

Programming and Audience Development

Introduction

Programming is a core film society activity. Film societies that get their programming right build, retain and develop a loyal audience, and by doing so, they serve their communities in the best way possible, and form an important element of the film culture of the nation. Other factors bear on the sustainability of an individual film society, of course, but programming has unique and critical importance in a society's success or failure.

Every organization that shows film to audiences undertakes programming – the selection and sequencing of a series of films – but the circumstances of film society operation are unlike any other. Staffed and operated by volunteers, composed of audiences who are connected in a myriad of networks, film societies work on the basis of consent and consensus, and their programming processes must reflect this.

Although final decisions about a society's programme are generally made by a small group of activists, the decisions must express the tastes and aspirations of the whole audience group, and the deciding group has to be aware of this responsibility. Most film societies have mechanisms to provide audiences with ways of expressing choice, and successful societies have invariably developed an ethos and a sensitivity which ensures that selection successfully reflects audience need. The processes which underpin this are examined in the next section.

Audiences vary enormously, of course, and within any given audience, a wide spectrum of taste is always evident, along with a considerable variation from individual to individual in the level of interest in film. It is partly because of this that the film society model is so consistent throughout the nation, and has been since the beginning of the film society movement in 1925. The model allows consensus to be reached, and it is only through consensus that these variables can be reconciled and balanced. However, although the model is fixed, we should not suppose that the audience is static. Within any given audience, each individual is engaged in a journey of discovery in relation to film, and film societies are unique in creating the formal circumstances for this process of audience development. Audience development processes are examined in more detail in Section 2.

I Collaborative programming

Audience involvement in programming choice.

There are many ways to collect information about the expectations of audiences. Most film societies are small enough to rely on relatively informal methods – the collection of film title suggestions on slips of paper, the recollection of conversations – and these methods can seem disorganized and haphazard to those unfamiliar with them. They are effective nonetheless, and they have an additional benefit, in that they give audiences a sense of ad-hoc openness, a feeling that informal channels for expressing taste exist and are effective. Without this commonly-held sense that all audience members are collaborators, participants in this enterprise, a film society will not build a level of trust that ensures cohesion: the pay-off of this is the willingness of individual audience members to attend screenings of films that they might not otherwise go to.

Committee-based selection processes

At the heart of all film societies is a group of voluntary activists who do the work to make the society function, and it is normally this group which makes programming decisions. Occasionally they may have the advice of a programming expert, but normally the programming group convenes with the task of reconciling a number of factors, which include

- information about suitable films
- information about audience expectation
- information about finances and performance during preceding seasons
- a programming ethos developed over years
- a decision-making process which has similarly developed over the lifetime of the society
- their own taste (for many activists, programme selection is the key point of their involvement).

Of these, the least-researched and discussed is potentially the most important. Societies may have a programming ethos which ensures, for example

- that only a certain proportion of films in any season are American
- that a certain proportion of any season must be world cinema
- that at least one cult film is shown every year
- that at least one classic film is shown every year.

In commercial film societies, which rely on box-office income, it can be hard to disentangle ethos from commercial sense. Is the need to have a proportion of 'popular' films in a programme in order to ensure break-even over the year an issue of ethos? No, but the society's shared definition of 'popular' is, and in a given society this might include *Mrs Henderson Presents* but exclude *Ladies in Lavender* (for being too 'popular'). This is not nit-picking, but the crux of real programming choice.

Programming ethos and film society culture

Three key elements that can be traced back to the earliest film societies are found in the programming practices of almost all UK film societies. These are

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

The film society tradition that sustains this culture is barely recognised in the film arts establishment of the UK, yet it flows, hidden but strong, through the practices and beliefs of film society activists and audiences in UK communities. In many ways, this tradition reflects the programming practices of cultural institutions like the National Film Theatre, and forms a local, informal counterpart to such established national centres of excellence. BFFS regards itself as the guardian of this tradition, and many of its programmes and ambitions are, at least in part, intended to ensure its continuation.

Programming practice: building on existing awareness

A number of key factors determine the conditions for film society programming. These include

- 1) what your audience already knows or is aware of
- 2) the extent to which you have built a relationship of trust with them
- 3) your resources to extend their knowledge or awareness.

As you plan for a forthcoming season, you will be bringing to bear knowledge and awareness of what films are available and suitable. Film producers and distributors work hard and invest large sums in making sure you know about the films they produce, and media exposure in newspapers and magazines and on TV is very extensive. Your audience is as subject to these influences as you are, and will know more or less what you know, which makes it much easier to attract an audience to a well-known film, as much of your publicity work has been done for you.

This awareness also translates into expectation, and some programming is about meeting such expectation. But some is not, and here your judgment is paramount. How far, and in what direction, can you take your audience? Is there a taste for formal experiments, such as in Kiarastami's *Ten*? Is there an interest in political documentary such as *An Inconvenient Truth*? The balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar is in your hands.

Programming practice: film availability

Films normally become available to the film society (or 'non-theatrical') market after all theatrical runs have been completed, by which time they have been as extensively publicised as they are going to be. Film societies often push at this boundary by trying to get desirable films as early as possible (particularly if they screen on 35mm film), but cinemas are where films make most of their money, so despite the early release of DVDs, there will always be limits on when films become available for rental.

BFFS publishes a source-list for films likely to be of interest to film societies early each spring to assist in programming processes. Prepared by BFFS South-west Regional group, the list provides film society programmers with a comprehensive information kit detailing what films are available, and who from, with contact details. This list can be found on the BFFS website.

