The Work of the British Film Institute

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THE "FINE" ARTS, as we call them today, presumably had their upward struggle before they earned the adjective. Since the days of Athens, however, they have enjoyed a distinguished career, adorning the market places of rich states and illuminating the salons of great men. During the more violent moments of history, they survived the storm by sheltering in some cloister or by passing a century or two within an academy of scholars, always emerging punctually, to be welcomed by a new aristocracy and to be reshaped to the taste of the age. Today we accept them as the aristocrats of pleasure; they have a hereditary antiquity of twenty centuries and more; they have distinction; they have the *haut ton.* But as the Edwardian elite replenished their blue blood from the depths of the ladies' chorus, so from time to time have the great and ancient arts admitted to their circle some more vulgar form of amusement, giving to it grace and distinction and at the same time gaining from its freshness and vigor.

To those of us whose life is bound up with the development of cinema, this process has a peculiar fascination. For the newly born medium of film is in the main a type of folk art, brash and vigorous. This is due not so much to its kind, for it is capable of infinite imaginative expression, but to its employment. Be so absurd for a moment as to imagine the response of an Aristophanes or a Sophocles to the film, conceive an *Aeneid* scripted and directed by Vergil, shorts produced by Horace under the sponsorship of Maecenas, or consider the superb Technicolor savagery that Akbar would have had his men produce. Yet owing to the accident of its mechanical nature, the film was not born until the industrial age; it had no decent cultural descent; it did not even emerge from the people; it was thrust in front of the people by the showman.

The people have never really recovered the initiative. They accepted the cinema readily but passively; soon it was to become their favorite indoor entertainment, as the showman developed it sturdily along his traditional lines, borrowing largely from the cruder forms of storytelling, drama and mime to exploit its appeal. It was not, however, through any older art that the film found itself. It became a serious medium only when the experimental artist found in it new dimensions of time and place, new rhythms and new sensibilities, and when, in the late flowering of the silent period, he forged these elements into an idiom susceptible to high artistic expression—an idiom soon to be given yet another dimension in the form of the sound track.

In the dual recognition of the film as an art and as a mass influence, the British Film Institute was founded in 1934. In form it was a nonprofit-making, limited-liability company governed by a board whose members were appointed by the Lord President of the Council. In function, it was to fulfill a wide range of purposes. The older arts had their academies, libraries, and museums, each with its traditional field of responsibility. The new Institute, in that it was to collect films for preservation, was something of an archive; in that it was to promote the study of the art of film, it was something of an academy; in setting out to raise the standard of public appreciation, something of an Arts Council; in concerning itself with the social effects of the film, something of a public welfare body; in promoting the use of film in schools, something of the formal educationist; in lending and displaying films, it was a public library; and in forming its own membership, a club.

From small beginnings, the Institute, financed from the Sunday Cinematograph Fund (a fund endowed from a percentage of Sunday box-office takings), gradually grew; and as would be expected, it found a center of balance in those functions which proved to be most practicable. Thus, the establishment of the National Film Library in 1935 and the development of the film-society movement in the late thirties were significant landmarks in the course the Institute was destined to take.

During the war, there were two notable developments in the field of British films: first, the emergence of a strong indigenous feature-production industry; and secondly, a rapid expansion in the documentary and educational uses of the film. These developments resulted in the formation in 1947 of the British Film Academy as a meeting ground for artists and technicians, in the peacetime continuance of an informational film service through the Central Office of Information, and in the institution of the new National Committee for Visual Aids in Education. The house was setting itself in order; and the Institute, lightened of several borderline responsibilities, could see before it a clearer task, defined by the Radcliffe Committee which considered its affairs in 1948 as "To encourage the development of the art of the film, to promote its use as a record of contemporary life and manners, and to foster public appreciation and study of it from these points of view."

Today the Institute receives, in addition to some £20,000 from the Sunday Cinematograph Fund, a Treasury grant which, together with its own trading turnover, makes up an annual revenue expenditure of £125,000. From this total, the largest net amount is devoted to the National Film Library.

