44</sup> Appointing former BFI Director James Quinn to conduct the survey, the resulting 'Outside London' report inaugurated the regional film theatre initiative in which film appreciation was 'delivered' to the nation. What can now firmly be seen as a determined desire to fulfil a missing aspect of provision through the application of policy and

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<sup>43</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly* 4 February, 1965, p.6.

<sup>44</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly* 14 October, 1965, p.7.

finance, however, was not necessarily perceived, or at least promoted, as such. Contrasting sharply with Colin McArthur's assessment of 'the totally *ad hoc* expansion into the regions so lavishly funded by Jennie Lee, an expansion driven more by the availability of money than by cultural policy', William Coldstream's introduction to 'Outside London' sees the expansion in different terms.<sup>45</sup> Noting 'a steady growth of an audience eager to see the latest productions from all countries' and 'that so little provision is made outside London for showing the best of world cinema', he states that 'the Governors of the Film Institute feel that they have a responsibility to fill the gap'.<sup>46</sup> This 'responsibility to fill the gap' is perhaps best viewed in light of the changing governmental and BFI leadership and the need not to appear staid and conservative in a climate in which changing political and social structures meant possibilities both challenging and progressive were not only available but desirable.

The Conservatives, under Harold Macmillan's leadership (before his replacement in October 1963 by Douglas-Home), had attempted to foster a perception as reformers with the establishment of various commissions on matters addressing the state of the country aimed at countering criticism for a faltering economy.<sup>47</sup> Seen as compensation to a degree for the declining economic impact Britain had upon the rest of the world due to the loss of former colonies, the pre-eminent political goal of the period, membership of the European Economic Community (EEC), was vetoed by French President Charles de Gaulle in 1963 and its cause adopted by the new Labour government of 1964.<sup>48</sup> Continuing the impetus inherited from the previous government, the nature of this reform meant that expansion into a 'European

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<sup>45</sup> McArthur, 'Two Steps Forward, One Step Back', p.114.

<sup>46</sup> Quinn, 'Outside London' p.3.

<sup>47</sup> During this period various commissions were established to investigate, amongst other things: national income, education, higher education, the railways, decimal currency, the civil service and Independent Television (ITV). David Childs, *Britain Since 1939: Progress and Decline* (London: MacMillan, 1995), p.38.

<sup>48</sup> The reasons behind both Conservative and Labour attempts to join the European Economic Community (EEC) during this period are complex but stem from a desire to curtail any loss of power as a nation due to the creation of a European bloc. For a fuller consideration see: Bernstein, *The Myth of Decline*; Marwick, *Culture in Britain Since 1945*.

Community’ was mirrored somewhat by the expansion into the regions. If the model for Britain could function on a wider world stage then surely the model for London could function on a nation-wide stage. The problem of expansion, irrespective of need at this juncture, was nevertheless one of location.

With ‘the possibility of such development in a number of centres, selected with an eye to variety in size, location and type’ providing the initial stage in the expansion, this ideal was ‘superseded by a plan of action covering the greater part of the country’.<sup>49</sup> What is striking about the expansion plans of the NFT template is not so much the gap between suggestion (the Radcliffe Report - 1948) and implementation (favourable government – 1964) as the lack of consultation undertaken in the process of expansion. Whereas the initial raft of funding for the fiscal year 1964/65 had apportioned £11,000 towards the investigation of regional expansion, the reality was expressed that

whilst the Institute as a public body has a responsibility to the country at large, it is clearly beyond its capacity to launch and sustain all the developments it hopes to see. The Institute’s role, in this as in other activities, is primarily to stimulate others to act, and to advise rather than to assume direct executive responsibilities.<sup>50</sup>

This acknowledgment, that the Institute could only offer itself as a conduit to regional provision on a London-based template, is the crucial factor that, had measures been different, could have enabled a more regionally-specific exhibition circuit to flourish. The method of this ‘tentative’ investigation was nevertheless curtailed by two factors. Firstly there was the recognition that, as a ‘public body [with] a responsibility to the country at large’, the BFI should be as egalitarian as possible led to a policy of expansion based primarily upon

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<sup>49</sup> Quinn, ‘Outside London’, p.3 and p.5.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 11.

