

# PROGRAMMING: SHOWING THE BEST FILMS TO YOUR COMMUNITY



## Overview

Programming, education and marketing are interrelated activities in any Community Cinema (CC). Reading the Growing Your Audience article first may help because it explores the importance of community context to a CC's identity: understanding the purpose and place of your CC is critical before you can develop a suitable programming strategy and show 'the best' films to your community.

### What is programming?

This sounds like a daft question but it is worth being clear from the outset. Programming is more than simply booking a number of films. Rather, programming is the process of making an informed selection of films and presenting them in a schedule, based on a judgement of what is appropriate to your aims, objectives and audience.

Every CC is different. Each one has its own unique combination of geographic location, scale of operation, demographics and so forth. The particular combination of these factors means that any cinema and especially CCs require some form of bespoke programming.

The programming of a CC often is a collective exercise involving a number of volunteers compiling the programme for one screen. The advantage here is that the CC's programmers are indistinguishable from its audience.

The programmers should closely represent the interests and constituency of the cinema's wider audience (not just their personal interests), and have the film knowledge and programming flair to gently steer the audience towards new and interesting films.

### Programming in the traditions of the film society movement

Throughout the history of the film society movement four key elements can be found in the programming practices and constitutions of almost all UK film societies:

- Programming films that bear witness to the world and enlighten the audience.
- Programming films that transgress cultural norms, either formally or in their subject matter.
- Programming films that have been neglected by commercial cinema but for a range of reasons may be important to film society audiences.
- Programming that pays homage to the great works of cultural heritage.

Through these film society traditions, community exhibitors ensure the sustainability of bringing culture to audiences in UK communities.

Since the roots of the film society movement in 1925, BFFS has regarded itself as the guardian of this tradition and is dedicated to ensuring its continuation. The 2007-08 BFFS Annual Survey revealed that over 625 different titles were screened by responding community cinemas. With only 516 films released in commercial cinemas in the UK and Republic of Ireland in 2007, the breadth of CC programming seems broader than ever.

The power of the CC programmer is the scope by which you may know and understand your audience, appreciate and work within the programming ethos of your own community, and recognise the developing tradition of film society culture as a national institution.

## 1. Programme types

Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of programmes. Each one is equally worthwhile but the focus should depend on what kind of programme is important to your community and to your organisation. A mixture of all three will yield a programme enjoyed by many and will develop 'taste'. You may start out with one type and develop it into something different, or occasionally include a 'wild-card' title that may stimulate the appetite of your audience.

### i. Commercial

A 'commercial' programme will comprise films that were huge box office hits during their theatrical release and often are scheduled by a CC as soon as the distributor makes them available for non-theatrical exhibition. Recent examples of this type of film are *Mamma Mia!* and *The Dark Knight*.

On the face of it, a mainly commercial programme may appear to be most appropriate to CCs located in villages and towns too small to attract a large cinema operator, or the nearest commercial cinema might be some distance away. However, the CC should not be seen as simply substituting for a commercial outlet. The unique features of a CC should be considered: the social aspects of themed programmes, the closeness of the programming team to the audience (the one usually a subset of the other), the level of trust established in the programme. These factors mean that a CC is able to offer much more variety to its audience and members.

In any case, while having a commercial focus will make getting hold of a title easier and there will be lots of press materials to help you sell it, the problem with having a purely commercial programme is the time lag between a film's mainstream release and its availability to CCs.

A film may even become available in the shops or on TV before it is released to community exhibitors. This can be difficult to explain to expectant audiences and it means that the programme, despite the best efforts of the CC, can seem outdated.

### ii. Cross-over

Crossover films are not big-budget Hollywood blockbusters and do not enjoy as wide a release at the mainstream cinemas but are critical and commercial successes nonetheless. Many UK films, most recently *Slumdog Millionaire*, fall into this category as do many documentaries such as *Touching the Void*.

This type of programme offers a good alternative to programmes that consist of purely mainstream films. Many crossover films become popular through word of mouth rather than huge publicity campaigns. The slow-burn effect is good for CCs whose programme is subject to the distribution delay referred to earlier.

Like commercial titles, crossover films are easy to research because there is a lot of press material and this can be drawn on for publicity and programme notes.

A programme of mainly crossover titles represents a more varied cultural remit and can fulfil the educative value that your CC may have in its constitution. This type of programme can also serve a wider range of audience. For example, the film *Fahrenheit 9/11* attracted a younger audience than was typical for a documentary film.

