

In Focus: The British Film Institute

edited by Toby Miller

Who Are These People?¹



by Toby Miller

A letter to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* signed by 48 academics—42 from overseas—cited BFI Publishing’s “unique contribution to the study of film and television around the globe;” a similar letter to the *Guardian* expressed the concern of 58 academics. [BFI Director Amanda] Nevill, however, is unmoved. “Go back and analyse who these people are. It’s a very small number of people ... saying a small number of things”—*Time Out*²

The time is the late 1990s, and I am cleaning under my bed—an unusual activity for me. The phone rings. I reach for the cordless device, and a pleasant-sounding, youngish man introduces himself as a consultant who has been asked to look for ways to improve the British Film Institute (the BFI). He was given my name and number. His main thought is that the Institute should become more commercial, following the example of the American Film Institute (the AFI). I laugh and say that the AFI is a joke, a public relations arm of Hollywood with minimal academic, cultural, theoretical, political, or intellectual credibility. The AFI needs to become more like the BFI, I suggest.³ He laughs, the conversation ends amicably, and the dust accumulates under the futon. Ten years later, someone pins up *Kill Bill* posters around the BFI, with Uma Thurman’s sword-wielding figure airbrushed away and replaced by the face of the organization’s director, Amanda Nevill. The trope symbolizes her stripping the BFI of its assets, to remake it under the spell of the private sector.⁴

I suspect that today the joke is on people like me, not the BFI’s director or the advance-guard consultant of a decade ago. Buttressed by years of neoliberalism, their triumph seems complete. For many of us, however, “the overall mood of the organization” seems “subdued, quite different to the buzzy atmosphere 10 years ago.”⁵ What had been “an enviable model” of cultural policy is now widely regarded as “an awful example of political vandalism.”⁶ This dossier seeks to explain how that happened, and what it means for us now, in the light of the BFI’s past.

How should we conceptualize the British Film Institute? In struggling for an analogy, anthropological museums come to mind. Ethology, ethnology, and

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archaeology were pioneered by such institutions. The study of difference moved from the museum to the classroom in part via their example. Something similar occurred with screen studies, which in its humanities manifestation has drawn massively on the example set by the BFI. The great thing about the Institute for scholars has been that its teaching, archiving, and publishing were run by intellectuals, pioneers of English-language film theory, history, and study. They provided an example of how to “do” screen culture that we cloistered souls now emulate.

The BFI’s origins in the late 1920s and early 1930s lay in concerns about the perils and promises of cinema, its twin capacities to curse and to bless, to intoxicate and to educate. In those days, the screen was regarded by such bodies as the Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, a creature of the adult-education movement, as “a powerful instrument for good and evil.”⁷ That discourse animated the formation of the BFI. Activists thought that the best way to use movies as an “instrument” for “good” over “evil” was through the generation of a considered, improving discourse that would elevate viewers.⁸

Such beliefs conceived of culture as “conformity to law without the law,” as articulated by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*. Kant argued that aesthetic contemplation, if properly tutored, could produce “morally practical precepts” that transcended particular interests through “public sense, i.e. a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation ... to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind.”⁹

The BFI initially focused on publishing and education. The heart of its mission from 1933 to 1948 was providing instructions for projectionists, short courses for teachers, film pantheons for pupils, and periodicals for readers.¹⁰ Similar drives animated Britain’s inter- and postwar adult-education movement more broadly, alongside the left Leavisism that took hold in schools and elsewhere. This position was carried forward at the Institute and various British universities in the 1950s and 1960s by the likes of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, and Paddy Whannel. Some later turned to Marxism, of course, partially abjuring this earlier, confident brokerage of taste.

From those modest beginnings, the BFI came to offer an extraordinary array of objects and services. The National Film and Television Archive has been collecting, cataloguing, and preserving for over seven decades. It has 675,000 TV shows and 180,000 movies. The National Library is the largest source of materials about the screen in the world, with over two million newspaper cuttings; 47,000 books, CD-ROMs, annuals, and pamphlets; 110,000 periodicals; 20,000 scripts; and 25,000 press books. The production, exhibition, and distribution apparatus includes annual sales of 100,000 books, DVDs, and associated texts and 300,000 copies of *Sight & Sound*, an IMAX® theatre, and the National Film Theatre. The superb West End offices, a gift from John Paul Getty II, are worth millions, while the Institute draws its basic operating budget from the UK Film Council, a peak body of the film industry established by the Government that re-grants state moneys.

Despite these successes, as a public body that receives a tiny proportion of state outlays but operates in a fissiparous and prominent sector, the BFI has routinely endured crises of finance, governance, morale, and direction, not unlike those experienced by public broadcasters. It is variously said to be too populist, not populist enough, too scholarly, not scholarly enough, too independent, not independent enough, too British, not British enough. The first moment of critique occurred during the Second World War, when the Darlington Hall Trust accused the Institute of failing to change the shape of education and hence fulfill its principal mission. A few years later, the Radcliffe Committee of Enquiry into the Future Constitution and Work of the BFI called for greater funding, expanded screenings, and regional devolution. Subsequent developments saw these other activities blossom.¹¹ So criticism can generate expansion.

The Institute's budget has stagnated for years in absolute, let alone real terms, at around £16 million; many functions are being sold or diminished. Tony Blair's lasting legacy to profligacy (the bid to stage the summer Olympics in London) is expected to starve cultural subvention for the foreseeable future.¹² This might, in *Variety's* words, induce a "cynical shrug." After all, does the Institute not "lurch permanently from one crisis to another"?¹³ Some even welcome these developments. "GBR" offered the *Guardian* this blog comment on August 3, 2007: "The BFI are a valuable source for archive material but their publishing wing produced a hideous lot of pseudo-psychoanalytical twaddle" that "reduced film theory to the level of Scientology."

But the *Observer* suggests that this time things are different.¹⁴ The current regime has spent a third of the budget creating and promoting BFI Southbank (a gallery, mediatheque, and studio cinema). In the process it has transferred buckets of public money to consultants and produced a possible white elephant that already sucks money from other activities.¹⁵ BFI Publishing has been sold off, archiving is restricted, the Library is effectively out to tender, and rumors spread that Getty's bequest may be sold to pay for neoliberalism's extravagant reallocation of resources to West End glitz. Meanwhile, the parental Film Council pours money into industry training via the new Film Business Academy so that bright young things know the ins and outs of tax avoidance.¹⁶

And BFI management is increasingly prone to puerile warlockcraft superstitions about "excellence," "access," and "evaluation." Basically, the organization seeks to resemble the entity it now serves—business. This mimetic managerial fallacy increases surveillance and ties budgets to "outcomes," in keeping with the prevailing beliefs of public-policy mandarins and their restless quest to conduct themselves like corporate elves *manqués*. Many of us who have worked for corporations know what laughably inefficient institutions they can be—but then, those who watch intellectuals from the perch of administration frequently have *ressentiment* in their eyes and underachievement on their résumés.

This tendency is exemplified in the fate of Danny Birchall, who wrote a regular 2007 column for *Sight & Sound* about online movies. In early November of

that year, he received an email from the editor that read, in part, “Since your call for Amanda to resign—something I’m sure you know she took very personally—your column, fine as it is, has become more trouble to me than it’s worth.” He was purged. The crime? Birchall—a freelancer, not an employee—had posted a jokey New Year’s 2007 message on his blog calling for Nevill to go. At the point that he was fired, the posting had been up for ten months. It had been seen by, ahem, twenty-four people. Would that not be the kind of customer research favored by auditors? Would not the topic exemplify the open criticism that public institutions and cultural leaders should welcome? Apparently not, until the fuss became public and the editor relented.¹⁷

The thinking that now makes policy for and at the BFI is evident in the British Comptroller and Auditor General’s National Audit Office 2003 report, *Improving Access to, and Education About, the Moving Image Through the British Film Institute*. Page one’s “Executive Summary” (do you ever feel as though you are not qualified to read these crib sheets for the important-but-distracted?) says that the BFI must “broaden access by attracting new customers” (1). The Audit Office proceeds to pummel its object of desire because there has been “insufficient evaluation by the BFI of the BFI’s activities” (3). We are witnesses here to a creeping, creepy governmentality blended with commodification, where the only arguments with any play are to do with stimulating business and incorporating the populace into corporate multiculturalism.

The Institute is increasingly conceived, it seems, as a hand servant to the movie industry. This is wrongheaded. The BFI should not be “a commercial organization,” but “a public body dedicated to a whole series of integrated functions designed to foster film culture at large.”¹⁸ Subordinating it to industry’s concerns is “a bit like having the British Library run by the Publisher’s Association.”¹⁹ As *Time Out* said, it puts screen culture “at the mercy of market forces.”²⁰

What is to be done? The British have a venerable notion of “the great and the good.” It has counterparts in the UN’s Eminent Persons Groups, Royal Commissions, and joint bodies convened by otherwise rivalrous think tanks, for example, the American Enterprise Institute–Brookings Joint Center for Regulatory Studies. The idea is to deal with controversial topics in ways that blend popular visibility, political bipartisanship, professional expertise, and public interest, deliberating without the burden of party loyalty or corporate responsibility. No such group has been convened to ponder this tragic fire sale. As per Billy Bragg’s lament in “Tear Down the Union Jack,” “the great and the good” have been displaced by “the greedy and the mean” in “England.co.uk.” Ms Nevill asked “who these people are” that signed petitions opposing the sale of publishing. The answer is that we are professors of media studies from the United States, Sweden, India, Hong Kong, Canada, Australia, and Britain. We may not be “the great and the good.” And we are stuck thinking like Clement Atlee and Immanuel Kant instead of Tony Blair and Milton Friedman. Woops, wrong object choices.²¹ But at least we know who

we are, as per the BFI director's command. And we should agitate for the "great and the good" to roar back into town and review the BFI.²²

Britain's Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association produced a 2007 paper expressing concern at the Institute's idea that universities take over the functions of the Library.²³ This critique is in keeping with a desire for decentralization rather than locking up treasures in cloisters, and an understanding that the work of the Institute is international, not merely national. SCMS should follow that lead and start a ginger group in the United States to push for the AFI to get real and perform a serious function for U.S. and world screen culture. We have made periodic attempts to do this since 1969²⁴—let us forge a broad-based coalition with other professional bodies and try again.

And the BFI? Its infrastructure unraveling, its intellectuals gone, and its leadership compromised, the Institute is a residual sign of public culture, a sign now thoroughly disarticulated from its referent. That legacy deserves better than to be sloughed off to capital by a bunch of bottom-feeding neoliberals. I hope this dossier goes some way to put on record a sense of what has been, what has been lost, and the significance of its influence on screen studies.

Notes

1. Thanks to Edward Buscombe and Rick Maxwell for comments, to Heather Hendershot for proposing this dossier, and to the authors for producing in double-quick time. It is no surprise that they are not fussy career academics.
2. Dave Calhoun and Ben Walters, "Inside the BFI," *Time Out*, October 18, 2007.
3. Like the BFI, ideas for an AFI were around from at least the 1930s (Lorraine Noble, "Modernization, By Way of the Educational Film," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 10, no. 3 [1936]: 152). The BFI became an inspirational model for what activists hoped the AFI might become (Colin Young, "An American Film Institute: A Proposal," *Film Quarterly* 14, no. 4 [1961]: 40). Once created, the Institute essentially excluded intellectuals from management, and cutbacks squashed screen studies (Ernest Callenbach, "The Unloved One: Crisis at the American Film Institute," *Film Quarterly* 24, no. 4 [1971]: 54).
4. Keith Dovkants, "The Kill Bill Prank and the BFI Boss Accused of Asset-Stripping," *Evening Standard*, October 12, 2007, A18.
5. Sarita Malik, "Now You See Me ..." *Guardian*, August 3, 2007.
6. Colin MacCabe, "Save Our Film Heritage from the Political Vandals," *Observer*, July 8, 2007.
7. *The Film in National Life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932).
8. Christophe Dupin, "The Postwar Transformation of the British Film Institute and its Impact on the Development of a National Film Culture in Britain," *Screen* 47, no. 4 (2006): 443–44.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (New York: Hackett Publishing, 1987).
10. Dupin, "The Postwar Transformation," 444.
11. Dupin, "The Postwar Transformation," 445, 447.
12. Dovkants, "The Kill Bill Prank."
13. Adam Dawtrey, "BFI Shakeup Raises Alarm," *Variety*, June 18–24, 2007, 12.