Programming practice: deciding collaboratively

Example 1: Prior to the start of the selection session, a long-list of possible films is prepared. There are no limits as to what can be included. The long-list may have a hundred or more titles. This list is then worked through. Each member of the selecting group has as many votes as there are films in the forthcoming season, and they cast them. The lowest-scoring films are discarded. This produces a short-list: in some cases, the short-list may become the season, and in other cases, adjustment is needed, if the list does not conform to the film society's programming ethos (too many American films, say, or not enough popular titles, or even just the wrong mood overall).

Example 2: The whole process is delegated to a small group, who each make suggestions and argue the merits of individual films until consensus is reached.

Example 3: An individual is commissioned to produce a proposed list, which is then discussed by the whole committee.

The role of the block-booking scheme

In two BFFS regions, Yorkshire and the South-west, block-booking schemes are operated on behalf of film societies. These schemes bring economies and ease of programming to participating societies. Typically DVD copies of selected films are made available to BFFS member societies through a local booking scheme operated by volunteers, at a favourable rental rate. The two schemes vary in detail, and interested societies should find out more by contacting BFFS central office (0845 693728 or info@bffs.org.uk)

The role of the viewing session

BFFS regions hold viewing sessions at which films of interest can be viewed in advance, and the Independent Cinema Office holds screening days nationally twice a year specifically for film society members. These events are at weekends, and consist of intensive end-to-end screenings of films selected on the basis of their likely interest to film societies. Invariably, a high proportion of films shown at viewing sessions find their way on to film society programmes, but viewing sessions are also a useful way of weeding out films which do not live up to their reputation. Every film at a BFFS viewing session is rated (by all audience members) according to an established system, and the ratings are reported in *NewsReel*, the BFFS newsletter, and on the BFFS website.

3) How audiences are developed by film societies.

The collaborative programming process used by most film societies works at several levels. It gets a necessary job done, and makes sure that the investment of voluntary effort involved in operating a film society season is likely to pay off in terms of audience satisfaction and survival of the enterprise. These are baseline requirements, but beyond them lie a series of needs which are satisfied less directly, and which can be grouped together as processes of audience development. Film societies 'develop' audiences in two senses. Firstly, in the strictly numeric sense, they build a regular audience for film where none previously existed. Secondly, they let film audiences develop their engagement with film culture by

- **Enabling** access to film, discussion, involvement in choice
- **Enhancing** the experience of audiences through the provision of programme notes, special events and so on
- **Extending** opportunities of members through regional & national events, access to film professionals and film archives, and accessing BFFS provision of advice, information and training.

Enabling access, discussion, involvement in choice

That film societies enable access to film is self-evident. They also foster, both formally and informally, discussion of film, including evaluation of what has been seen, speculation about what might be seen, and connection of what has been seen with other experiences. On the basis of this, audience members develop ambitions about what might be seen, and how it might be organised. Some move beyond this to active involvement, but for many, the ability to articulate a choice, and have it heard, and taken seriously, is engagement enough.

Enhancing the experience of audiences

Most film societies have an explicit educational intent – that is, they see themselves as an agency of film education, by which audiences broaden and deepen their knowledge and understanding of film. To this end, 71% of all film societies issue programme notes to audience members, and just under half of all societies measure and publicise audience ratings for the films they show. Around half of all film societies put on special events to enhance their programme. All these statistics are drawn from the 2006 BFFS Member Survey, which is available from BFFS and can be downloaded free from the BFFS website (bffs.org.uk). The audience experience is often enhanced in other ways: the social cohesion created by a brief introduction to the film, or an informal chat together afterwards, deepens the experience and increases the trust which underpins a society's operation, and audience members can be seen to follow a path of exploration of watching films at home as a result.

Extending opportunities

Film societies offer individuals

- the chance to get involved in the society as an active volunteer
- supported skills development in technical fields such as projection
- opportunities to engage more deeply with a strong cultural tradition
- structured ways of developing their knowledge and understanding of film
- engagement with local community provision in other related fields.

Film societies have formed the starting point for significant film festivals, for at least one Regional Film Theatre, for organized courses, and for commercial enterprises like mobile film shows. They also provide the channel for activists to become involved with BFFS itself. The institution of a society offers opportunities to extend interest in film in the local community as well: film societies have been known to bring retired film professionals together with members to discuss and appreciate film more deeply, from a different perspective, or to mount archive film events drawing upon local archive material, thus extending their audience by drawing in new interest groups.

Conclusion

Film societies are unique in UK film culture, organizations of consumers intent on expressing their own taste, largely in opposition to the main institutions which provide film to the population. They also lie outside the art cinema circuit, which is almost entirely restricted to the large cities of the UK.

Just as there are significant overlaps between what art cinemas put on and the film society programming agenda in any given year, so there are also significant differences between them, and these are largely accounted for by the collaborative programming practices outlined above. The discrepancy between what film societies show and the programmes of multiplexes is more marked. Film societies are not driven by commercial considerations (beyond a crude need to break even, year on year), but are instead motivated by an enlightened, liberal interest in film as a way of looking at the world. Most film society audiences love film as film, but equally they love serious drama which bears intelligent witness to the world as it is, and in this they set themselves apart from other audience groups.

This then is the programming challenge. To know and understand your audience, to appreciate and work within the programming ethos of your own film society, and to recognise the developing tradition of film society culture as a national institution. This last element, particularly, sounds heavy and onerous, but from the very first film societies in the early 1920s to today, the programming process has been a delight to engage in, creative, fulfilling, and almost invariably, fun. And so it should be!