### iii. Specialised

Many CCs are set up by cinephiles keen to see films in their locale that would otherwise not be available. Such CCs fill a gap in cultural provision by screening films that are not widely shown at the multiplexes, such as low-budget, foreign-language and classic films.

This category also includes films that tackle more artistic, political and cultural subjects. For example, *El Bola*, a gritty powerful drama from Spanish director Acheró Mañas, won four Goya awards (Spanish Oscars).

The difficulties of having a purely specialised programme can include difficulty in accessing the films themselves, as well as the lack of good quality materials that will help you pitch the films to your audience. Showing highly specialised films can involve a significant amount of research, possibly rights negotiation and specific marketing. Many CCs will find this challenging but deeply rewarding, as will their audiences.

CCs often programme highly specialised films as part of special strands, seasons or events. For example, in 2008 CineGuernsey ([www.cineguernsey.com](http://www.cineguernsey.com)) organised a one-day festival that took their audience on a journey Around the World in Animation. Scarborough Film Society ([www.filmscarborough.com](http://www.filmscarborough.com)) hosts an annual festival of silent film, and Slough Co-operative Film Society co-runs the Same Difference Film Festival ([www.same-difference.org.uk](http://www.same-difference.org.uk)), dedicated to conflict resolution and anti-racism. A significant minority of CCs meet specific needs by offering highly specialised programming year-round.

Combining films from across these broad categories provides a well-rounded programme of cinema that enables audiences to take a wider and deeper interest in film as an art form. Be careful, however, that film selection does not appear too random and erratic. If you show *High School Musical* one week and *Last Tango in Paris* the next, people might not know what to expect – and your ‘brand’ might be difficult to convey to new audiences. Some suggestions are made in Section 5 about how to structure the programme to accommodate the widest variety of films.

## 2. Programme selection and planning

### Audience-driven programming

Placing the audience at the heart of the programme selection process is central to the success of a CC. Many commercial and independent cinemas thrive on the ‘now factor’, by giving audiences their first opportunity to see new releases and creating demand by building on the critical buzz and hype from success at award ceremonies and festivals. Delayed access to films means that a CC cannot behave in the same way, so how can a CC ensure that, given the time delay from the initial theatrical release, there will still be an audience for a film? The answer lies in making the audience integral to the process of film selection. The CC becomes a cinema of the people, where audience demand is created by a sense of loyalty and ownership of a venture that is at the heart of the local community.

The majority of CCs operate some type of membership scheme and this gives them a relatively easy way to build a close relationship with a large proportion of their regular audience. It is a simple task to engage members in making suggestions to form a long list of film choices. To encourage broader participation in the process you can ask audiences to feed in their requests directly through a suggestions box. From this long list, the film selection committee can, by a democratic process of selection, develop a short list of preferred titles and from there quickly form a quarterly, seasonal or annual programme.

But the process doesn’t end with the presentation of a film, and it’s important that you gather feedback from your audience after each screening. You will use this information to further develop your programming. A common feedback method is the reaction index (RI) that is used at BFFS Regional Viewing Sessions and ICO Screening Days. This is a simple way of illustrating which films were most enjoyed. Over time, this data is collated and interpreted to provide a profile of the tastes of your audience.

Audience consultation can also be carried out informally, through observation. Building up a ‘feel’ or instinct for audiences takes time and practice and it’s advisable for programming volunteers to spend some time at the front of house to see who actually comes through the door to see films. The key to considering audiences in the programming process is to look at how the films – their subject matter, form and content – potentially speak to certain audiences.

A very clear example of an audience-led approach to programming is the recent revived interest in archival, mostly nonfiction programming. Such programmes appeal to a very wide audience. Some viewers may be primarily interested in the social document aspect of these films, others in genealogy or local history.

Knowledge of audience composition, taste and habits is almost as important as knowledge of films, and all effective programmers aim both to retain existing audiences, and to push audiences to take risks and expand their taste.

### **Film knowledge**

Keen volunteers in your CC are an excellent resource and they will have a lot of knowledge between them. It is important, however, to ensure the group makes it their business to always be up to date with potentially useful critical and availability information from all the following good sources:

Print: *Empire, Sight & Sound, Total Film, Guardian Guide, Times Playlist* and so on.

Online: [www.launchingfilms.com](http://www.launchingfilms.com)  
[www.findanyfilm.com](http://www.findanyfilm.com)  
[www.rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com)  
[www.bbfc.co.uk](http://www.bbfc.co.uk)  
[www.britmovie.co.uk](http://www.britmovie.co.uk)  
[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

- TV & Radio: The Culture Show, Front Row, Newsnight Review, Film 2009, BBC Five Live, etc.
- Regional Screen Agency or Regional Film Archive: Websites and newsletters should keep you informed of all films shot in the region or by people/production companies from the area.
- Film distributors: Keep a general eye on the latest releases (and deletions) available to CCs.
- International Film Festival Blogs and Diaries: Cannes, Sundance, London, Edinburgh, Berlin, Venice, Toronto etc.