14. MacCabe, "Save Our Film Heritage."
15. Dovkants, "The Kill Bill Prank"; Dawtrey, "BFI Shakeup"; Cy Young, "The Heart is Being Ripped Out of the British Film Institute," *Guardian*, June 13, 2007.
16. Geoffrey Macnab, "Times Look Bleak for the BFI," *Guardian*, June 14, 2007. Fortunately, the government directly allocated £25 million for archiving in 2007 (Simon Crear, "Government's £25m Boost to Save British Film Institute's Archive," *Times*, October 17, 2007).
17. See Danny Birchall's blog at squaresofwheat.wordpress.com.
18. Michael Chanan et al., "BFI Realignment Threat to Book Publishing Imprint," *Guardian*, June 9, 2007, 37.
19. Cary Bazalgette, "The Heart is Being Ripped Out of the British Film Institute," *Guardian*, June 13, 2007.
20. Calhoun and Walters, "Inside the BFI."
21. Peter Monaghan, "British Film Institute Will Outsource Production Role of its Publishing Arm," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 15, 2007, A16. The University of California Press, which dutifully distributed BFI titles for years, was never consulted about the changes to publishing. I told the Press about the proposal, staggered that the Institute's incompetence stretched to this failure to communicate. Business efficiency, anyone? Anyone?
22. For those seeking to participate, a good source for information is Pam Cook's www.bfiwatch.blogspot.com.
23. Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association, *The Issues Facing the British Film Institute National Library*, January 2007.
24. Gerald Mast, "The AFI and Film Education I: Gerald Mast Responds to E. Ann Kaplan's Editorial Statement on the Closing of the AFI Education Services Program (*Cinema Journal*, Summer 1983)," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 1 (1983): 57–59.

The British Film Institute



by *Geoffrey Nowell-Smith*

Founded in 1933, the British Film Institute (BFI) celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2008, making it the most long-standing government-sponsored arts organization in Britain. It is also the oldest film-related institution of its type in the world. It is not only the oldest but also unique, since nowhere else does one find so many functions synthesized and indeed synergized into a single organization.

The BFI started small. In its first year its government grant was £4,500—equivalent perhaps to £100,000 (\$200,000) today, but still not very much. But it grew. It took over an educational magazine called *Sight & Sound*. It began to collect books and other printed materials, film stills, and actual films. In 1935 it created the National Film Library, consisting on the one hand of films to be preserved for posterity and on the other hand of a lending collection of must-see films for colleges and film societies. During the war its premises were bombed but the

collections survived. Then, after the war, its dynamic new director, Denis Forman, persuaded the government to provide premises on London's South Bank for a National Film Theatre (NFT) where archive and other films could be shown. Karel Reisz was hired as programmer. Gavin Lambert, soon joined by Lindsay Anderson, was brought in to turn around *Sight & Sound* and make it a spearhead of combative film criticism. A film appreciation department was set up (later renamed education). A small fund was established to aid experimental film production. The lending collection was hived off from the rest of the National Film Library and the Library (renamed National Film Archive in 1955) concentrated increasingly on preservation and on building up a small cache of restricted access viewing prints.

Although it had vastly expanded its public reach, the BFI remained poorly funded throughout the long period of Conservative rule from 1951 to 1964. The NFT's premises were rent-free, but it received no revenue funding and was expected to break even on its running costs—though it rarely did so. The Archive could collect and store films but had very little money to spend on active conservation. The lending collection, which might have been a money-spinner, was ineffectively managed, though it did at least send films out to the provinces, in other respects badly served by the BFI. In 1961, the BFI made a policy decision to include television under its remit, but it was some while before it could really commit any serious resources to TV-related activity.

The return of a Labour government in 1964 provided welcome relief. Between 1965 and 1969 government funding increased nearly threefold, with some of the new money being devoted to expanding the education service but most of it going into supporting a network of so-called Regional Film Theatres spread across the country. More money was made available to the BFI Production Board (successor to the Experimental Film Fund). It also became possible to put an end to the fiction of a totally self-supporting NFT, which in 1971 acquired a second screen and was hard put to cover its costs. Then in 1974, a catastrophic explosion at a chemical plant near the village of Flixborough in Humberside, which killed twenty-seven people, alerted the government's attention to the dangers of many sorts of chemicals, including nitrate film. Since nitrate is not only highly flammable but also liable to decay, this tragedy was a godsend to the archive, which was able to embark on a program of duplicating all its nitrate holdings onto acetate, making numbers of viewing copies in the process.

Meanwhile the BFI was riven by ideological disputes. Under the leadership of Paddy Whannel, the Education Department turned itself in the late 1960s into a powerhouse for new ideas on film, which put in question the "art cinema" culture expressed in the pages of *Sight & Sound* and in NFT programming. In 1970, a group of BFI members calling themselves the Members Action Committee (I was one of them) challenged the BFI's priorities and practices, notably the rather ineffectual Regional Film Theatres (RFTs) but also the Archive's prioritizing of

preservation over access. At a stormy annual general meeting on December 14, 1970, the Action Committee narrowly failed to push through a motion dismissing the BFI's entire Board of Governors. The Governors and management identified the source of the trouble, not in the culture at large, but in disaffected elements inside the BFI itself, especially in the Education Department. A hastily written report by a subcommittee of governors chaired by Professor Asa Briggs recommended scaling back the department and reducing it to a servicing role. Whannel resigned, taking five other members of staff with him. But the matter did not end there. Hydra-headed, the pesky dissidents kept reappearing, occupying various positions in the surrounding culture or in the BFI itself. One member of the Action Committee, Nick Garnham, became a BFI Governor. Peter Sainsbury became Head of Production. I became Head of Education (and later of Publishing). Colin McArthur, who had been a member of the Education Department staff, was promoted to take over the unwieldy and incompetently managed Film Services and set about using it to stir up the stagnant waters of the film societies and RFTs who were its main clients. Deprived of input into the "Cinema One" series of books, the educationalists and their allies got together to produce books of their own. The Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT), which had also been threatened with loss of BFI support, was reprieved and, under the editorship first of Sam Rohdie and then of Ben Brewster, the Society's magazine *Screen* played a major role in introducing new theories of film, notably semiological, throughout the English-speaking world.

By the end of the 1970s, then, the BFI was, and did, a multitude of things, often on quite a grand scale. It was a cinémathèque that both collected and preserved films and showed them (it also archived television programs). It had a lending library of films and a stills collection. It had a world-renowned library of books, periodicals, scripts, and assorted other collections, as well as an information service. It supported film theatres around the country. The London Film Festival, inaugurated in 1957, had become a major event, spread across several London venues as well as the NFT. The BFI also published books and other written materials. It was a powerful force in promoting film and media education. And it had become a substantial film producer, with a number of feature films to its credit including the Bill Douglas trilogy and Chris Petit's *Radio On*. It was shortly to add to its portfolio a wider role in film distribution and, at the end of the 1980s, video (and later DVD) distribution/publication, and the ill-fated Museum of the Moving Image.

The things the BFI did were the sort of things that were done in other countries. Only in its pioneering educational work was it doing things that had no parallel elsewhere. Other countries had cinémathèques (whether for screening or preserving), film festivals, lending collections, specialist libraries, and a thriving publishing sector. In some cases other countries did some or all of these things better than Britain. What was remarkable was the concentration of so many activities into one institution and often under one roof. The Cinémathèque Française

showed a wider and more interesting range of films than the NFT. Only in the past couple of years, however, following a merger with the Bibliothèque du Film (BiFi) has it combined its exhibition activities with a library and a stills collection (“iconothèque”). Meanwhile, as a result of the miscreance of its creator, Henri Langlois, its function as a preserving archive has been taken away and given to a separate organization, the Service des Archives du Film. The Cinémathèque has played a small role in film book publishing, but far more is done by French commercial publishers. In the United States, a much larger and more polycentric country, archives are dispersed. The Library of Congress holds pride of place, but scholars are often faced with long plane rides, up to Rochester, New York, or across to Los Angeles, in search of precious prints. And if they are studying the industry they will almost certainly have to go to Los Angeles, where they will find files of documents and a wonderful stills archive, but not necessarily the films to which these documents and stills relate. Meanwhile American university presses have a record in quality film book publishing that puts their British counterparts to shame.

Reader, you are probably one of the international community of film scholars to which the BFI provides a unique service. Maybe you have spent a day alternating between watching David Lean films on a Steenbeck in the basement at the BFI's London headquarters and sitting in the library leafing through papers in the Lean collection; your evenings have perhaps been spent at the National Film Theatre, a twenty-five-minute walk away on the far side of the river. Back home, you have some BFI books on your shelves. Know, then, that your status is a privileged and resented one, and you may not enjoy your privileges forever. A recent report by the British government's National Audit Office estimated that your viewing of *In Which We Serve*, for which you paid £20, actually cost £110 to provide, meaning a net subsidy by the British taxpayer of £90. In the eyes of some, both outside and inside the BFI, this is not what the BFI is for.

But what is it for? Who is this complex of interlocking activities designed to serve? And whom does it serve, by design or not? This is a question to which it is not possible to give a simple answer. Twenty or more years ago it would not have been necessary to give one. The jewel in the BFI crown was the National Film Archive, and the Archive was a national institution whose existence was its own justification. It is true that it cost a lot of money, and the government anxiously scrutinized the budget to make sure the money was not being deployed in frivolous ways. But nobody thought it necessary to subject it to cost-benefit analysis to see precisely who benefited from the cost. As for the rest of the BFI, it had a good public profile. In the 1970s it occasionally seemed to lean dangerously towards the left or produce films or books with little mass or even middlebrow appeal. But in the 1980s, when it managed to create a museum attraction bringing in nearly half a million visitors a year and at no cost to the public purse, even the most ardent Thatcherites gave it the benefit of the doubt.

Times have changed. Money is short. The question of purpose is asked with increasing urgency, and high-level answers are not forthcoming. Both questions and answers are couched in terms of performance and targets and outputs and access and footfall. And in these terms many of the BFI's most prized activities are not scoring high enough on the government checklist. Fortunately, the archive seems to be exempt from the worst ravages of the target-setting culture. The question "Who is the archive for?" having proved unanswerable, the alternative question "What is it for?" has been temporarily answered in the most traditional manner possible. It is there to be part of our national heritage and as such has just been awarded a special grant of £25 million to solve problems that, in all honesty, should never have been allowed to arise. But every other part of the BFI is feeling the pinch. The National Film Theatre (now renamed BFI Southbank in an effort to make the world more conscious of the BFI as a brand) has been instructed to save money by importing fewer prints from abroad, and other departments have come under intense financial scrutiny.

The biggest loser in the search for savings has been the BFI's famous synergy. The publishing department, which was losing money, has been handed over to Palgrave, the academic arm of Macmillan. (This is called a "partnership," but nobody who knows the slightest thing about how publishing companies operate will be under any illusion about how such partnership will be effected.) The stills department has been downsized, though whether this was as a result of falling demand for copy-stills following an ill-judged price hike or because still images were thought by someone in management to be no longer a priority in an age when moving pictures can be so easily downloaded onto computers and mobile phones remains unclear. DVD publishing, the great success story of the past few years, is also being threatened with outsourcing, which will seriously threaten the BFI's ability to take risks with important though commercially precarious releases. Most bizarre of all, an attempt has been made to persuade a university library to take over the BFI library and associated services. Again this has been done in the name of partnership, and indeed such a scheme could have benefits if properly operated, but the BFI's motives in proposing the arrangement had little to do with possible improvements in the service and everything to do with the value of the real estate in which the library was housed. It is a great relief that the scheme has apparently been shelved.

The problem with outsourcing activities such as publishing and the library is not that they would not be done well in their new locations. They might or they might not. Rather, what would be lost is the ability to coordinate BFI activities. When I was in charge of BFI Publishing in the 1990s, my role was first and foremost to build up a professional and moderately commercial book publishing operation but also to manage a sort of clearinghouse for a stream of other publications that the BFI produced to support and enhance its other services. We produced archive catalogues, support documentation for NFT, and assorted pamphlets

including policy documents. We also handled the sales of the voluminous materials for teachers and school students produced by the education department. After I left in 1989, my successors reduced the volume of this uncommercial and often unproductive support activity. Financial performance improved, but along with the bathwater they also threw out the baby. Useful synergies continued as late as 2000 with the publication of Tom Gunning's *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Visions of Modernity* paired with a retrospective of the director's work at the NFT. But a management reshuffle that placed publishing in an area called "Trading" was the death knell for such quaint cultural ambitions. The publishing operation that has just been partnered with Palgrave ("Trading" having more or less ceased trading) continued to provide some useful materials for schools but in other respects had become just another publisher pitching its product mainly into an academic market.