geographical dispersion rather than feasibility. In considering the possibility of ‘regional National Film Theatres’, James Quinn admitted that

in principle it was felt that the regions selected should be as widely scattered as possible, that they should if possible form a cross-section of the country, and should include on the one hand major industrial areas with very large populations and flourishing universities and on the other smaller towns serving the rural population in the vicinity.<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, the plan to ‘investigate’ the potential of these regional film theatres was undercut somewhat by the action already taken by both individuals and film societies in seeking their own solution to the disparity between London and the rest of the country. In opting to visit a number of locations (which the report titles “Reconnaissance in Nine Cities”) where specialist exhibition was either absent in the form of commercial continentals or prevalent in the form of pro-active film societies, the future model of the regional film theatre initiative was established in so much as geography and opportunity superseded need and practicality.<sup>52</sup> The nine cities of Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Ipswich, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Norwich and Nottingham represent a geographical dispersal and concentrated population that met favourably with the BFI’s desire to assuage criticism. Approaching local authorities, film societies, universities and arts centres and proposing the joint establishment of a regional film theatre along the lines of the NFT, the survey found that a promise of capital expenditure on the cost of building work from the BFI (via the Treasury) and the involvement of the local film societies made the scheme appear worthwhile. While this initial, tentative, survey resulted in a working formula for the expansion into the regions, the casual assumption inherent in much of the investigation leaves a question as to the constitution of a potential audience for theatres of this kind.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16.



The survey of Manchester, noting the presence of four film societies and a course in the History of the Cinema at Manchester University, went so far as to observe that ‘there is [...] only one specialised cinema; and it would appear reasonable to assume the existence of an unsatisfied demand for films of artistic merit imaginatively and professionally presented on N.F.T. lines’.<sup>53</sup> Compounding this obvious disregard for the feasibility of the operation, the survey of Norwich as ‘one of the smaller cities covered by the survey’ admitted the priority of the initiative may be based more in perception than practicality when it noted that ‘to the extent that it is desirable to locate the N.F.T. at representative points geographically throughout the country, Norwich should be included’.<sup>54</sup> Acknowledging the critical influence of the way the ‘Outside London’ survey was conducted is paramount to understanding the subsequent expansion of the regional film theatre initiative and the basis on which these theatres were conceived and operated. Noting that ‘local authorities and others consulted did not need to be persuaded that a branch of the National Film Theatre in their city or town would provide a useful addition to their cultural amenities’, the report concludes with four points of recommendation, the last of which proclaims:

The Institute, in accordance with its brief, should seek to stimulate action locally or regionally rather than undertake developments itself. It should, however, be prepared to give help particularly at the launching stage and some assistance thereafter, but continuing responsibility should rest primarily with those on the spot.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 32-33. The remaining three recommendations were as follows: ‘1) Minority taste is recognised in Britain for the other arts and literature. It is high time that it should be more widely recognised where film is concerned, and the practical consequence of such recognition should be accepted by the British Film Institute. 2) Accordingly the Institute should seek to establish centres throughout the country for the showing and study of films, on the lines of the National Film Theatre in London. 3) The successful development of the N.F.T., and through the N.F.T. of other aspects of the Institute’s work outside London, will involve the expenditure of money and will call for the co-operation of the Government, local authorities, the film industry, film societies, universities, colleges, schools and the local industry in each area’.

This financial constitution of the regional film theatres is one of the defining characteristics that dictated to a large extent the operation and provision of services that began on a trial basis in three strategic locations. Beginning with Brighton and Aldeburgh in June 1966 and continuing with Malvern a month later, 'experimental' operations were inaugurated at venues either owned by commercial interests (the Continentale Cinema in Brighton) or collectives interested in the preservation of artistic activity in the town (the Festival Trust in Aldeburgh and the Theatre Trust in Malvern).<sup>56</sup> Intended to gauge the feasibility, not so much of local audience potential as local institutional interest and compatibility, these 'experimental' operations can be considered akin to film society meetings with direct affiliation to the BFI rather than through the intermediary of the BFFS.