In the field of literature, it is possible for the British Museum to preserve a copy of every published work. Films, however, are more bulky than books; their expectancy of life is shorter; their storage and maintenance is an expensive and highly technical affair. Hence, since its establishment, the National Film Library has selected for preservation only the more significant films from the spate of current production. The method of selection has been aimed to fulfill three principal objects: to provide a record of contemporary life and manners for the social historian of the future, to survey the development of science and technology, and to preserve for posterity an anthology of films which reflect the development of the art.

The first of these objects entails a wide and judicious selection of material based not so much upon the journalistic value of news as upon the value of events as an interpretation of the age. This intention can be clarified by asking the question: "If you could recall to life the Britain of the eighteenth century, which scenes would most vividly reconstruct the life of the period?" The gardens at Vauxhall, the new manufactories at Birmingham, the interior of a coffeehouse, or a sustained view of Charing Cross would all be candidates at least as strong as the funeral of Queen Anne or the opening of George III's parliament. So today, the backgrounds of fashion, sport, and social life are given their due weight in relation to the events which make headline news. Thus, the History Selection Committee includes a sports journalist and an expert on dress as well as more orthodox historians.

The selection of films important to the development of the art of the cinema is a simpler affair. Great films are an automatic choice, as are any films made by artists of the top rank (actors, directors, and others are allotted gradings which reflect the selector's view of their importance). This, however, is not all; any film which uses a novel technique such as *The Lady in the Lake* or *Rope* would be certain of inclusion. This selection committee is composed mainly of film critics; it includes also film directors, journalists, film historians, and lay members. Already the archive holds over 20,000 reels of film, to which new titles are added at a rate of 10 or 20 a month.

The National Film Library is not, of course, alone in the field. The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Cinémathèque Française, to mention but two, carry on similar work in their own countries, and—thanks to the institution in 1938 of the active Federation Internationale des Archives du Film—there is now a high degree of international coördination, which extends beyond the Iron Curtain. The Library is, however, unique in the one respect that it has at Aston Clinton in Buckinghamshire a set of vaults specially constructed for the preservation of films. These vaults, under the supervision of a Technical Officer and a laboratory staff, are kept at carefully controlled levels of temperature and humidity. The staff is mainly engaged, however, in the work of film preservation.

Motion-picture film on a nitrate base is perhaps the most ephemeral material used in any visual art. After twenty to thirty years (although age is no certain yardstick), a complex series of chemical reactions may produce from the nitrate base acidic substances which, if allowed to develop unchecked, will combine to destroy the gelatin emulsion in which the actual picture is recorded. In extreme cases, the film becomes sticky and unfit for projection or further reproduction. Hence, a test has been devised to check the state of all films suspected of instability. A small circle of film is punched out of the reel to be tested and is inserted into a test tube. Since the deterioration of film can be artificially hastened by raising its temperature, the test tube is heated to 134 degrees centigrade. Inside the tube is test paper impregnated with alizarin red dye and moistened with glycerin and water. The volatile acid vapor generated from the hot film has the effect of bleaching the test paper; the result of this test is therefore taken as the time in minutes required for the color change to occur.

The bulk of the films held in the archive are used prints given by the distributing company on the request of the Selection Committee. Many private collections, however, have been donated to the Library; and these may contain a certain percentage of negatives. The technical quality of the material is important because the archive is not a viewing library in any sense; it is a collection of matrices from which any future viewing prints may be struck.

The mobilization of this vast treasure house will present posterity with a sizeable task. A start, however, has already been made by setting up a Loan Section, which holds viewing prints of those films which no longer hold any reissue value in the commercial sense but which, nevertheless, are of great importance to those interested in the history of films. They include the early work of the Lumière brothers and Méliès; a representative selection from the one-reel period; early westerns; Chaplin two-reelers; the great silent films of Griffith, Eisenstein, and Pudovkin; several examples of the French *avant-garde* school; and, in the sound period, Sternberg's *Blue Angel* and Pabst's *Kameradschaft* from Germany. British film production is well represented and in all there are some 500 films available on 16-mm. and 35-mm. gauges.

Distribution of the collection through the loan of prints had, however, obvious limitations; and, until the National Film Theatre was opened on October 23rd, 1952, the Institute had been in the position of a museum rich in stock but without exhibition space.