It has to be said that the much-vaunted synergies supposed to be derived from the concentration of so many activities into the single BFI were often illusory. They did not emerge spontaneously, and the effort to create them was often disproportionate to the results achieved. Part of the reason for this was the ideological differences referred to above, which were also demographic differences. For most of its life, the BFI's core public has been a membership consisting of NFT and RFT patrons, film society members, and *Sight & Sound* readers—in many ways a motley crew but with significant overlap. It was this public that the most visible parts of the organization set out to serve, and it was this same public that voted down the Members Action Committee's attempt to change the direction of the organization in 1970. By contrast, the public of SEFT activists, left-leaning intellectuals in higher education, and radical independent filmmakers was relatively small, even though at times it punched well above its weight. Age profiles are not easy to come by, but the core public has mostly tended towards the middle-aged, whereas the activists tended to be younger (though they, of course, became older and more established in their turn). So it is obvious that, with 1,000 seats available to be filled every day of the week, and intense pressure to fill at least 500 of them in order to meet budget targets, the NFT was not going to let its programming be overly influenced by a vociferous minority. In any case, now that substance has been abandoned in the pursuit of eye-catching would-be populist "initiatives," the glue that used to hold the BFI together no longer holds.

For most of its history, much of the distinctive character of the BFI was provided by the intellectuals it directly or indirectly employed. Karel Reisz, Lindsay Anderson, and Gavin Lambert have already been mentioned. There were also, in the NFT/*Sight & Sound* part, David Robinson, Richard Roud, Jan Dawson, Jonathan Rosenbaum (briefly), Tom Milne, and others. In the education camp, there were Peter Harcourt, Alan Lovell, V. F. Perkins (briefly), Peter Wollen, Colin McArthur, Ed Buscombe, Christine Gledhill, Pam Cook, Paul Willemen, and many, many others. There was Ian Christie, and Colin MacCabe, who brought

in both Laura Mulvey and Philip Dodd. The first three curators of the National Film Archive, Ernest Lindgren, David Francis, and Clyde Jeavons were all people capable of writing books, even if their duties left them little time for writing. Brenda Davies and John Gillett in the library and information department wrote for *Sight & Sound*. There were superb scholarly compilers of information who did not write as much as their admirers would have liked, such as Markku Salmi and David Meeker. Beginning in the early 1990s there was a gradual hemorrhaging of people of this quality out of or away from the BFI. This hemorrhage—or maybe bloodletting—is now almost complete. Apart from Geoff Andrew at the BFI Southbank, there is nobody left who has any standing as a writer. There are individuals here and there who know and care about cinema and TV and can turn out a well-rounded sentence, but they are few and far between and rarely in positions of power and influence. Meanwhile the intellectuals from the education camp have almost all moved into university posts—as part of the expansion of film studies in higher education that they themselves had pioneered.

The BFI today spends huge sums of money marketing itself, its product, and its image. It has a vague sense of itself as providing services but no sense of service. In a context where the bean counters have ascertained that sizable parts of the BFI's budgets are still devoted to servicing the so-called higher education sector but where there is no notion of what it is all for, it is perhaps not surprising that last year's big idea was to turn to outside partners. But what will be left if the process is allowed to continue? There will be the expensively refurbished (£7.5 million) Southbank exhibition facility. There will be a massive archive, most of which will be literally in cold storage as films are vacuum-packed and put in the chiller while someone works out what to do with them. There will be the admirable Screenonline, which provides information on British cinema and (subject to copyright restrictions) access to selected British films from the archive. There will be an ever more inflated film festival. And there will be some bits that the BFI is too shamefaced to get rid of, probably including *Sight & Sound*. Will there be something more?

Nostalgia for the BFI that seems to me pointless. There are lessons to be learned from its history, but the idea that it could recreate itself as it was in the 1970s and 1980s is not one of them. Its loss of centrality in the film culture seems to me, in retrospect, to have been inevitable. The writing was on the wall when the 1997 Labour government subordinated it to a body called the UK Films Council, which promptly took away its film production and regional distribution functions and disabled its most active contributions to higher education. In 2008 the BFI goes on putting on a show about being something, but the charade is looking tired. This does not mean that it cannot reinvent itself in a form appropriate to the twenty-first century. But it will need substance, and substance is what it is lacking at the moment.



After the flood: BFI Publishing beyond the BFI

Rebecca Barden Responds

“He holds him with his skinny hand,
“There was a ship,” quoth he.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

Friends and family who were unfortunate enough to have encountered me during the long, wet summer and fall of 2007 may have felt cast in the role of Coleridge’s hapless wedding guest, so all-consuming was the febrile atmosphere, “blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures” at the BFI. Now that the dust thrown up by Phase One of the Realignment process has settled, my concern here is not to dwell on *les événements* of 2007, but to outline the new situation of BFI Publishing, and to offer reassurance to authors and the wider academic community who have written, read and taught with BFI books about our present and future prospects.

Five months on from the institution of the partnership with Palgrave Macmillan,¹ I’m pleased to conclude that BFI Publishing has found a caring and sympathetic foster parent who will provide a secure context within which the book list can develop and flourish. I’ll begin by addressing one misunderstanding: the assertion by several contributors that BFI Publishing has been “sold off” or, in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s words, that the partnership agreement between the BFI and Palgrave Macmillan will be viewed with scepticism by anyone “who knows the slightest thing about how publishing companies operate.” While I was not directly involved in the negotiations with external publishers, I was aware of the details of the various proposals received, and I am clear that the Palgrave proposal represented by far the best outcome for BFI Publishing, its staff and authors. It’s important to stress that this is a partnership and not a sale: BFI remains the publisher of BFI books and owner of the publishing rights in its backlist and frontlist titles. Palgrave undertakes to commission, produce, market and distribute BFI titles, in close collaboration with the BFI.

A Publishing Board, comprising BFI and Palgrave representatives, has been established to ensure BFI input into commissioning strategy and synergy with the BFI cultural program and, crucially, two members of the BFI Publishing team have transferred across to work on the list at Palgrave. BFI Publishing remains as a separate imprint, although it benefits from Palgrave’s international marketing, sales and distribution networks and from the economies of scale it can achieve in book production. This has already had the positive effect that we are able to bring back into print many of the Film Classics titles that had, at the BFI, languished in out-of-stock no-man’s land, for want of the money to reprint them.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's article seems to suggest that the glory days of BFI Publishing (sometime during the mid- to late-1980s, if I read his piece correctly) are behind us, and that we have now become "just another publisher pitching its product mainly into an academic market." Before joining the BFI in 2005 I worked for many years for a leading academic publisher,² and my experience of working on the BFI list has led me to a quite different conclusion. BFI Publishing, to my mind, has always been and remains a publisher, to borrow a phrase from the Sheffield electro band Heaven 17, of quality and distinction. It's true that the market into which we publish our books has grown and changed beyond recognition since the mid 1980s. The BFI is no longer alone in publishing in film and media studies—the subject area, and the publishing that accompanies it, has boomed, in large part due to the foundational work of members of the BFI Education and Publishing departments.

I feel sure, however, that "just another publisher" would not have continued to publish the award-winning BFI Film Classics series, commissioning titles on less well-known films of British and World Cinema alongside the more obvious (and commercial) canonical texts of American cinema, nor maintained a commitment to achieving the highest standards of design and production, nor continued to produce books with full-color illustrations on every page. It's a testament to the quality that characterises the BFI list that BFI titles comprised three of six of the books shortlisted for the 2008 Kraszna-Krausz award for the 2007's best book on the moving image, and one of these, David Curtis's *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* was named the winner.³ Palgrave has made clear its commitment to maintaining the distinctiveness of the BFI list, and the partnership agreement enables BFI books and authors to continue to benefit from the rich resources of the BFI Archive and the expertise of our former colleagues, whether as authors, editors or advisers.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith writes of his anxiety that the synergies between BFI programs and the output of BFI Publishing will founder on the rocks of the partnership agreement. Such synergies have been carefully cultivated, both by me and by my predecessor Andrew Lockett,⁴ resulting in the publication of a number of books explicitly linked to BFI projects and programs. To name but a few: two books celebrating and contextualising the rich resource of the BFI's Mitchell & Kenyon collection of Edwardian film; three books on documentary film published in 2007 to coincide with a major BFI season on documentary; and a BFI Modern Classic on Terence Davies's *Distant Voices, Still Lives* published to tie in with a Davies retrospective and a new print of the film exhibited at BFI Southbank and subsequently released as a BFI DVD.⁵

Both parties to the partnership agreement are determined that these synergies will continue, and indeed flourish, through the work of the BFI/Palgrave Macmillan Publishing Board, and, less formally but no less importantly, through frequent and continuing liaison with colleagues across the BFI. Relationships that were already in place will continue to be developed, and I would even venture that

these collaborations will work more effectively now that they are formally incorporated in the relationship between Palgrave Macmillan and the BFI. In general, and in conclusion, it seems to me that the outlook for our list and its prestigious heritage is bright.

Notes

1. The partnership agreement came into effect on January 1, 2008.
2. I was commissioning editor and later publisher for the Routledge film and media studies list between 1992 and 2005.
3. See <http://www.kraszna-krausz.org.uk/books/2008-awards-winners-announced>.
4. Andrew Lockett was Head of Publishing at the BFI from 1997–2003.
5. *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film*, ed. Toulmin, Popple and Russell, BFI 2004, and *Electric Edwardians: The Story of the Mitchell & Kenyon Collection*, Toulmin, BFI 2006. *The Politics of Documentary*, Michael Chanan; *Seven Up*, Stella Bruzzi, in the BFI TV Classics series; *100 British Documentaries*, Patrick Russell, in the BFI Screen Guides series—all BFI, 2007. *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, Paul Farley, in the BFI Modern Classics series, BFI 2006.

Cultural Strategies: Publishing at the British Film Institute



Manuel Alvarado and Edward Buscombe

The British Film Institute was founded in the early 1930s, its ostensible purpose being “to encourage the art of the film.” This was always going to be an uphill struggle in a country that has traditionally valued other cultural forms such as theatre and literature above the cinema. What was needed was a strategy that would attempt to challenge these entrenched social and cultural prejudices against cinema. Of necessity, the BFI would have to be oppositional to much of the cultural establishment, even though its position as a recipient of government money placed it in the mainstream of public life and accountability.

By the late-1960s there were several solid achievements. A world-class archive had been assembled, the National Film Theatre was a showcase for world cinema, and there was an influential magazine (*Sight & Sound*). But British society remained obstinately resistant to the notion of film culture. This was the problem facing an increasingly restless and articulate group of film intellectuals who had been gathered in the BFI's Education Department under the leadership of Paddy Whannel.

Paddy's view was that if cinema in Britain was to achieve a status and prestige similar to that enjoyed by theatre or literature, painting or music, then it would have to develop a body of scholarship that could attest to its seriousness, its claim to be more than mere entertainment. At the time we are writing about, very few substantial critical works on film had been published in the English language. Perhaps

Robin Wood's pioneering work *Hitchcock's Films*, first published in 1965 and whose opening words are "Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?" was a sign that things were about to change. Though Wood's book appeared under the imprint of a small independent company, the BFI's Education Department recognized that publishing was one of the keys to building up the intellectual status of cinema.

Publishing, therefore, formed one of the twin arms of a strategy to develop film studies. The second arm required the BFI to devise ways of getting film taken up by the academy. If all parts of the BFI existed to educate people about cinema, in the broadest sense, traditionally the Education Department had oriented itself towards teachers in secondary education, trying to encourage the study of film in schools through the provision of materials and ideas. But increasingly the Department's view was that significant advances would never be made in the education sector until film had assembled a substantial body of historical, critical, and theoretical work. Given the exigencies of their working situation, it was asking a lot of schoolteachers to undertake this task. What it required was the time and space afforded by a university department. Since at that time there was hardly any university teaching of film in Britain, the BFI's Education Department set out to fill the gap.

Essentially the BFI's work was to be pump-priming. The Education Department gave its members time and encouragement to generate a serious critical and theoretical discourse about cinema, it afforded the facilities to publish such work, and once this body of work had achieved a critical mass it would facilitate the adoption of film studies into the higher education curriculum. As is perhaps well enough known, those in charge at the BFI soon grew alarmed at such developments. Many of the governors, who were responsible for formulating policy objectives, were representatives of the film and television industries, not noted for their receptiveness to intellectual ideas. And inevitably the Young Turks at the BFI were ruffling the feathers of the staid and stuffy critical establishment. Eventually, when working conditions became impossible, Paddy Whannel and several others felt obliged to resign.

It was just at this moment that the Society for Education in Film and Television, an organization representing film teachers, mainly from the secondary sector, found itself placed on a more secure financial footing by the BFI. This enabled it to function with a high degree of autonomy and with more staff. SEFT's policy had much in common with that of the Education Department under Paddy Whannel, in particular an emphasis on building up a critical mass of serious, sustained writing about cinema. Its journal *Screen*, comprehensively remodelled in 1971, introduced a range of theoretical discourses, many of them originating in France and Italy, and also developed a solid basis of homegrown scholarship. Its sister journal *Screen Education*, though more focused on the practicalities of teaching film, nevertheless initiated a productive engagement with newly emerging forms of thought in cinematic, cultural, and educational theory.