National and regional festivals, previews and screening weekends provide invaluable opportunities for CC programmers to view forthcoming releases and to get a feel for future film programmes. These may be national or regional events arranged around a topic, format or theme.

- National and regional film festivals: Bath, Bradford, Brighton, Bristol, Cambridge, Cornwall, Keswick, Leeds and many, many more.
- Themed festivals: Bite the Mango, Encounters, DocFest, Jewish FF, Kinoteka (Polish FF), Lesbian and Gay FF, Tongues on Fire, Sensoria (UK Festival of Film and Music) and many, many more.
- Screening Days: Run by the Independent Cinema Office, Screening Days take place twice a year and offer the opportunity to see a large number of titles in advance of the theatrical release. ([www.independentcinemaoffice.co.uk](http://www.independentcinemaoffice.co.uk))

Dedicated screenings are an invaluable opportunity for CCs to meet with other like-minded individuals and to share information on the film sector and its relation to CC programming. These sector-specific events are provided by BFFS:

- BFFS Regional Viewing Sessions: Run in-region by BFFS Regional Groups for BFFS members and non-members and presenting a selection of titles likely to be of interest to the CC sector.
- BFFS National Conference: This is a dedicated event for the CC sector that comprises training, facilitated networking, film screenings and the Film Society of the Year awards. The film programme showcases current and new releases from the BFFS National Block Booking Scheme.

### **Forward planning**

Forward planning is an important part of a good CC programme, and a calendar is a good planning tool. The calendar should pinpoint key events that may have an impact or influence on the film programme both in terms of the titles chosen and scheduling. The calendar should be kept updated by the volunteers and used whenever programme-planning meetings are taking place.

- Local events: school holidays, fetes/carnivals, theatre events and so on.
- Regional events: sports and cultural festivals etc.
- National events: BAFTAs, Remembrance Sunday, Comic Relief, elections, Wimbledon, Refugee Week, major sporting fixtures etc.
- International events: Olympics, the Oscars, Chinese New Year, UN Human Rights Day and Earth Day etc.

This knowledge will help you avoid clashing with key events that may limit turnout at a screening but it will also help you create a programme that is relevant to your community. You may, for example, want to avoid showing a film on the weekend of the village dog show, but you may want to show an appropriate film (Best in Show) the week before.

Relevance serves as a selling point for audiences and a hook for press and media coverage. Many film programmes have this factor simply by being tied to a new release title. Programmers will often build seasons of films around titles that they perceive as seasonal highlights, using the awareness created around the release of the central film to develop profile for the longer season.

### **3. Accessing films**

Once a wish list of films has emerged, by whatever means, the next step is to find out:

- Who owns the rights, i.e., whose permission do you need to exhibit the film?
- Where can you get hold of a copy of the film?

#### **Feature films**

For many CCs screening on DVD, obtaining a feature film is as easy as making a booking with their supplier from the titles listed in their catalogues. For most, this means MPLC, Filmbank and the BFI, which are licensed by theatrical distributors (i.e., those who provide titles for commercial and independent cinemas) to carry many of the titles a CC will be interested in. However, many of the smaller independent distributors are happy to work directly with community groups (contact them directly and you'll soon find out who!). For a service dedicated to sector needs the BFFS National Block Booking Scheme offers a diverse range of titles including UK and world exclusives, specialised films, crossovers, documentaries, animations and more, all at an affordable rate and that otherwise get little or no distribution in the UK.

Answering the two questions at the start of this section can be a challenge if the film you want is not available via the 'usual' distributors. This probably will be the case with older films (which may only be as 'old' as 10 years) and highly specialised film titles, or if you want to obtain a 35mm film print that is more than a year old.

This will mean researching whether titles are still in distribution in the UK. Just as new-release titles become available, so other previously released films become unavailable. Most independent films are acquired by UK distributors for a fixed-term licence; after this period, unless the rights are purchased again, the film will fall out of circulation. In these cases, it may still be possible to get permission if research indicates who the rights holder might be (this may be the production company or an agent representing the producer, or the filmmakers themselves for smaller films) and the programmer is then able to negotiate a reasonable screening fee.