The theater is a handsome modern building constructed under the title of The Telecinema for the Festival of Britain 1951, during which it played programs of three-dimensional films and large-screen television. Re-equipped as a repertory theater with 400 seats and complete with club premises, it still retains the stereo equipment; but, more important for its purpose, the projectors on both 16 and 35-mm. gauges can exhibit old films at their proper speed and can adapt their gates to any size of frame.

The opening of the National Film Theatre was hailed by the press with satisfaction—one Sunday newspaper claiming that this was "The screen event of the week, month, year, and probably decade." However that may be, after one year in operation, it is clear that both financially and from the point of view of public support the experiment has been successful. It has brought the Institute into touch with a large new public of members and associates (some 25,000 at the time of writing) who are enrolled on the lines of a theater club.

In arranging programs for the theater, the Institute had three objectives in view: first, to present a steady repertory of the acknowledged masterpieces of the screen; second, to concentrate attention on some theme of contemporary interest or importance in the cinema; and third (in keeping with the traditions of the Telecinema), to demonstrate what was new and experimental. Thus, two nights every week are devoted to a chronological survey of film history under the general title of *Fifty Years of Film;* four nights in each week are given to a series of studies of the work of outstanding directors or actors or else to some decisive trend in the cinema, past or present. In this category under the heading of *World Cinema,* the directors René Clair, Vittorio de Sica, Alfred Hitchcock, and Erich von Stroheim have each been given a season of from six to twelve weeks; the comedians of the silent screen (Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Harry Langdon) had a long and popular run. Other topics have included a study of changing fashions in male and female film stars, the work of Ealing Studios, and a typical cinema program of thirty years ago. Except for Saturdays, when the theater is thrown open to the public, only members and associates are admitted. Under this arrangement, the theater has built up its own specialized audience while enjoying the full support of the film industry.

Although the theater is a boon to the London film lover, its value to other centers of population is of course negligible. In the provinces, the work the Theatre is doing in London is carried out by Film Societies. The rise of the film-society movement in Britain since the end of the war is something of a phenomenon. In 1939, there were 18 societies, many of them veterans of seven or eight years' standing. During the war, new societies sprang up to serve the special needs of wartime concentrations; many of these societies died as the population ebbed back into the peacetime pattern. In 1946, however, there were 48 societies; and since that date, a sharp but steady rise has brought the number up to the remarkable figure of 230, serving an audience of perhaps 50,000 people.

In other countries the words film society (or cine club) are capable of bearing many meanings, covering at one end of the scale the frankly commercial operation and at the other a coterie of the intelligentsia. In Britain, a bona fide film society can be only one thing: a group of people formed into a nonprofit-making, nonpolitical association for the purpose of seeing and enjoying films other than those normally accessible through the box office.

The purpose and advantages of the nonpolitical clause are clear, but the definition of nonprofit-making calls perhaps for a fuller explanation. The intention behind such a restriction is twofold: first, to ensure that there shall be no competition with the film industry proper; second, that societies should exist only for the purpose of seeing and enjoying films unallied to any financial motive on the part of the promoters. Thus, no officers of a society can accept any emolument; members must pay their share by subscribing an annual sum and by booking their tickets in advance for each performance; and, in the event of a society's ceasing to function, any surplus funds must be given to another film society or to somebody working in the same field. This policy has proved its worth; the film industry, and especially the Kinematograph Renters' Society, has been constructively helpful in its attitude; and among the societies themselves, although finance is often a worry, it can never become a preoccupation.

The domestic affairs of the movement are controlled by two Federations, one for Scotland and one for England and Wales. Much of the credit for the successful realization of the film-society scheme lies with these two bodies; standing in the background, however, the Film Institute has provided moral support and from time to time financial help. The hire of films, too, is organized for the societies through a central booking agency operated by the Institute. This unit receives from the society the program requirements for the season and places the bookings with the renter of the library concerned, including the distribution section of the Institute itself. The service is used by the majority of societies and in the season 1952–53 the agency passed some 6,500 films through its books. Continental films which have made a reputation in their country of origin, or which have been screened in one of London's specialized cinemas, are perhaps the group of films most in demand; recently, *Golden Marie, Don Camillo, Kermesse Héroïque,* and *Rashomon* have topped the poll.