However, contrary to the impulses within BFI Education, *Screen* went out of its way to decry any attempt to entrench film studies with the higher education curriculum. Most of the people associated with the journal had had experiences at university that inclined them to an oppositional stance vis-à-vis film as an academic discipline. Whether their background was in the study of English literature, or foreign languages, or some other subject, in the wake of 1968 “and all that” they felt strongly that British universities were in the main repositories of reactionary and outmoded forms of thought. English studies were largely dominated by the example of F. R. Leavis, whose hostility to literary theory was notorious. If film was to be inserted into such a context, it would inevitably be recuperated, its intellectual cutting edge blunted.

It is easy to smile at the irony of what has happened in the subsequent thirty years or so. The growth of film, either as a subject in its own right, or in association with other sympathetic disciplines, has been dramatic, in all the English-speaking countries. Who now would seriously argue that this has been a negative development? Whether film has, in fact, had its radical thrust compromised by its success is possibly a less open-and-shut case. But *Screen*'s enterprise of building film studies in isolation from universities was not one that could have been indefinitely sustained. The resources of time and energy required needed a more secure institutional base than could be provided by a tiny corpus of employees and a group of volunteers, however willing.

The fact that British universities, for better or worse, did eventually take film studies to their bosoms was in substantial part the result of the BFI's Education Department instituting a policy deliberately designed to continue Paddy Whannel's aims, while, for tactical reasons (mindful of the forces that had engineered the earlier resignations), not positioning itself as a quasi-university department. In the early 1970s the BFI began to offer selected universities funding to establish a post in film. Each year the BFI would choose an institution and offer to pay the salary of a post for a period of three years, at the end of which the university was expected to take over funding and make the post permanent. Though film did not take root in every university so selected, within a decade a substantial number of posts had been established, transforming the academic terrain in England and Scotland. Many of those universities that are today in the forefront of academic film studies in Britain, such as Warwick, Kent, and East Anglia, benefited substantially from this BFI initiative.

At the same time the BFI was building a publishing program that paralleled SEFT's activities. Book publishing soon grew into a major strategic tool. Film studies, it was apparent, could not readily develop as an academic discipline if there was nothing much for the students to read. *Screen* was forcing the pace intellectually, but the journal could not provide the more substantial works that were required. The later 1960s and 1970s saw a major expansion of film publishing. Not all of it by any means originated in the BFI. The *Movie* series of paperbacks made a significant intervention, with books by Robin Wood, Raymond Durnat, and Charles

Barr, among others. But the BFI's series of Cinema One books was to have an important influence on the future shape of film studies, both within Britain and in the United States of America. Robin Wood's study of Hawks (1968) and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's book on Visconti (1967), Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969), Jim Kitses's *Horizons West* (1969), Jon Halliday's books on Pasolini (1969; under the name of Oswald Stack) and Sirk (1971), and Colin McArthur's *Underworld USA* were all models of what cinema scholarship could be, setting agendas both in terms of expanding the canon and in introducing new theoretical concepts.

In the later 1970s and the 1980s BFI Publishing—as it became known when a separate department spun off from the Education Department—steadily built up its program to an output of about thirty books a year, which made it a major player in a field that was still in development academically. It possessed two advantages over its rivals in the commercial publishing sector. Although increasingly under pressure to generate enough revenue to meet its overheads, the BFI's publishing program was not obliged to make a profit because it was supported by public money. Clearly, there was no intention to produce books that no one wanted to read, and increasing efforts were made to improve design and distribution with a view to increasing sales. But public support meant that the program was free to take initiatives and explore new directions in film studies, rather than merely service an existing field of study. Of course the BFI was not the only publisher seeking to open up new areas. University presses also benefited from subsidy, far more so than today, and were able to take risks. Altogether, this made for exciting times in film book publishing.

What BFI Publishing also enjoyed were the services of editors who were specialists in film studies, and, indeed, who were authors themselves. This meant that the publishing program was never merely reactive to what academic scholars were doing elsewhere. BFI editors were able to consciously formulate a publishing program designed to push film studies in what they considered a radical and challenging direction. Publishing was always primarily done with a view to shaping the subject area, not merely reflecting it, and was carried out within the context of a general BFI commitment to promoting a healthy film culture.

One other advantage enjoyed by the BFI, though undoubtedly one that sometimes existed more in theory than in practice, was that book publishing could both support and be supported by the BFI's other activities. The strategic reason for uniting an archive, a repertory cinema, a distribution program, a production company, a library and a range of educational activities under one roof, that of the British Film Institute, was that each activity would benefit from a coherent engagement with all the others. Thus, if the National Film Theatre proposed a season of films on African cinema, BFI Distribution could acquire some key titles, Education could produce material for teachers, and Publishing could produce a book or two. If activities were properly synchronized and planned together, each form of activity could make far more impact than if carried out on its own.

That was the theory. All too often it did not work out quite so neatly. Different forms of activity often moved in different rhythms, each department had its own agenda, and bureaucratic structures were ill-designed for easy cooperation between the constituent parts of the BFI. But when it worked, it could offer a coherence to the celebration of a particular body of cinema to which no other institution could aspire.

One other feature of BFI Publishing is worth mentioning. From its earliest days, despite its name, the BFI did not confine its activities to the promotion solely of British cinema. Just as the British Museum contains objects of cultural value from all over the world (even if often acquired through dubious practices), and the National Gallery preserves paintings from many different national schools of art, so from its inception the National Film Archive collected films from around the globe. More than most arts, the cinema has always been an international undertaking, and British cinema itself cannot be properly understood except in an international context.

From the 1970s onwards, BFI Publishing consciously strove to extend the geographical scope of film studies, publishing significant works on the cinema of Mexico, China, Africa, India, and elsewhere, as well as on the European film industries, both major and minor. At the same time, it made a major contribution to the opening up of Hollywood to serious scholarly investigation. It also played its part in pioneering work on race and ethnicity, on sex and gender, and it published important books on topics that were to assume great importance in the field, such as melodrama and early cinema. There was also a range of books directly focussed on the teaching of film, foremost among these being *The Cinema Book*, which has been highly influential on a whole generation of film students.

Paddy Whannel's vision has been in large part achieved. Film is now securely established within the academic curriculum, and a solid body of scholarship attests to its cultural importance. Film book publishing has blossomed in a way that could scarcely have been foreseen at the beginning of the 1970s. It is at this moment that the BFI has chosen to sell off its publishing activities, and it looks set to divest itself of other related activities before long. There might be an argument for saying that the BFI's job in these areas is done, that scholarly activity and film book publishing are now so well established that the BFI's direct support is no longer required. But no such argument has, in fact, been offered. Instead, despite lip service being paid to the importance of such work, the decision to sell appears to have been motivated by short-term, opportunist considerations. The BFI needs money, and publishing was one thing that commanded a price.

In fact, though the achievements of the past are solid, there is as much reason as ever why the BFI ought to have a publishing program. If you want to educate people about cinema, how better than to publish books, still the most reliable and efficient way of disseminating knowledge? Preserving and showing films, the core activities that, it seems likely, will soon be all that is left of the BFI, are vitally important activities. But unless people understand why some films are preserved

and not others, why some are shown and not others, then the public will not be much the wiser. With university presses increasingly reluctant to publish anything but textbooks and readers, and shying away from monographs, especially on anything not already in the syllabus, and with commercial publishers leery of anything too new or too radical, there remains a need for a publisher whose decisions are going to be guided not by sales potential alone but by a sense of what film culture needs if it is to evolve and stay alive.

We are assured that Palgrave, who have taken over the BFI list, will maintain its identity. Amanda Nevill, Director of the BFI, announced the deal in this way: "The BFI remains absolutely committed to film scholarship. By working with one of the strongest academic publishers in the world to support and grow this important and flourishing area of study, we will be able to secure the investment that BFI publishing deserves." Perhaps she is entitled to the benefit of the doubt for the time being. Perhaps the BFI will manage to have some significant input into editorial decisions. But who can doubt that the deal was primarily done not to strengthen BFI Publishing but in order to save the BFI money, mainly by getting rid of publishing staff? And once the BFI has no one left whose job it is to publish books, how does it propose to maintain a coherent input into Palgrave's decisions? There cannot be much doubt that the driving force will come not from within the BFI, an increasingly moribund institution, but from the financial imperatives identified by those who are paying the piper, namely a company that, however "strong," is essentially just another academic publisher whose priorities will never be "the art of the film."

Whatever Happened to BFI Publishing?



by Pam Cook

In May 2007, a letter appeared in the UK weekly the *Times Higher Education Supplement* signed by forty-eight leading international academics expressing alarm about rumored plans by the British Film Institute to sell off its award-winning publishing arm, located at the BFI's headquarters in central London's Stephen Street. Their concerns were not far off the mark: on May 25, BFI director Amanda Nevill circulated an internal email to BFI staff outlining management's Realignment Plan, in which it was revealed that BFI Publishing would be removed from direct management by the BFI through "a sale, merger or outsourcing arrangement."¹ The *THES* letter was part of a widespread protest, which took the form of further press correspondence and a barrage of letters and emails to Amanda Nevill and chair of the board of governors Anthony Minghella. It quickly escalated

throughout June into global media coverage and Internet discussion about the consequences of the proposed outsourcing of this valued resource, both for the BFI itself and for moving image culture and education in general. A picture began to emerge of a crisis-ridden institute unable to sustain or invest in the wealth of activities for which it is internationally renowned. This critical response, much of which focused on the management style of the director and board of governors (the BFI's decision-making body), was clearly an embarrassment to those in charge, not least because their plans were suddenly made public and they were held accountable. Although they had faced criticism about the expensive refurbishment and transformation of the National Film Theatre into BFI Southbank and the institute rebranding exercise, this had been predominantly local, while the British press coverage of the relocation of the institute to London's South Bank as part of the area's cultural regeneration, and the ambitious plans for a new Film Centre there, had on the whole been supportive. Whatever the gripes, BFI management was pleased with its achievements in creating a revamped identity and visibility for the institute for a new generation of film enthusiasts, and was determined to modernize it to face the challenges of the digital revolution. However, when the details of what would be sacrificed in the process emerged, a disjunction appeared between management's euphoric public relations and the deep unease felt by many within and outside the BFI about the direction in which the institute was being taken. Once this fissure was made public, it became difficult to ignore the mounting pressure to account for their decisions.

None of this seems particularly unusual. In its seventy-five-year history, the BFI has been plagued by crisis, financial and otherwise;² it is no different than other UK arts institutions in being underfunded and undervalued by politicians. It is also no stranger to "restructuring"—a euphemism (like "modernization") that refers to the process of downsizing through cuts and job losses. With intelligent leadership, transparency, and proper consultation, restructuring can involve creative regeneration. But it is seldom painless, and it can extend over years, as successive waves dig deeper into the organs of institutional bodies. Many of the decisions taken by current BFI management emerged from or redrafted policies forged by earlier incumbents (for example, relocation to the South Bank was on the cards when I left the BFI to become an academic in 1994). All institutions must change; some are more intractable than others, and no doubt there was hard-core resistance in parts of the BFI that made managing the modernization program difficult. But two factors made the current restructuring plans a matter for urgent public scrutiny: first, the proposed makeover was the most far-reaching in the institute's long and honorable history, and second, the decision to change the BFI from an internationally recognized cultural and educational body into primarily a set of exhibition spaces had been taken without consultation with the people who use and value its existing services (in management-speak, the "stakeholders"). The opinions and ideas of experienced BFI staff were mostly ignored, while internal memos and press releases characterized the situation as one of highly successful

initiatives achieved in difficult financial circumstances, behind which all staff were assumed to be united. In fact, this was far from the case—but successive waves of cuts and redundancies, together with a strategy that imposed difficult and sometimes impossible targets on vulnerable areas, had created a climate of resignation among many staff, who feared for their jobs.

This “climate of fear” helps to explain why few people outside the BFI knew about the Realignment Plan that would change the institute’s identity forever. Despite the fact that the plan must have been around for some time before it was circulated internally, it is not clear whether all staff (or indeed the unions) were fully informed about its proposals for a phased operation of cuts and “partnership” deals in which many of them would be made redundant or be at risk of redundancy. Nor is it clear whether BFI management deliberately kept its intentions under wraps in order to expedite the plan as quickly and smoothly as possible, or whether it simply assumed that no one would care enough to protest. The plan had the full support of the governing body and its chair, and by the time it was announced, many of its proposals were already underway. BFI Publishing was in the front line in Phase One, along with key services such as Stills, Posters and Designs. The library was also at risk, and operations such as DVD production and *Sight & Sound* magazine were under review. In response to mounting public protest, BFI director Amanda Nevill denied that management intended to sell off or dispose of Publishing or the library. Rather, it was seeking partnership with outside organizations that were better equipped to invest in and develop these activities. She dismissed the protests as unfounded speculation and rumor based on ignorance about the difficult financial circumstances faced by the institute.³

It is certainly the case that there was an element of speculation in the protests—but the responsibility for the lack of clear information lay with BFI management, something the director failed to acknowledge. She also failed to address significant points made by the protestors about the lack of open debate and consultation with respect to the future of the British Film Institute—a public body governed by Royal Charter that (in theory at least) is accountable to its members and other stakeholders. Although the institute had published its policy review on its Web site, it lacked detail, and it is doubtful that many stakeholders would have been aware of the full implications. Certainly, their opinions had not been actively canvassed. By the time that the realignment plan became public, the policy review outlined on the Web site was seriously out of date. The lack of fit between the protestors’ expectations of democracy and the director’s assumption that decision making rests entirely with senior management speaks volumes about the changed ethos of the BFI over the past decade. It is clear that the director was not interested in debate that might stir up opposition to the realignment plan among the punters who value the BFI’s cultural activities; such consultation as had taken place was with official bodies or senior figures who were unlikely to actually use the BFI’s facilities.