As a general rule, films produced by the US studios are owned by those studios in perpetuity, so rights will always be held by the studio that made the film. Some studios will appoint an agent to handle theatrical and non-theatrical bookings on their older, previous releases or library titles – that is, anything that is not a new release. So, for the serious programmer seeking to clear screenings of older studio titles for a repertory programme or thematic season, you need to find out who's handling which studio's titles.

The big studio distributors will generally hold a few 35mm prints of most recently released titles in their warehouses for a number of years after release for second- and third-run and repertory bookings. Prints of older titles might also be available if they have been re-released more recently. Otherwise, screening prints of older titles might also be held in certain archives, such as the BFI National Archive, for which any programmer would need firstly to clear rights to screen (which usually involves a fee), then book the material (i.e., the print) from the archive for an agreed booking fee. The advent of the release of older titles on DVD makes getting hold of physical material from which to screen easier, but the rights will still need to be cleared with the rights holder once you've tracked them down.

Over time you will begin to accumulate knowledge of available titles, rights and distributors. Keeping a detailed record of this information can be an invaluable resource to both your organisation and other groups who are part of the CC sector. You can then share this acquired knowledge using the BFFS community cinema network and discussion forum.

It may seem bizarre that there is no single centralised source of information around rights and materials for films in distribution in the UK. After all, doesn't the distribution sector want to make it as easy as possible to supply product to exhibitors? The simple truth is, the distribution sector is a fast-moving environment, with distributors acquiring and losing titles almost daily and a lot of such data is commercially sensitive. These two factors appear to preclude the creation of a central database.

### **Short films**

Some shorts are picked up by distributors and can be acquired by processes similar to those described above. A significant number, however, do not achieve full UK distribution and so permission must be gained directly from the filmmaker or production company. A great many digital shorts are made with public money via the Regional and National Screen Agencies and these bodies will be able to provide contact information.

Alternatively, why not find out who is making films in your community? Outreach with local film schools or courses may provide links to filmmakers right on your doorstep, giving you the added advantage of possibly holding introduced screenings.

### **Archive films**

There is currently a push from the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) through BFI and the UK Film Council to promote access to film heritage. From 2009 there will be more local-level initiatives delivering this objective, and regional film archives will, hopefully, be better equipped to facilitate access to material in the community. Contact your Regional Screen Agency or Regional Film Archive directly to find out what is available in your area.

## **4. Programme presentation**

Effective planning and good all-round film knowledge will make pulling together a programme an easier task. Really good programming, however, is not as simple as slotting films into a regular timetable.

Two more factors that make a well-conceived programme are 'sequence' and 'schedule'.

## **Sequence**

This refers to the specific order in which films and events are presented. A good sequential order will be designed with some logical impetus relating to an audience development strategy. If an objective of a CC is to introduce specialised film to a family audience, for example, it may begin a season with safe commercial titles, progress to crossover films and conclude with a specialised film. This approach gives the CC time to win the trust of a new audience that is necessary to encourage viewer risk-taking. [NB: Do not underestimate the importance of leaving your audience on a 'high' at the end of the season, so they want to come back at the start of the next; consider the deployment of the 'rare' good, crowd-pleasing comedy in this slot.]

The sequencing may also be more thematic. Programmes can be used to illustrate cultural, social or political themes, such as food, the environment or a particular country or regional culture. Themes of this type will work better and are easier to promote if they are relevant i.e., connected to a local, regional, national or international event. Alternatively, programmes can follow film-cultural themes such as genre, a specific production era, star or director, or a national cinema.

Both types of thematic programme will usually be delivered via a well-considered combination of newly released and older titles.

## **Schedule**

This is the timing of films and events. CCs often structure their programme by seasons, with many 'going dark' in the summer season when volunteer access and audience interest in or availability for cinema are lowest.

Beyond this, the timing of screenings is an important skill and it can be the key to winning or losing audiences. It is given great weighting in the television industry where audiences and patterns of consumption are in constant flux. The same is true to a certain extent in cinema-going and should not be overlooked as a secondary and perhaps boring part of the process. In commercial cinemas, the schedule is the first part of providing access for audiences, who look at screening times, showtime frequency and ticket price as the decisive elements when making film-going choices. Your CC audience will share many of these behaviours, although your closeness to your audience, your membership scheme and your ability to offer great deals on season tickets linked to membership, will give your audience a different 'loyalty' profile.