The societies themselves fall into three broad groups. First come the giants with a membership of from 1,200 to 3,000 operating in big cities and in big cinemas. Their programs are run usually on Sundays outside cinema opening hours, and they attract an audience comparable to that of regular concert- or playgoers, which fluctuates in accordance with the appeal of the program. Many of them, such as the lively Merseyside society, run a 16-mm. section too, organized as a study group complete with courses of lectures; but in the main, the larger societies have only the loosest sort of organization of membership. Next come the bulk of the 35-mm. societies; their membership is from as few as 200 up to 1,000. These may be run on much the same lines as the larger societies, or they may be more or less closely knit round a central group of enthusiasts for whom the weekly show is as much an occasion for discussion as a chance of seeing a film. Lastly, there is a smaller 16-mm. society with upward from 80 members, often operating under difficult conditions. These are the societies whose enthusiasm can stand the test of the 16-mm. sound track, the drafty hall, and the more limited choice of films available to them.

The success of the film-society movement has been largely built upon the work of a small band of enthusiasts. Such people as Forsyth Hardy and Margaret Hancock (to mention but two), themselves running flourishing societies, found time to plan and carry through the development into federation with its attendant opportunities for nation-wide participation. Today, the structure of the English federation is again under review; it must develop yet further if it is to take count of the strong regional consciousness which is an increasing factor in British life today.

The film-society movement is one of the practical expressions of the Institute's concern to raise the standard of filmgoing from the level of a habit to something more like serious critical appreciation. To this end, the Institute also organizes a service of lectures and runs courses for the many social and cultural groups interested in the problem. One of these, the annual course now held in conjunction with the Edinburgh Festival, is an event of some note, during which film makers and filmgoers are brought face to face to discuss their many problems of mutual interest; but the Institute has reserved its main effort in this field for the younger generation.

It is of course generally agreed that the best age for teaching critical appreciation of any subject is during the middle and late teens. It is known too that the incidence of filmgoing is at its highest at this age. For the whole mass of the population, it is true to say that when children leave school, if comics are discounted, they largely give up reading books; they do not, however, relinquish the cinema nor the television screen. The Institute has always held that the school curriculum should be adjusted to meet this situation and has been greatly heartened by the interest recently shown in film appreciation by Institutes of Education, Teachers Training Colleges, and the like. To give up school time to a study of entertainment films may sound a little quixotic, and indeed the subject is so young as to have no generally used technique of instruction. Some teachers encourage the children to keep maps showing what films are being played at the local cinemas and encourage discussion both as a means to select the most enjoyable film and, afterwards to evaluate its good and bad points. Most instruction is related in this way to the children's cinema-going experience, but some teachers go further and have their pupils produce films themselves. The class will be broken into syndicates; first, to write a script and then, when the best script has been chosen, to prepare for its production. Producer, director, cast, and crew are appointed; and the film is made on two or three free afternoons. Then comes the test of playing it back to the whole class, and if good enough, perhaps to an outside audience. The Institute already has a collection of more than thirty such films, some of them of quite remarkable quality, and mostly stimulated by members of the Society of Film Teachers, a vigorous body, who are the leaders amongst their colleagues in their interest in this latest addition to our school curriculum.

For its own membership, the Institute provides more specialized services. In addition to the National Film Theatre, there is a small cinema theater and a television theater available in the London premises; there is an extensive book library and a stills library of over 60,000 photographs from a wide range of films. For its members, and for the public as well, it provides an information service and publishes two journals: *Sight and Sound*—a miscellany of topical writing upon the film with such well-known contributors as Roger Manvell, Ken Tynan, and Paul Rotha—and the *Monthly Film Bulletin*—a businesslike review of all current production. The Publications Department (under the general editorship of Gavin Lambert) also produces a series of indexes of the work of well-known directors and a variety of miscellaneous pamphlets. More specialized needs are served by the Scientific Film Association and the British Universities Film Council; and in Scotland, the Institute's sister organization offers a comprehensive service which includes the distribution of educational and informational films. All three bodies receive a grant-in-aid from the Institute.

In this and in other ways, the British Film Institute is tackling its main task of raising the standard of public taste in films.