The publicity generated by the press and other coverage highlighted the woefully inadequate funding of the institute over several years, a situation that had forced management to revise its “core activities.” The BFI national archive was prioritized under the banner of preserving the nation’s deteriorating film and television heritage, while high-profile areas such as the revamped BFI Southbank, the Mediatheque, and the London Film Festival were earmarked for development as part of the plans for the new Southbank Film Centre. To dissenters, these plans appeared as short-term political solutions fostered by the BFI’s dependency on the UK Film Council (UKFC), which had taken over responsibility for funding the institute in 2000.⁴ The UKFC was appointed by the Labour government’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport as the central agency for film, charged with creating a sustainable UK film industry. The UKFC’s focus is on production and exhibition rather than on the wider context of moving image culture and education. It could be argued, then, that the BFI’s educational resources and activities would thus provide a valuable complementary service to the UKFC’s production initiatives. Needless to say, this is not the route chosen by senior management, who seem supremely uninterested in the institute’s role in international film and television culture. Whether this is due to ignorance of the BFI’s history and the synergy of its various activities is hard to determine—some of those on the governing body have been associated with the institute for many years.

The historical context for the current crisis is complex, and the financial pressures on management should not be underestimated. But neither should the importance of what is at stake: the dismantling of one of the foremost agencies for moving image culture and education in Britain and the world. Since the late 1960s the BFI has been influential in the development of film and television studies through book publishing and educational initiatives. It helped to lay the foundations for modern screen studies and the proliferation of courses in schools, colleges, and universities. Perhaps that role is less significant now, but BFI Publishing has continued to produce cutting edge film and television scholarship, and the range of interlinked resources offered by Publishing, Education, Stills, Posters and Designs, the national library and special collections, the archive collections, *Sight & Sound*, and DVD production and sales, all of which draw on and support one another, makes the BFI unique. If the value of this synergy is recognized, it becomes impossible to isolate a single activity as “core.” Indeed, it is precisely this cluster of activities that to many represents the core, or heart, of the BFI.

However, in the context of years of flat funding, and the imminent government spending review, BFI management apparently decided that drastic action was necessary and chose an obvious path. The national film and television archive was identified as the funding priority, while those resources that were less visible and less easily justifiable in financial terms were to be outsourced or developed in partnership with private companies. It must be acknowledged that outsourcing and public/private partnerships have become commonplace in recent years—with

variable success. Public/private partnerships have been central to the Blair government's modernizing agenda, and the proposals to regenerate the South Bank as a cultural center have been powered by this ethos. What is not clear is why the inclusion of the BFI in those plans should involve the exclusion of its educational and cultural resources.

The answers from senior management on this question were primarily economic: the areas to be outsourced had not met their financial targets, and they required levels of investment and funding that the BFI simply could not provide on its own. This response would be more convincing if there were hard evidence that those areas earmarked as priorities are (or can be) financially profitable or self-sustaining, and if some of the marginalized areas had been given reasonable targets to meet—apparently not the case with BFI Publishing. Management's reasons were ideological as well as economic and political, downgrading the potentially critical and analytical skills fostered by the moving image research and education sector in favor of an emphasis on cultural consumption.

Even if taken at face value, the economic/political argument does not stand up to scrutiny, because the BFI as an arts institution possesses a wealth of "cultural capital" that feeds into the national economy in myriad ways that are not necessarily direct, and that make it inappropriate to adopt an approach centered on financial targets, profit, and loss. One example would be the support it provides to the academic sector, where screen studies and research are thriving and represent areas of high student recruitment. But this longer view holds little water in the prevailing climate, and BFI management (in particular the institute's director) was unsympathetic, hostile, and dismissive in response to criticism of its realignment plan from academics, researchers, and scholars. While this may imply arrogance, it also suggests vulnerability and a desire to fend off potentially threatening ideas. But whatever the motives, those who expressed resistance were generally characterized as backward looking and devoid of constructive ideas ("creative thinking" being the prerogative of those who devised and/or supported the realignment plan). A complex range of positions was polarized into those who desire change and those who oppose it.

While there has been a dismal failure by BFI management to consider the views of significant interest groups within its constituency, it is also true that there is an element of nostalgia in some of those views. However, nostalgia is not always retrograde; those who hark back to a more democratic BFI characterized by public debate about its policies are justifiably critical of the current authoritarian, top-down regime. Those who defend the publishing arm and the national library as key educational activities and services look back to a time when both were better resourced. In the case of BFI Publishing, staff cuts and internal problems over the past decade have left a much reduced operation that, since the only in-house editor was made redundant in 2005,⁵ has inflicted massive strain on Publishing staff, who nevertheless continue to produce a world-renowned list characterized by diversity and high quality production values. BFI Publishing is an example of successful,

small-scale, independent publishing that hardly exists any more, as global publishing companies swallow up such enterprises. While there may be gains in terms of efficiency and financial resources, often the integrity and distinctive identity of previously independent outfits are lost in the absorption process. This sacrifice of independence has been a matter of great concern to those who question the wisdom of the BFI's intention to seek an outside partner (read: global company) for its publishing operation.

BFI Publishing is not a conventional publishing house. Since it was established in the early 1970s, it has grown up organically in conjunction with other interdependent cultural activities that together strive to fulfil the BFI's updated mission "to champion moving image culture in all its richness and diversity across the UK, for the benefit of as wide an audience as possible, and to create and encourage debate." Leaving aside the irony of the professed intention to encourage debate, there are interesting contradictions underlying this mission statement. Cultural diversity in all its aspects is an important feature of the BFI's activities, and is reflected in its publications. The BFI's book list (and, indeed, its DVD catalogue) includes noncommercial topics and titles that are unlikely to be taken on by larger concerns because they are not big sellers. They do, however, possess significant cultural and educational value. BFI Publishing was able to produce non-commercial titles precisely because of its position within the BFI. In the last few years, under the current management regime, Publishing came under increased pressure to produce more titles that would sell well (that is, reach wider audiences). In theory this is a laudable aim, and there is no inherent reason why culturally significant "niche" material should not be presented to a wider audience. However, it appears that management failed to understand the relationship between the wider audiences and the niche markets for many of its book titles. Nor, it seems, did it understand the time it takes to turn around such a shift of emphasis. The publishing outfit, along with a group of related activities, was corralled under the umbrella BFI Trading set up in 2004 with the remit to rationalize and promote the institute's various publishing activities. A new head of Publishing was appointed to carry this forward,⁶ following a demoralizing period during which those staff who remained were without leadership. Within eighteen months, BFI Publishing was told that it had not met its financial targets and that staff were at risk of redundancy unless an outside partner could be found. BFI Trading was perceived as having failed in its task and was dissolved. The realignment plan, which proposed outsourcing the publishing operation, was put into motion.

This was a Catch-22 situation. Management's imposition of impossible financial targets created circumstances in which failure was inevitable; this failure was then blamed on staff. The effect of these bullying tactics on hard-pressed staff was devastating. Management's actions could also be seen as disingenuous: apparently it had already received offers from other publishers for BFI Publishing, and it seems director Amanda Nevill had targeted book publishing for disposal when she was appointed in 2003. By the time stakeholders got wind of the outsourcing proposals

and voiced their concerns publicly, the fate of BFI Publishing was probably already sealed, though a suitable partner still had to be found and the deal finalized. The timetable for executing Phase One of the realignment plan was short: one month's consultation period (internal, that is—no consultation with stakeholders or BFI authors was included), with the outsourcing of Publishing to be concluded by the end of 2007. The internal consultation period was extended by one month at the request of the union because of the scale of planned redundancies. But the token nature of the consultation process is an indication of the speed with which management was determined to act—partly, perhaps, because the imminent change of prime minister and a cabinet reshuffle might result in a new government minister for the arts less sympathetic to its project, and partly because Anthony Minghella, who was solidly behind the director's proposals, was due to stand down as chair of the board of governors at the end of the year.

On August 8, 2007, management issued a press release announcing that, after considering a number of bids, it had reached a provisional agreement with global publishing company Palgrave Macmillan to take over responsibility for producing and managing the BFI book list, marketing and distributing its titles, and dealing with authors' royalty payments and statements. The future of existing staff remained obscure until further negotiations had taken place and the agreement was signed, but it was evident that BFI Publishing would be moved out of Stephen Street and relocated. Management neatly avoided having to consult authors by retaining copyright for the BFI in all its titles, and insisted that the cultural integrity and independence of the book list would be maintained and guaranteed by a Publishing committee (though the membership of the committee, clearly crucial to its success, was not revealed). It also promised to honor all its current contractual obligations. BFI authors were collectively informed of these developments via a series of FAQs, and the deal was trumpeted as good news for them and for BFI Publishing.

The deal between the BFI and Palgrave Macmillan was finalized on December 3, 2007. Authors were not informed, but shortly before Christmas, an internal e-mail was circulated to BFI staff informing them that two of the three remaining Publishing personnel would transfer to Palgrave Macmillan offices in London's King's Cross from January 2008. The third staff member was made redundant.⁷ Many BFI authors will be relieved by the outsourcing arrangement, because their books will be produced, distributed, and marketed effectively and their royalties managed efficiently. Palgrave Macmillan has considerable experience of producing scholarly film and television texts. Although the details are not available, BFI management has asserted that the high production values of its books will be maintained and that BFI resources will continue to be available in producing the list. It would seem to be business as usual.

However, authors who have the experience of dealing with global publishing companies may be ambivalent. BFI authors' previous close involvement in the editorial and production process of their books is unlikely to continue, and absorption

into a large company will no doubt have an impact on future contractual agreements. And, despite BFI management's assurances, the future of the book list and its cultural remit cannot be regarded as secure in the context of the crisis facing book publishers worldwide. But there is no doubt that BFI Publishing and its unique catalogue will be a huge asset to Palgrave Macmillan—hopefully they will appreciate, respect, and nurture it. In the meantime, it is not easy to determine what influence, if any, the public protest about the plans to “realign” the institute and the volume of publicity generated as a result has had on management's thinking. Though the bus may have gone with respect to BFI Publishing, the phased realignment plan still has some way to go.⁸ While it may not be stopped, if genuine reasoned dialogue can take place about the future of the British Film Institute, there may well be scope for modifications to the overall design.

Notes

1. The *THES* letter and Amanda Nevill's Realignment Plan, along with other documents about the current BFI crisis, can be found on the BFIwatch blog: www.bfiwatch.blogspot.com.
2. See also Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “The 1970 crisis at the BFI and its aftermath,” *Screen* 47 (Winter 2006): 4.
3. Letter in the *Guardian*, June 16, 2007. Available on BFIwatch blog, June 18, 2007.
4. See Colin MacCabe, “Save our film heritage from the political vandals,” *Observer* July 8, 2007. Available on BFIwatch blog, July 9, 2007.
5. Rob White, who went on to become editor of *Film Quarterly* in 2006.
6. Rebecca Barden, previously Commissioning Editor and Publisher at Routledge, joined the BFI as head of Publishing in 2005.
7. Document available on BFIwatch blog, January 7, 2008.
8. Although a public announcement has not been made, it appears that the BFI national library has been reprieved, though whether this is as a result of public protest or difficulties in finding a suitable outside partner is not clear. Details of the library's future funding situation have not been revealed. Meanwhile, in October 2007, the government announced £25 million in investment funds awarded to UK national and regional archives. See BFIwatch blog, October 17, 2007.

Implementing Cultural Policy: The Case of the BFI Distribution Library



by Colin McArthur

My essay “Two steps Forward, One Step Back: Cultural Struggle in the BFI” is a memoir of my ten years, 1974 to 1984, in the senior management of that organization. Although it alludes to the cultural policy of the “key debates” (those areas of discussion such as authorship, genre, realism, ideology, etc., surfacing recurrently in discourse about cinema) that informed our work, the piece is as much concerned

with the nuts and bolts of bringing efficient management to a languid cultural body and with the “wading through molasses” experience of trying to shepherd policy change through bureaucratic committee structures. Here, therefore, I would like to go into greater detail about a specifically cultural feature of our intervention, the transformation of the holdings and the role of the BFI’s (mainly) 16 mm film library.