The scheduler generally has a range of factors to juggle when creating a practical programme schedule:

- **Frequency of film screenings**  
Most CCs screen films on a weekly schedule while smaller organisations may screen only once a month. The number of screening slots in a particular season will have a direct impact on the programmers' choices – e.g., is there room to put in a lesser known, possibly riskier option?
- **Optimal start times**  
Generally, 7.30 to 8pm is the best evening performance start time for general film-going audiences during the week. The slot allows time to return home after work on weekdays, to eat before the screening and to leave before the close of public transport.
- **Advertising and short films**  
In mainstream cinemas we are used to sitting through reams of national advertisements. Many CC members will appreciate not having to do this at your venue, although a valuable source of income and potentially useful local information may be provided by advertising local businesses. It's a good idea to use five minutes of this time to make announcements, promote forthcoming events and to introduce the film. This is important contact time with your audience and should be factored in.

The inclusion of short films can add significantly to the texture of a film programme. It is best, however, to show shorts of around three to six minutes; though they can be a bonus for some audiences, others might not be as interested.

It is probably best to pick just one of the above options and avoid starting the feature too late.

- **Technical factors**  
Make sure you have plenty of set-up and run-through time before audiences arrive, with time to clean up the screening space afterwards, if required. On the whole, a good standard of technical presentation is essential. For more information on technical presentation, see *Projection*.
- **Target audiences**  
Programme times should always be informed by the known preferences of target audiences. If the audience is dependent on public transport to get to and from the venue, there's little point in scheduling a film to finish after the last bus. If, on the other hand, a programme's key selling point is extreme content, then a late-night slot would be more appropriate for its intended audience.
- **Competing exhibitors and cultural events**  
It is worth reiterating the importance of an awareness of happenings at local, regional, national and international level. Don't forget to keep an eye on any other cinemas in the area – and avoid duplicating or too closely mirroring already available programming.

In addition to considering films that complement key events, there is the option to 'counter programme'. This means offering films aimed at an entirely different audience to that of the cultural event in question. So, seasons of films may be programmed to clash with a major football tournament and provide an antidote for those who are keen to escape it.

## **5. Experimenting with new programmes**

After a while, the programming becomes instinctive because those involved understand their audience so well. But once this happens, it is important to avoid getting stuck in a rut. Try to explore fresh ideas for programme development by introducing new kinds of films to your existing audience or by reaching out to new audiences.

This will require some careful thought by the programming and marketing teams. You do not want to alienate loyal audiences with an unwelcome change of course, or disappoint new audiences who find that a one-off film show is never to be repeated.

There are four main ways of branching out:

### **Strands**

Sometimes it is wise to create a regular offshoot programme for specific audiences. An obvious example is a 'family-friendly' strand showing U and PG films on a Saturday morning or during school holidays. Other strands might serve teens, over-55s, BME communities and so on.

Strands work best when they are audience-focused rather than film-focused, and the key word here is 'regular'. It doesn't have to be offered every week, but there should be some kind of ongoing commitment to the strand so it is possible to build audience loyalty.

### **Special seasons**

A season is a more short-term initiative than a strand, and is more film-focused. Seasons help to introduce audiences to new material or new filmmakers and create an appetite and demand for wider programming

in the long-term. The opportunities for seasons are endless: national cinema, specific directors or actors, genres, themes and so on.

A film season will have an education programme that runs alongside if it is to be an effective audience development tool. This does not have to be an expensive addition to the activity, as the article on *Film Education* will explain.

Do not be tempted to call a 'season' a 'festival', which is an over-used, misused term that could create false expectations in the community.

### **Film festivals**

Never underestimate the work involved in a film festival. Organising one should only be undertaken if you have the time and money. It is, however, a great way of making a splash in the community. A festival can be a day, a weekend, a week or even longer, but it is not just a bunch of films with a specific marketing campaign. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully describe the complexities of staging a film festival, but suffice to say that it is a 'celebration' event. A festival should, therefore, be a high-impact, high-profile community event that offers a unique and exciting audience experience. This takes a huge amount of work and good community partnerships to pull off, but it can be one of the most rewarding activities of a CC.

### **Exhibition partnerships**

Working with another exhibitor in the area can be a great way for a CC to expand what's on offer and offer community outreach. Potential partners include arts centres, independent and multiplex cinemas, churches, pubs, museums and galleries. You could, for example, have a programme of regional archive film that is screened at the museum. Working with a cinema will enable a CC with only DVD capability to show 35mm films from time to time.

Building relationships will take time. Most potential partners will not see a CC as a significant threat to their own audience but, hopefully, will spot the benefits of collaboration. The right organisation will be able to bring more to the partnership than the use of its facilities; its staff resources, expertise and marketing power can help you create a successful programme.

For examples of CCs that run outreach programmes to actively engage different communities, refer to the article on *Film Education*.

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