Constituting a significantly different viewing experience, the difference between the film society movement and the resulting regional film theatres can be equated to the disparity between the continental commercial theatres and the all-pervasive commercial circuits. While the three 'experimental' operations were chosen because of sympathetic reactions to an initial BFI approach, which required insubstantial investment on the part of the host authority and venue, the inauguration of the dedicated regional film theatres that opened from Autumn 1966 required a funding mechanism that would enable the BFI to honour its desire to 'stimulate interest locally'.<sup>57</sup>

The first regional film theatre to open, in Nottingham (22<sup>nd</sup> September 1966), had also been the first to inquire as to the possibility of establishing closer links with the BFI and the NFT operation when the Nottingham Co-operative Film Society approached the Institute in

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<sup>56</sup> 'BFI Outlook 1967' (London: BFI, 1967).

<sup>57</sup> Quinn, 'Outside London', p.62.

1963.<sup>58</sup> With Bristol and Norwich opening regional film theatres in October and with Aldeburgh ending its ‘experimental’ stage by becoming a regional film theatre the same month, the process investigated by James Quinn in ‘Outside London’ between Autumn 1964 and Spring 1965 had taken root [for an illustration of the spread and speed with which the regional film theatre initiative progressed throughout Britain during this period see ‘Table 1. Significant opening dates (regional film theatres)’ on page 98].<sup>59</sup> As the BFI approached local authorities around the country based primarily upon geographical considerations, other authorities took notice of the potential for reflected glory engendered by having a cultural amenity with associations to London.

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<sup>58</sup> For a thorough investigation into the role of the Nottingham film society movement and its links to the BFI see: Melanie Selfe, ‘**The Role of Film Societies in the Presentation and Mediation of “Cultural” Film in Post-War Nottingham**’ (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of East Anglia, 2007), and Selfe, “‘Doing the Work of the NFT in Nottingham’ – or How to Use the BFI to Beat the Communist Threat in Your Local Film Society’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 4:1 (2007), pp. 80-101.

<sup>59</sup> The Bristol RFT opened 15<sup>th</sup> October 1966 and the Norwich RFT opened 17<sup>th</sup> October 1966.

<u>Regional Film Theatre</u>	<u>Opening Date</u>
Brighton (experimental)	June 1966
Aldeburgh (experimental)	June 1966
Malvern (experimental)	July 1966
Nottingham	22 <sup>nd</sup> September 1966
Bristol	15 <sup>th</sup> October 1966
Norwich	17 <sup>th</sup> October 1966
Aldeburgh	October 1966
Middlesborough	October 1966
Colchester	February 1967
Southampton	April 1967
Newport	12 <sup>th</sup> June 1967
Sheffield	10 <sup>th</sup> October 1967
Manchester	13 <sup>th</sup> October 1967
St Austell	October 1967
Exeter	November 1967
Tyneside	March 1968
St Albans	April 1968
Edinburgh	May 1968
Dartington	May 1968
Basildon	22 <sup>nd</sup> September 1968
York	20 <sup>th</sup> October 1968
<b>Hull</b>	<b>9<sup>th</sup> January 1969</b>
Brighton	23 <sup>rd</sup> February 1969
Luton	September 1969
Canterbury	9 <sup>th</sup> October 1969
Southend	12 <sup>th</sup> January 1970
Croydon	1 <sup>st</sup> March 1970
Leeds	September 1970
Bolton	30 <sup>th</sup> October 1970
Stirling	September 1971
Lancaster	18 <sup>th</sup> November 1971
Horsham	29 <sup>th</sup> January 1972
Whitehaven	22 <sup>nd</sup> May 1972
<b>Whitgift (Grimsby)</b>	<b>27<sup>th</sup> March 1972</b>
Kendal	September 1973
<b>Scunthorpe</b>	<b>July 1974</b>

Table 1. Significant opening dates (regional film theatres).

Justifying the initiative to interested (and disinterested) parties became a crucial factor in establishing future film theatres, and considerations such as expense, competition and trade revenue became recurrent concerns. Fears from the distribution side of the film industry were assuaged by the reassurance that ‘unlike the National Film Theatre, which obtains its programmes free, the provincial theatres would hire programmes, so there would be benefit to the trade’.<sup>60</sup> The exhibition sector was equally concerned about the potential competition from what many feared would amount to a third circuit. Whilst not explicitly encroaching upon the traditional territory screened by the commercial cinemas, those exhibitors with an interest in non-mainstream exhibition feared that a combine with increasing geographical presence throughout the country could present a threat to revenue. By far the more important sector of the industry to appease were local authorities who were in many cases new to the concept of film exhibition tied to a national institution. Concerned about the financial commitment required of them, local authorities and interested institutions were assured that:

Using existing facilities for screenings and allowing for improvements to equipment and seating, the cost of establishing a film theatre in the provinces would be relatively inexpensive – requiring a grant of probably not more than £1,000-£2,000 a year, until it became self-supporting.<sup>61</sup>

To aid this added expenditure for county and non-county boroughs and urban and rural districts, they were reminded that through the Local Government Act of 1948 they were empowered to ‘spend up to the product of a 6d rate net on the arts and entertainment’.<sup>62</sup> Added to this measure was the amendment to existing laws in The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, which granted local authorities further powers to ‘help arts organisations by allowing them to use such premises for meetings, exhibitions, film shows, musical

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<sup>60</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly*, 21 October, 1965, p.18.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> A.H. Marshall, *Local Authorities and the Arts* (Egbaston: University of Birmingham, 1974), p.1.

performances and other educational or cultural events’ (this latter was to be of immense importance with regard to Hull Film Theatre).<sup>63</sup> With aid provided by the BFI in the form of a deficit grant against incurred losses, the variety of operations gradually becoming regional film theatres is testament to the cautious attitude with which the initiative was approached. Community and arts centres became regional film theatres as did university halls and live theatre venues operated on an alternate basis. This pattern of film screenings became the norm as the various cultural and educational venues used as regional film theatres continued ancillary activities with most opting for a one-week-in-four operation, dedicating the venue to a programme of art cinema once per month.

In this attempt to instigate regional film theatres in key geographical locations across Britain, however, the BFI followed a policy that sought to situate these theatres in significantly different locations. Whilst small, dispersed communities were targeted in the key geographical locations of Malvern (experimental – July 1966), Aldeburgh (October 1966) and St Austell (October 1967), larger, more concentrated communities such as Nottingham (September 1966), Manchester (October 1967) and Sheffield (October 1967) were also sought in order to cater to a wide, yet significantly disparate, set of demographics. Within these catchments there are noticeable omissions in the form of cities with populations greater than 500,000, and those falling between small towns such as Aldeburgh and the ‘medium’ size of those such as Sheffield. Addressing the latter first, it becomes clear that negotiations between the BFI and the interested local parties (be they council or art collective) had more of a favourable chance of success in the locations where a small community had hitherto been under-served by any cultural activity and the interest of a ‘national’ organisation could flatter and excite the local representatives. In the case of the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

‘medium’ sized cities this enthusiasm for the establishment of a regional film theatre can be understood to stem from a desire to emulate London and cater to a potential audience thought more ‘cultured’ than had previously been acknowledged. This diversity in needs perhaps explains the lack of regional film theatres in locations that have a population that falls between these two examples.

The failure to establish a film theatre in Lincoln is illustrative of this gap. Lincoln was a city included on the map of Britain in ‘Outlook 1967’ illustrating the progress of the establishment of the RFTs around the country as a ‘project likely to come into operation within [the] next year’.<sup>64</sup> With both Nottingham and Sheffield regional film theatres within reach of Lincoln (Hull being inaccessible directly until the opening of the Humber Bridge in 1981), the status of Lincoln as a city of a certain size mitigated against the formation of its own RFT. Not small enough to warrant a theatre that the BFI could claim was bringing cultural exhibition to a minority, and not big enough to justify the investment of time and finance, the case is illustrative of the geographical and representative impetus behind the RFT initiative.

Compounding this failure to cater for populations of a certain size was the difficulty in establishing RFTs in areas with a population greater than 500,000. Planning ahead for the future establishment of RFTs, the BFI’s ‘Outlook 1966’ reproduced a map of Britain with the heading ‘Principal towns in Great Britain and the location of proposed sites of the National Film Theatres’.<sup>65</sup> Alongside London as a ‘principal town’ were Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester, all of which had trouble establishing their own RFT. Due to the size and location of these cities the exhibition of ‘art cinema’ was nowhere near as atrophied as in smaller cities and towns and opposition from other exhibitors and the reluctance of local representatives (council, film society or art collective) to instigate such a project resulted in

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<sup>64</sup> ‘BFI Outlook 1967’, p.26.