Having been set up as a cultural body in the 1930s, the BFI, when it came to enter the field of film distribution, did so initially as a way of making available, principally to the film society movement, some of the films not seen in mainline cinemas. Following the critical concerns of the 1930s, this particularly involved the cinemas of Weimar Germany and the Soviet Union. The film society movement, increasingly joined by the “film appreciation” initiatives appearing in the UK educational system, was to remain the central constituency of the film library. However, its initial cultural impulse became muddled over time. While it continued to acquire the “classics” of screen history, as they became available for acquisition (always a complex business due to the diversity of rights holding) it also began to acquire a motley collection of scientific, instructional, and documentary films, becoming something of a repository of the films other 16 mm film libraries did not wish to carry. At the same time, some of its holdings duplicated those of these other libraries. Having been an ardent user of the BFI Library as an aspiring film teacher in the early 1960s, I came into closer contact with it when I joined the BFI Education Department in 1968 as Teacher Adviser and shortly thereafter became its Editor of Film Study Materials. My predecessors in that role, most recently Alan Lovell, had established negotiations with a profoundly suspicious film industry (the characteristic industry stance to the BFI as a whole since its inception) to provide 5- to 15-minute extracts from feature films for use by teachers in the classroom and had even secured permission to create study units comprising an entire feature film, several extracts, and accompanying documentation, which, for a modest fee, a teacher could retain for six weeks to facilitate in-depth study. The Editor of Film Study Materials would discuss with colleagues which films to go for, arrange the screenings and discussions, oversee the production of the extracts and their documentation, and make them available through the BFI Distribution Library. The study units were commissioned from teachers active in the field (e.g., Ed Buscombe on the *Western* and Richard Dyer on the *Musical*).

As other essays here have alluded to, the BFI in the late 1960s and early 1970s shared many of the features of public (particularly educational) bodies throughout the western world in the wake of the events in Paris in the summer of 1968. Within the general calling into question of the purposes and the running of the BFI, there was a specific concern with both the management and the policy of the Distribution Library. This resulted in several middle-ranking managers from diverse departments across the BFI forcing the library to accept two criteria within which acquisitions should be made: that each film should have a body of critical writing on it and that it should not be available from other libraries. This, however,

remained largely an aspiration without managerial control of the library. Such control rested in the post of Head of Film Availability Services, to which I was appointed in 1974. The subsequent activity of the library concentrated on two fronts: the rooting out of those films not considered central to the “key debates” policy and the accelerated acquisition of those films so regarded, and the production of a catalogue that would function not simply as a list of available films but as an active aid to course building, programming, and cultural debate.

Because of the immense complexity of the rights-holding situation, many of our attempts at acquisition were frustrated (I recall many fruitless hours of effort to acquire *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*) but our first major acquisition (we tended to go for groups of films rather than individual titles) was a cache of RKO films from the 1930s through the 1950s comprising *The Informer*, *You Only Live Once*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *Mary of Scotland*, *Cat People*, *Out of the Past*, *Woman on the Beach*, *They Live By Night*, *Crossfire*, *Secret Beyond the Door*, *On Dangerous Ground*, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, and *While the City Sleeps*. We deemed all of these titles to be highly relevant to the key debates policy connecting as they did with current auteurist concerns relating to Fritz Lang, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Jean Renoir, and Nicholas Ray and with generic concerns with the western, the gangster movie, and the film noir. A later initiative acquired a collection of Sam Goldwyn productions including *Stella Dallas* (1924 and 1937 versions), *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, *Nana*, *Barbary Coast*, *The Hurricane*, *The Westerner*, *The Little Foxes*, *Ball of Fire*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and *A Song is Born*. This acquisition contributed significantly to our holdings on Howard Hawks; the melodramas connected with the increasing interest in that form, particularly among feminist critics; and the William Wyler films supported the extensive use of Andre Bazin’s writings in the expanding higher education film studies sector. For instance, as well as simply reading about the celebrated sequence from *The Best Years ...* in which the handless war veteran plays a piano duet with Hoagy Carmichael in the foreground, Frederic March watches from the middle ground, and Dana Andrews makes the crucial telephone call to March’s daughter far in the background, students could now actually see the evidence for Bazin’s argument about deep focus and his admiration for Wyler’s work (an admiration often regarded as puzzling by more strictly auteurist critics such as Andrew Sarris). Some of our acquisitions, rather than servicing existing or emergent critical concerns, were designed to *provoke* critical interest and writing. Such was the case with a substantial tranche of feature films of the Third Reich that we leased, including *Kolberg*, *Friedrich Schiller*, *Titanic*, and four early Douglas Sirk films, *Stützen Der Gesellschaft*, *Zu Neuen Ufern*, *La Habanera*, and *Schlussakkord*. We had hoped to acquire analogous groups from fascist Italy and francoist Spain, but these negotiations came to nothing.

A catalogue—more or less an A–Z listing of the library’s holdings—had been in the pipeline at the time of my appointment in 1974, and this appeared in 1975. However, plans were laid immediately to produce a new catalogue that would

contextualize the holdings and provoke discussion of the key debates. Julian Petley—now a distinguished figure in the UK Film and Media Studies professoriat but, at that time, a recent graduate—was engaged to write the new catalogue. Organizing the library holdings into sections as far as possible reflective of the key debates, he wrote contextualizing essays for each section and, as far as possible, in-depth descriptions and analyses of the individual films. His section headings give some sense of the interrogatory tone of his writing and of the critical issues he attempted to foreground: “Lumière and Méliès: the Documentary and the Fantastic”; “Realism and the Problem of Documentary”; “Soviet Cinema 1919–1930: New Politics, New Forms”; “The Avant Garde(s)”; “German Cinema 1919–1945: Problems of Style and Ideology”; “American Cinema: Critical Contexts”; “Two Production Contexts (the BFI Experimental Film Fund and the National Film Board of Canada)”; “Films on Film: Problems of Method”; “Television Material”; “Miscellaneous Feature Films”; “Miscellaneous Shorts and Compilations”; and “Film Study Extracts.” Julian’s contextualizing essays consistently referred to the most fruitful theoretical and critical writing on the topic concerned. His introduction to “Realism and the Problem of Documentary,” for example, cites the writings of Roman Jakobson, Georg Lukacs, Colin MacCabe, and Paul Willemen; his piece “The Avant-Garde(s)” refers to Peter Wollen’s essay “The Two Avant-Gardes”; and the essay on German cinema refers to Lotte Eisner’s *The Haunted Screen* and Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler*.

As my “Two Steps forward...” piece makes clear, our cultural interventions at this time were made in the face of profound suspicion and some open hostility from the wider film culture (mainly the film press), from some other parts of the BFI, and from some members of its governing body. Also, events within cultural bodies were often mapped onto a wider campaign being run by the right-wing press against what it called “loony lefties” in local government, particularly the Greater London Council (GLC). It was being run at this time by Ken Livingstone, currently Mayor of London and still attracting right-wing flak for, among other things, his close rapport with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. The Thatcher government eventually gerrymandered the GLC out of existence and sold off its headquarters to an up-market hotel chain. The point here is that anyone politically left of center at this time could expect to attract the attention of the right-wing press. (I was myself contacted by a reporter from the most slaveringly populist paper of this tendency, the *Sun*, demanding to know whether I thought it appropriate that Marxists should be in positions of authority in public bodies.)

In this context, therefore, let me close by indicating how the writing of a film catalogue might become enmeshed in the politics of the institution in which it was located and in the wider political milieu. Julian Petley’s introduction to the section entitled “Films on Film: Problems of Method” read:

The great majority of films in this section are, unfortunately, of only limited usefulness and value. The various interviews with actors and directors tend towards the anecdotal and adulatory while the films on cinematic technique are, on the whole, superficial

and mechanistic and simply do not raise important issues such as the relation between technology, form and ideology. Similarly, those films which deal with more critical, analytic issues are limited by their adherence to a rather naïve aesthetic of “realism” which is usually covert and implicit rather than explicitly formulated. Probably most useful are the purely historical films, though even some of these contain questionable (and again implicit) historical/theoretical assumptions. Thus all the films here are interesting more as an example of a certain tradition of criticism rather than as critical works per se (Petley 1978, 141).

Included in this section of the library was a series entitled “The Critic and Film,” each individual film involving (for the most part) a film journalist from the “quality” press discussing a particular film, the films in question being *Great Expectations*, *The Overlanders*, *Odd Man Out*, *Twelve Angry Men*, and *3:10 to Yuma*. The “critic” discussing the latter was a rather more elevated figure in British society than a mere film journalist. John Freeman had been a prominent front bench Labour politician who had resigned from the government over the issue of the introduction of charges into several areas of the National Health Service. He had subsequently become editor of the left-wing periodical *The New Statesman*, a prominent BBC personality with his interview program *Face to Face*, British High Commissioner to India, ambassador to the United States, and chairman of an important independent television channel. Petley was highly critical of Freeman’s discussion of *3:10 to Yuma*, chastising it for its adherence to an outmoded view of the Western that celebrated the more recent “psychological” Westerns as superior to the earlier, more “simplistic” versions of the form. As Petley argued, this view underrated the range and diversity of the genre before the 1950s, had little to do with the *generic* features of the film, and assumed that psychological verisimilitude in characters is intrinsically “realistic.” Petley took issue with other aspects of Freeman’s reading but concluded that “this is the most useful of the ‘Critic and Film’ series because it is the most closely argued, the most explicit about its criteria of judgment” (Petley 1978, 145). The favorite tactic of those hostile to the kinds of interventions we were making in the 1970s was to leak information to the press or draw press attention to our critical writings. (Somewhat earlier, Peter Wollen’s *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* had been savagely reviewed by Kenneth Tynan.) Had Freeman simply been another member of the British establishment, we could have ridden out any furor that might have arisen from Petley’s critique being drawn to the attention of the press. However, precisely because he was one of the “Great and Good” of UK life, Freeman had been appointed Chairman of the Board of Governors of the British Film Institute. Now, as the recent resignation of Peter Fincham (controller of the most popular UK public service television channel, BBC1) exemplifies, you do not spring unpleasant surprises on your boss. Accordingly, I informed the Director of the BFI, Keith Lucas, of what Petley was proposing to say about Freeman in the catalogue. While supporting Petley to the hilt, I pointed out that unless we all understood and supported the line he was taking, the piece, if leaked, could be used as evidence that the BFI was shambolic. Lucas, a man so cautious as to be at times catatonic, had been mauled more than once by

the press, so he was profoundly nervous and inclined to suppress the piece. However, he undertook to show the text to the Chairman who duly let us know (good liberal that he was) that he considered Petley's remarks fair comment.

The refocusing of the Distribution Library, then, was a policy intervention in one sector of the BFI. A similar intervention was attempted (eliciting much greater resistance) in another sector under the control of Film Availability Services, the programming of the BFI-subsidized regional film theatres (McArthur 2001), and analogous initiatives were discernible in the Publishing, Production, and Education sectors of the BFI. However, in the three key departments—the National Film Archive, the National Film Theatre, and *Sight & Sound*—whose support might have greatly intensified the public visibility of the key debates policy, responses ranged from live and let live acceptance to outright hostility. One cannot imagine a similar interventionist policy being long tolerated in the BFI in the Thatcherite 1980s or the succeeding Blairite period, as is testified to by the sacking of Colin McCabe (*Screen* Editorial Board 2000). Although some individual BFI officers retain a commitment to serious discourse about film and television, the BFI is now widely regarded as a spent force as far as cultural change is concerned.

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In the Dark: The BFI Archive



Charlotte Brunsdon

Like most British scholars of film and television of my generation, I am formed by the British Film Institute: through its exhibition, distribution, and production policies; by the Education Department, its summer schools, and conferences; through BFI publications; by its promulgation of "film culture"; and in its libraries and archives, both paper and audiovisual, in Dean Street, Charing Cross Road, and Stephen Street. I owe my current occupation, and much of what I know about film and television, to the British Film Institute, and it is on the BFI archives that I thought I would write when invited to contribute to this "In Focus."¹ I had the idea of documenting the significance of the archives to international film and television scholarship by collating the acknowledgements given in academic and

popular books to the archive and its curators and librarians, so that my contribution would consist of a long list of authors and books with their acknowledgement cited. This was such a good idea, I soon discovered, after a little preliminary research, that I could easily have filled the whole of the “In Focus” section of *Cinema Journal*. I tried various ways of selecting which acknowledgments I would cite, but the beauty of the project was lost when it was not indiscriminate. So instead, reluctantly, rather than being a collagist, I will reflect briefly on my own passion for the dark of the archive by describing three different encounters with it.

I first went to the archive as a young teacher to watch films that I had read about and needed to see, before video was a domestic medium—long before DVDs. This archive is forever cold and snowy to me, for much of what I watched on 16 mm film was Soviet cinema of the 1920s, and my own rhythms of viewing were quite Stakhanovite: so many films, so little time. With Jay Leyda to guide me, I viewed the sort of films that, even when video became available, were not going to be shown on television so that you could tape them: *Battleship Potemkin* possibly, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* never. My aim was to familiarize myself with a canon: to actually see what I had read about. And the only way of doing this was to watch films on celluloid in a dark basement viewing room.

My second example is about television. Here, what I remember is often a wondrous astonishment. I was not going to view canonized material, but instead, a notoriously poorly archived medium, seeking to find out what was there. In the context of the lifestyling of British television, I wanted to find out what the precursors of this type of television were. While I did discover something of this, as I viewed hours of instructional, leisure, design, and magazine programs, what was almost as significant was discovering how poorly archived this type of ordinary television was. The cataloguing department of the BFI were assiduous in seeking out material that might be relevant, but it was very patchily preserved, and very little of it existed as viewing copies. It was as if the policies for the archiving of television had had little connection with some of the ways in which television was thought about academically following Raymond Williams’s inaugural account of the medium.² If what was becoming of great interest to television scholars was the ordinariness of the medium, what was most archived were its moments of exceptionalness. Poring over the interplay of experts and ordinary people in sporadically preserved programming made when television itself was new, it was very difficult to judge what was normal and what was extraordinary in the performance of “being on television.” Often, too, the metadata was incomplete, and so while the date of broadcasts was normally recorded, their times were rarely there. The schedule was, perhaps, both invisible and taken for granted by those early archivists of television. However, viewing all the material that was available—and thus identifying the sources for the familiar clips used to signify “funny old television”—was still illuminating, perhaps because the patchiness of the material preserved spoke more eloquently of the hours of programs lost than a few carefully preserved, complete series and programs would have.

My third example comes from a project about London and the cinema. In the early stages of this project, I was hoping to include film and television together, and spent many hours watching, in particular, newsreels, programs and documentaries that included material about the River Thames. It became evident that on television there were certain key tropes used to make films about the Thames that recurred across a great many texts, for example, the dead body recovered from the River at Wapping, or the return of fish to the River now that London industry is so much reduced. Again, it was essential to this project that I could roam through material deposited in the archive, identifying what I wanted to watch through a variety of means, and I am still planning to write up the “London and television” material. However, what was also important was the relationship between material held in the moving image archives and the paper archives. The BFI’s Special Collections, which have, for example, outstanding archives on Ealing Studios, provide a wealth of documentation on the production, exhibition, and reception of films, much of it only accessible with the help of specialist librarians. In relation to the River, I learned, for example, that the pioneering Ealing film of 1951, *Pool of London*, which took as its topic the issue of “colour prejudice,” was promoted by Ealing with a range of posters that never included an image of the Bermuda-born Earl Cameron, although the four other, white, leads were shown. These traces of marketing campaigns, of location research, of correspondence about who is paid what, allow scholars to understand films and television programs historically, and as historical artifacts. Although in some ways less glamorous than celluloid, paper, too, is precious and must be preserved.

The first of these stories recounts a use of the Archive that technology has—pretty much—made redundant. Most of the film canon is now available commercially to a much wider audience than people employed to teach film studies, and this can only be celebrated. But the second two, in different ways, involve the intricate relationship between scholarship and the archive that demands a moment of encounter when the scholar does not know what she may find. This moment, which can eventually be generative of many things—books, articles, film seasons, television programs, DVDs, streamed programming, mediathèque releases—is a moment of which many scholars in many disciplines have written.³ It is an encounter with an undisciplined trace; with something not yet put into words. And it is the possibility of this encounter that must be preserved if film and television scholars are going to learn new things, instead of just circulating the same old stories.

As I live outside London, going to the Archive always requires a journey. And I do, literally, travel hopefully. I hope that what I am going to see will render up this moment. I have recently been watching the 1978 BBC series *Law and Order* as part of a larger project about crime and policing on British television.⁴ I had not seen it for nearly thirty years, but I traveled to the BFI hoping that it would be as good as I remembered it. This anticipation is like an extratextual suspense. The journey, always a careful calculation about the relative costs of an early train

(which gets you there when the archive opens, but is three times more expensive), or a very intensive, shortened viewing day, is conducted in a peculiar spirit of immanence. The nature of the British public transport infrastructure—crudely, all railway lines lead to London—means that it is much easier to travel into London than to places quite near it, like Berkhamsted (where most of the film and television material is stored), which may be geographically closer to your starting point. It is a pilgrimage on a rush-hour train. And then the joy, in the dark, of becoming lost in the world of the fiction. And *Law and Order* is as good as I remembered; since I did not remember much of the detail, in some ways it is even better. And I cannot wait to go back and watch it again, as I think about how I will shape what I will write. Must do it soon, while I still can.

Notes

1. The British Film Institute funded lectureships at five British universities in the 1970s to develop the teaching of film. I teach at Warwick, one of these five, where the original post holder was Robin Wood, followed by V. F. Perkins who established the department. The other universities were Essex, Kent, Stirling, and the University of East Anglia.
2. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974). Steve Bryant, the current senior Curator of Television, has been assiduous in exploring links with scholars.
3. Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
4. *Law and Order*, four 80-minute plays, written by G. F. Newman, directed by Leslie Blair, produced by Tony Garnett (tx. Thursdays, April 6–27, 1978, BBC2).

In For A Downer? Notes on Some British Film Institute Feature Film Productions of the 1980s



by *Bill Grantham*

The moment I saw “The British Film Institute in association with Channel 4 presents *Distant Voices, Still Lives*” I feared we were in for a downer, and so it proved.

Ken Russell¹

For one living in the south London suburbs in the 1970s, connected by slow commuter trains to the metropolitan hub at Waterloo Station, the multisited British Film Institute principally meant the nearby National Film Theatre. The NFT was part of a cluster of cultural gatekeepers near Waterloo that included the Royal Festival and Queen Elizabeth Halls and Purcell Room for (mainly) classical music, the National Theatre at the Old Vic (and then at its own purpose-built South Bank site), and the Hayward Gallery for visual arts. This nexus of brutalist designs, windchilled

piazas, menacing underpasses, dark Victorian railway arches, and lines and louche pubs and cafes seemed to stare morosely across the Thames, only barely connected to the “real” city opposite and hemmed in by the frantic traffic intersection to the south and west and by a sinister web of glowering warehouses, industrial terraces, grimy streets, and pockmarked lanes of Southwark to the east. The Bankside Power Station was still a power station, not yet the anchor tenant of the cultural playground stretching to Tower Bridge that now includes the industrial chic of the Tate Modern and the Disneyland “authenticity” of “Shakespeare’s” “Globe.” Back then, we banlieusards arriving by train at Waterloo for cultural improvement were joined by pedestrians who poured south from their offices in Charing Cross and Covent Garden, crossing the Thames by the wide, painterly Waterloo Bridge or the anxious cage of the Hungerford footbridge, whose wire networks hindered attempts at suicide, whether across the train lines to the west or into the easterly river. The South Bank was a destination on the way to nowhere else, a home to the high arts that seemed like the last place on earth.

British Film’s *lieu de mémoire*. In those dark years between the Swinging London and Cool Britannia, there were plenty of repositories of film culture elsewhere in London. But the BFI, like its South Bank neighbors, was *canonical*: an “Institute,” “British,” its exhibition space “National” and a “Theatre,” a home to the singular, pedestalled “Film.” The site itself was consecrated: it was the home of the Festival of Britain, a 1951 event designed both to mark the emergence of a new, quasi-socialist, Labour Party–led order from the ruins of the Second World War and, at the same time and apparently unironically, to celebrate the centenary of the Great Exhibition, the international fair that marked the apogee of British imperialism. The Festival, and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II two years later, were statements of nationhood that simultaneously submerged and highlighted these paradoxes, although the former element was more apparent at the time. These were “celebrations of what contemporaries thought was a uniquely harmonious society.”² This attempted celebration of a totalizing and homogenizing ideology underpinned, so it was said, the solidarity of the nation during the Second World War.

I emphasize these physical spaces because the existence of the South Bank cannot be explained simply by the need to have places to house art, theatre, films, and so on. Instead, their creation seems to me to embody a yearning that goes beyond mere utility. They comprise a *lieu de mémoire* in the sense posited by Pierre Nora, a monument to a past that is disconnected from our actual memories.³ And in that sense, the cultural rupture between the imagined past and the imagined present that is inherent in the Festival is present at the birth of the BFI’s production activities.

The film aspect of the Festival, organized by the BFI at the request of the British government, was “integral to the Festival of Britain,” bridging the “three main areas of concern, the arts, industry and science.”⁴ Financial exigencies threatened the BFI’s mission, but ultimately the organization stimulated Festival-themed

mainstream feature productions while also acting as an underfunded impresario for original documentary and “technically experimental” films.⁵ The most prominent result of this celebration of film, *The Magic Box* (John Boulting, 1951), sought, via a fanciful account of the camera inventor William Friese-Greene, to claim the creation of the cinema as the product of the British genius, rather than the messy outcome of the work of myriad researchers from Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁶ The other key films of the Festival were similarly conflicted,⁷ most notably Humphrey Jennings’ contribution, *Family Portrait*, in which the “family” is the British people; in an exceptionalist turn, the film positions postwar Britain as a bridge between Europe and the rest of the world:

And now we also belong to a communion across the Atlantic and the South Seas. We are too small, too crowded to stand alone. We have to come both inside the family of Europe and the pattern overseas. We are the link between them. For all we have received, from them and from our native land, what can we return? Perhaps, the very things that make the family, the pattern, possible. Tolerance. Courage. Faith. The will to be disciplined. And free. Together.⁸

It was this Unionist, Atlanticist, romanticized Britain that gave birth not only to the film production activities of the BFI, a national, state-supported institution, but also to its South Bank exhibition buildings, the Telecinema and the NFT—all essential to the constitution of official (or at least hegemonic) versions of film culture in Britain. But the overdone, sentimental pleading of *The Magic Box* and Jennings’ “fantasy of the Empire” in *Family Portrait* were repellent to many. Even his champion, Lindsay Anderson, noted Jennings’ reliance on “[t]he [p]ast as a refuge.”⁹ The triumphalism of the Festival bred concurrently its own discontents and oppositions.

In its South Bank *lieu de mémoire*, the NFT was where the results of the BFI’s efforts to incubate new films would generally be seen. Thus, the new NFT was home to the first screenings of the so-called “Free Cinema” programs, organized by Anderson and including both BFI and non-BFI-funded work: *Together* (Lorenza Mazzetti, 1956), *Momma Don’t Allow* (Karel Reisz & Tony Richardson, 1955), and *O Dreamland* (Lindsay Anderson, 1953). These films all suggested a Britain different from the Festival version, a Britain where class, income, environment, and race were dividing, distancing features of national life. The pleasures taken by the jazz fans in their North London pub in *Momma Don’t Allow* or the funfair participants of *O Dreamland* are not those of Jennings’ “family” but of a more disconnected people, grounded in the local and part of nothing bigger. But if these films avoided institutional “Britishness,” they generally remained aligned with their subjects: even the dyspepsia of Anderson’s nightmarish views and soundscapes in *O Dreamland* is “truer” than such Free Cinema follow-ups as *Nice Time* (Claude Goretta & Alain Tanner, 1957), whose mashed-up accounts of nighttime visitors to Piccadilly Circus seem like mere *exercices de style* in comparison.

“Innovative” and “accessible.” By the mid 1970s, after twenty or so years of film funding the BFI’s production activities had reached a kind of entropy. No

BFI-funded films were screened at the NFT in the five-and-a-half years after March 1971, although a handful, including Bill Douglas's *My Childhood* (1972) and *My Ain Folk* (1973), were shown at the London Film Festival.¹⁰ Internal cultural divisions within the BFI—notably around issues of film theory—created an institutional environment that pitted the BFI's intellectual leadership against the more conventional, patronage-minded membership of the Production Board. And outside the BFI, centers of avant-garde film practice such as the London Film-Makers' Co-Op and the Independent Film Makers' Association opposed the entrenched practices of auteurism and art cinema embraced by the Production Board. These stresses, combined with financial, management, and distribution problems, kept the BFI's production activities in a persistent condition of near crisis. In response to these crippling difficulties, the BFI's new head of production, Peter Sainsbury, called in 1976 for “a renunciation of the ethic of patronage and the institution of professional production procedures with compatible budgetary strategies.”¹¹ This meant a number of things, but its most visible effect was to change the BFI into a producer of “commercial-grade” feature films with potential for theatrical, television, and video release, under the leadership of a head of production whose discretionary powers (i.e., independence from the BFI Production Board) had been greatly enhanced. Sainsbury was seen at the time as an instrument of change who had,

encouraged film-makers working with BFI finance to cast their scripts within a narrative structure, use well-known names in the cast, and employ skilled technicians to secure the highest production values possible with a low budget. Sainsbury's aim to maximize the audience for films which are innovative in their use of the film medium has brought strong criticism from experimental film-makers who interpreted such measures as attempts to compromise a director's creative integrity. Such criticisms spring from a deep disdain for the audience and a refusal to take any steps towards accessibility.¹²

There are quite a few contestable terms used in this short passage: notably, “production values,” “innovative,” and “accessible.” But it seems fair to say, first, that this description of Sainsbury's policy is accurate, and, second, that it endorses a conservative, incremental approach: the features supported by the BFI are essentially on the same page as those produced by more mainstream cinemas, albeit often at the margins. The idea that they might be written on a different page altogether has been roundly rejected.