<sup>65</sup> ‘BFI Outlook 1966’ (London: BFI, 1966), p.7.

the slow uptake of RFTs in these areas. A similar prolonged campaign occurred in Scotland, with the case of the Glasgow Film Theatre highlighting not only the difficulty in setting up a film theatre in a location already catered for by art cinemas but also the animosity between the Scottish Film Council and what it saw as its overbearing, yet uncooperative, host organisation, the BFI.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless with sixteen regional film theatres open by the end of 1967 and twenty-four by the end of 1968 the initiative had covered most of the geographical dispersion imagined by 'Outside London' in early 1965 (see Table 2 on page 139 for significant RFT opening dates including those within the county of Humberside to be dealt with later in the thesis). With cinema attendance continuing to decline throughout the period of regional expansion it is tempting to consider the regional film theatre initiative as a middlebrow 'third circuit', not quite threatening the duopoly, about which various monopoly commissions of the period had concerns, but a counter to the mainstream films on offer in these cinemas. Local response to the expansion into the 'provinces' varied immensely, however, and geographical dispersion acted against complete (or even partial) commitment to a 'third circuit'. The speed and uptake of the initiative does, however, obscure the struggle and compromise that at least one such regional film theatre, the Hull Film Theatre, encountered in its bid for a slice of the cultural progression offered by London.

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<sup>66</sup> From the establishment of a Scottish Film Council in late 1934 tensions ran high as to exactly who should administer control over film-related activities in Scotland. This antagonistic situation was particularly heightened throughout the 1960s and 1970s when a debate raged as to who was best positioned to direct the Housing the Cinema Fund and the establishment of regional film theatres in Scotland.



## Conclusion

This consideration of the first thirty-five years of the BFI up to the opening of the Hull Film Theatre in 1969 necessarily condenses a vast amount of institutional history into a digestible précis, which is concerned with changing policy but with an underlying stable intent. In taking its cue from public bodies such as the BBC, the BFI sought to position itself in its early years as a mediator in the transition of film from entertainment to art form via its use as a tool in education. With the legitimacy of film as an art form already embedded in the emerging 'movements' from Europe (Surrealism, Expressionism, Soviet propaganda cinema, French Poetic Realism) the route from mere amusement for the masses to intellectual engagement for the few had to be channelled through certain strata that would ensure its acceptance as such. With the middle-classes gaining credence through the adoption and championing of film as 'art', the stage through which film progressed in the charge of the BFI meant that *education through film* was at one remove from the *sanctioning of film* as worthy of study. The success with which this endeavour was delivered is disguised somewhat by the changing nature of political pressure and the removal of this remit from the BFI by the creation of both the National Committee for Visual Arts in Education and the British Academy and the subsequent recommendations of the Radcliffe Report.

Creating opportunity from opprobrium, the BFI altered its tack from the use of film for the benefit of those in education to the use of film for the benefit of the BFI. In doing so they created a subtle shift in their educationalist strategy towards educating the public as to the best way to 'experience' 'art cinema'. Whilst it could be argued that the Institute had shifted its focus away from the use of film in education towards more refined ways in which film could be utilized as a subject of study in and of itself in the more specialised environs of higher education and dedicated events, this was not until a process of policy entrenchment

had taken place. Over the two decades since the Radcliffe Report, the BFI could be said to have reacted to circumstances often beyond its control to create an Institute that responded to a need that was never systematically investigated. Couched in terms that attempted to draw serious attention to products previously thought unworthy of such attention, the process of creating a 'National Film Theatre' and programming 'the best of the World Cinema' revolved around notions of taste, distinction and social mobility. With such a strategy the success or failure of the endeavour rested not so much upon financial return or audience figures as a need not to exceed subsistence grants and the impact of the initiative in the opinion of the policy-makers. It is this that enabled the birth of the regional film theatres in the mid-to-late 1960s and that led to the hasty spread of theatres around the country, modelled not so much on local circumstance as central profligacy. With this expansion into 'the regions', brought forth by circumstance and forced policy, the course that led to the creation of the Hull Film Theatre in 1969 was one of such decisiveness that factors mitigating against such an opening were set aside in favour of attachment to an 'approved' cultural endeavour. Yet the circumstances that seeded the creation of Hull Film Theatre (as many others) were not as straightforward as the history of the regional film theatre initiative has recorded, with operation by local council(s) creating a situation far from envisioned and even further from ideal as the next chapter illustrates.