“Highest production values” was often coded language for not video, not 16 mm, or not Super 8 mm. It also meant less academy ratio and more color. By favoring 35 mm, widescreen formats and color photography, the BFI's policy pushed up costs, even of purportedly “low budget” films. Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) cost around £450,000 to make.¹³ His previous feature, *The Falls* (1980), was an hour and a half longer and received just £30,000 in production funding from the BFI.¹⁴ Sainsbury's new production dispensation required funds from other sources: on a small scale, there was the National Film Finance

Corporation (now British Screen), headed by a predecessor of Sainsbury's at the BFI, Mamoun Hassan. More substantially, there was a new UK television network, Channel Four (run by a former Production Board chairman, Jeremy Isaacs), whose film financing remit was heavily influenced by the success of West German television networks during the 1970s in nurturing such emerging talents as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, and Wim Wenders. According to James Park, Channel Four put £150–200,000 into *The Draughtsman's Contract*, which nonetheless left an enormous balance for the BFI to cover. In 1979, the Production Board's combined contribution to eight new films was about £370,000, while in 1978, the total for seven films was just over £150,000.¹⁵

Whatever else Sainsbury's policies may have achieved, the sums of money involved, together with the routine need for coproduction partners, imposed a marketplace logic on the BFI's production enterprise. Without commercial returns—something scarcely ever before achieved by any BFI film—the new approach would be unsustainable. And in light of the “national” role of the BFI discussed previously, it is worth noting what “marketplace logic” meant in Britain at the turn of the 1980s.

After the Atlee government fell in October 1951, just as the Festival of Britain was drawing to its close, the Labour Party found itself in opposition to the dominant Conservative Party for some sixteen of the next twenty-two years. Labour returned to power in 1974 in the aftermath of the oil crisis that had begun the previous year. In common with most other Western countries, Britain suffered prolonged double-figure inflation and then-record unemployment levels. In 1979, in reaction to this severe decline, the Conservatives, led by Margaret Thatcher, won the general election by a landslide on a pledge to sweep away the postwar Keynesian mixed economy model and replace it with policies promoted by free market theorists such as Milton Friedman. As with the contemporaneous Reagan-Bush administrations in the United States, the Thatcher government proclaimed the beneficial supremacy of markets and the failure of state intervention in regulating most human affairs. Thus, for the BFI, the embrace of marketplace logic in 1979–80 was a very British thing to do. In this light, the promotion of filmic “accessibility” seems less an appeal to popular (or populist) democracy than a submission to the new ideological current of allowing the “marketplace to decide” what should or should not survive. One would guess that many if not most of the BFI leadership voted against Thatcher in 1979 and continued to disdain her throughout her long term of office—that was the commonplace opinion of metropolitan culture at the time. Objectively, though, this was opposition waged through submission, more reactionary surrender than necessary improvement.

But just as the Free Cinema films somewhat cut through the prevailing Festival ideologies of the BFI in the 1950s, it is still at least theoretically possible that the actual results of the Sainsbury policy shifts may have diverged from the spirit of the Thatcher age. The films that I have chosen to discuss in this context are those that in some way or other have been deemed, then and/or since, to have

been “successes,” whether critically, financially, or both. In that sense, their place in the world into which they were born has been somewhat overlooked, as if they have become museum pieces rather than cultural products.

Christopher Petit, *Radio On* (1980). *Radio On* was in many ways the BFI’s first “hit,” a coproduction with Wenders’ Road Movies Filmproduktion company that cost about £80,000–£100,000 to make.¹⁶ Shot in widescreen 35 mm black and white, it has been anointed “[o]ne of the landmark English [sic] films of the past 30 years” by the conservative London newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*.¹⁷ Robert, a London disk jockey, drives across the country to learn more about his brother’s suicide. On the way he encounters various characters—an erratic, unemployed Scottish ex-serviceman, a feckless gas station attendant who plays Eddie Cochran songs, a German woman seeking custody of her young son, and so on, all against the backdrop of a score from the period, including songs by David Bowie, Kraftwerk, Ian Dury, Lene Lovich, and Wreckless Eric. There are gestures towards the political moment—graffiti on a wall call for the release of the jailed Baader-Meinhof guerrilla Astrid Proll, the Scot talks about two tours patrolling in Belfast—but the film’s dominant posture is the gaze from a distance of the disconnected, passive spectator to which things happen, a non-actor. Although *Radio On*’s most obvious debt is to David Lynch’s own low-budget black-and-white feature, *Eraserhead* (1977), a work that was greatly admired by the magazine *Time Out* (for which Petit worked as a film critic), it lacks the almost frantic engagement of that film with its stricken hero. It is determined to be cross-culturally Germanic—the Wenders collaboration, the Proll graffiti, the German characters, the Kraftwerk music, the German language version of Bowie’s “Heroes”—but as it progresses, the film becomes less and less cosmopolitan. Robert penetrates the dull heart of England: pubs, trailer parks, provincial towns, the seaside. With its grainy monochrome and seedy backdrops, *Radio On* begins to look more in the tradition of another British staple—kitchen sink drama—and less a product of the narrative vanguard.

Peter Greenaway, *The Falls* (1980), *The Draughtsman’s Contract* (1982), *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985). Some would claim that the charge that the BFI abandoned the avant-garde in the Sainsbury era is answered by the success of Peter Greenaway. In terms of his film practice it can be claimed that Greenaway’s work is related to the painterly tradition identified by Peter Wollen as one of the two strands of avant-gardism in the cinema.¹⁸ But he is also connected to other, more specifically British cultural strands, notably the short-lived “absurdist” theatre of the 1950s and 1960s, in particular the work of N. F. Simpson (*A Resounding Tinkle*; 1957; *One Way Pendulum*, 1959), and the zany tradition that runs through radio’s *The Goon Show*, the theatrical review *Beyond the Fringe*, and the television and film work of Monty Python. Seen against this backdrop, a work such as *The Falls* (1980), a three-hour series of ninety-two vignettes concerning people

whose names begin with the letters FALL seems to have more loopy geniality than any truly sinister or disturbing impact. But this good nature darkens and dissipates as Greenaway realizes his ambitions to make bigger films. *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), hugely praised in its time, combines, in its account of a painter working at an eighteenth century English country house, a cold formalism with glib analogizing—in a series of *tableaux vivants*, a commonplace is repeated and repeated: the artist is the director is the artist. Greenaway embraces a sort of enervated voyeurism: a dull project of looking without feeling. He is all surface, preferring “classical landscapes—studied, organized and considered” to any attempt to “capture the moment” of the type that he reads into impressionism.¹⁹ In that sense, he became in the 1980s a perfect reflection of a very British moment, substituting a parody of difference for the practice of opposition.

Derek Jarman, *The Angelic Conversation* (1985), *Caravaggio* (1986).

Derek Jarman's career was cut short by AIDS and death at the age of fifty-two, but he still managed a film career of nearly a quarter of a century. Although he struggled for much of that time in the *demimonde* of the poor artist, he was well connected and had different ways of getting films made: before *The Angelic Conversation*, he had made three features, *Sebastiane* (1976), *Jubilee* (1977), and *The Tempest* (1979), and some three dozen shorts without any BFI money, an oversight that must have begun to seem embarrassing. In *The Angelic Conversation*, he sets Shakespeare's sonnets to montages of a young man in love, using a panoply of effects—stop-motion, color desaturation, granular imaging, all in Super-8 mm—that evoke Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). In *Caravaggio*, Jarman takes his favorite subjects, art and gay love, and makes an urgent case for both. By the time these films were made, AIDS, which had only been identified in 1981, was rampant: these uncompromising expressions of love, art, and desire, made in the shadow of the epidemic, could only be seen as oppositional demands to the moral and cultural order. In that sense, the “high art” inflections of both films are relevant only as reclamations of vital cultural properties from their habitual custodians. Jarman's project insists on patterns of life and experience that reject all efforts to contain them. It hardly seems accidental that within two years of *Caravaggio*, the Thatcher government passed the notorious Section 28, a statutory amendment directing that a local authority “shall not intentionally promote homosexuality” or promote in schools “the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.”²⁰ Although the BFI was not directly subject to Section 28, official Britain had nonetheless spoken: for whatever reason, Jarman's remaining films were not supported by the BFI.

In for a Downer? Ken Russell's grumpy comments quoted earlier may not be fair to Terence Davies, but they do reflect valid frustration at the type of cinema the BFI often stood for in the 1980s. After all, there were other sources of visual arts and entertainment that often seemed more challenging and more daring than the

institutionalized “alternative” cinema offered under the Sainsbury regime. Television continued to be a vital source of drama, with Alan Bleasdale, Alan Clark, Trevor Griffith, David Leland, Dennis Potter, Philip Savile and many others producing a flow of work that took issue with the institutional vision of Britain posited elsewhere. And the techniques of music videos, which burgeoned in the 1980s, drawing from both avant-garde experimentation and from the maverick cinemas of, among others, Russell and Dick Lester, arguably had more influence on the language of cinema than anything done by Peter Greenaway. The “downer” of so much of the BFI funded work of the 1980s is a poverty of ambition thinly cloaked by an “alternative” and “independent” posture.

Notes

1. Ken Russell, *The Lion Roars* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1994), 168.
2. Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 535.
3. Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 1–2.
4. Sarah Easen, “Film and the Festival of Britain,” in *British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration*, ed. Ian MacKillop and Neil Sinyard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 50–51. Film seems less “integral” to general historians of the Festival, who barely mention it. See, e.g., Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976); and Paul Rennie, *Festival of Britain Design 1951* (Woodbridge, England, 2007).
5. Christophe Dupin, “The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of non-commercial film: A contextualised analysis of the origins, administration, policy and achievements of the BFI, Experimental Film Fund (1952–1965) and Production Board (1966–1979)” (PhD diss., Birkbeck College, University of London, 2005), 29–31. I am very grateful to Dr. Dupin for providing me with a copy of his unpublished dissertation.
6. See, e.g., David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 9–10.
7. An incomplete list of official, semiofficial, and unofficial films connected to the Festival other than *The Magic Box*, many with varying degrees of BFI support, would include *Air Parade* (Bill Mason, 1951); *Around is Around* (Norman McLaren, 1951); *Brief City* (Maurice Harvey & Jacques Brunius, 1952); *Family Portrait* (Humphrey Jennings, 1951); *Festival in London* (Philip Leacock, 1951); *David* (Paul Dickson, 1951); *Distant Thames: Royal River* (Brian Smith 1951); *Forward A Century* (JB Napier-Bell, 1951); *Now is the Time* (Norman McLaren & Raymond Spottiswoode, 1951); *Painter and Poet 1–4* (John Halas, 1951); *A Solid Explanation* (Peter Bradford, 1951); and *Waters of Time* (Basil Wright & Bill Launder, 1951).
8. Transcribed from the film commentary. I have attempted to match the punctuation to the vocal cadences of the narrator (Michael Goodliffe).
9. Quoted in Easen, “Film and the Festival of Britain,” 58.
10. Dupin, “The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of noncommercial film,” 212.
11. *Ibid.*, 251.
12. James Park, *Learning to Dream: The New British Cinema* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 51. Park’s enthusiasm for the new wave of British filmmakers of the early and

- mid-1980s was short-lived: his next book on the subject was called *British Cinema: The Lights that Failed* (London: BT Batsford, 1990).
13. Park, *Learning to Dream*, 73.
 14. Dupin, "The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of noncommercial film," 311. Some contributions were spread over two years.
 15. Dupin, "The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of noncommercial film," 311. Some contributions were spread over two years.
 16. £80,000 according to Park, *Learning to Dream*, 44; £100,000 according to Dupin, "The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of noncommercial film," 280. The BFI contribution was £40,000.
 17. Sukhdev Sandhu, "Road movie through post-punk Britain." *Daily Telegraph* (London), October 8, 2004, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/10/08/bfpetit08.xml> (accessed November 30, 2007).
 18. Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes" (1975), in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso Editions, 1982), 92–104.
 19. Park, *Learning to Dream*, 89
 20. Local Government Act 1988 (c. 9) [UK].

Contributors

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