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The British Film Institute by Dr James Cateridge

The British Film Institute (BFI) has been battling against industry hostility, government indifference, financial insecurity and social and technological change for almost eighty years, making it one of our longest-running, and consequently most reinvented cultural institutions. In its current form it is larger and more influential than ever. It maintains its traditional functions of archiving, education and improving access to the moving image but has also added a substantial film production and distribution budget drawn from the National Lottery. This funding stream was inherited from the now defunct UK Film Council, along with a successful slate of publicly-funded projects such as *The King's Speech* (2011). Despite this apparently healthy position, the organisation continues to face government spending cuts on its high running costs, which must reduce by 10% for 2015-16, and finds that capital funding for ambitious projects, such as the expansion of its South Bank home into a National Film Centre, can be suddenly and unceremoniously withdrawn.

That the BFI has survived for so long is testament to the ingenuity and forward thinking of the figures who have been central to its operations, from Ernest Lindgren, instigator of the BFI's film archive in 1935, to Sir Denis Forman who rapidly expanded the Institute's operations and membership in the post War period, to Mamoun Hassan and Peter Sainsbury who found modest resources to support a flourishing British art cinema in the 1970 and 1980s. Such initiatives never exist in a political vacuum, and often require considerable bolstering and manoeuvring to ensure their continued support. Internal and external pressures are always rife.

Even at its birth the British Film Institute found itself the focus for intense disagreements about the social function of cinema. Throughout the 1920s, British governments had been lobbied by an increasingly vocal adult education movement who saw potential value in film as a tool for public enlightenment, rather than merely entertainment (Dickinson and Street, 1985. p. 47-8). In 1932, the Commission of Educational and Cultural Film's report *The Film In National Life* recommended a new body with a Royal Charter and a wide-reaching remit encompassing education, training and possibly film distribution and development (Commission on Educational and Cultural Film, 1932). The film trade reacted with hostility to this plan, perceiving state involvement in cinema exhibition or production to be grossly unfair and damaging to competition (Ashley, 1934). As a result the Royal Charter was abandoned (not to be implemented until the body's 50th anniversary) and the organisation's initial manifestation was limited to educational rather than industrial activities. Nonetheless, this early period saw the beginnings of the Institute's vital interventions in film and information archiving (Dupin, 2012, p. 46-68) and an increased engagement with film culture in the shape of the magazines *Sight and Sound* and *Monthly Film Bulletin*.

During WWII, the BFI's headquarters in Great Russell Street were damaged by the blitz, and the film archive, now containing over a million feet of film, was moved out of London for safekeeping. Both these events facilitated a move to a new post-war home for the BFI in Shaftesbury Avenue, and the body also benefitted from a renewed vigour in state support for the arts which had been recognised as significant in keeping up spirits on the home front. With increased treasury funding, new director Denis Forman had three major responsibilities. Firstly, to administer and grow the film library, secondly to offer an information service, and thirdly to promote the appreciation of film at a national level (Nowell-Smith, 2012, p. 43). The 1950s saw the body expand dramatically, not least as a result of the Festival of Britain for which the BFI constructed its first exhibition venue, the Telecinema, later to become the National Film Theatre. Forman also achieved a productive synergy at the level of film culture by offering editorial control of *Sight and Sound* to a group of young critics and filmmakers including Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz, who were also able to access modest production funding via the 'Experimental Film Fund'. This resulted

in the spurt of activity then known as 'Free Cinema', which was later seen as sparking the British New Wave. The London Film Festival, which launched in 1957, was also a product of this successful era for the BFI's stewardship of film appreciation.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the BFI was wracked by internal ideological pressures, as the body's radical education and production department did battle with its more conservative elements (Nowell-Smith, 2012, p. 110-115). The radicals, including Peter Wollen in the education department, and later Colin McArthur who became head of the BFI's exhibition and distribution functions in 1974, were fired up by an emergent group of film theorists and filmmakers who wanted to revolutionise film education and film culture more generally. Here significant gains had already been made in the shape of 25 Regional Film Theatres which greatly widened the audiences for avant-garde and art cinema (Selfe, 2012, p. 16-129), and the seeding of film studies as a university subject through experimental lectureships set up in 1973. Meanwhile the bodies historical and preservation instincts were exemplified by the National Film Archive's 24 year plan to duplicate decaying and dangerous nitrate film stock. Preserving the history of British film whilst continually engaging with its present and future continues to be a challenge for the organisation to this day, as the recent failure to resurrect the Museum of the Moving Image exemplifies.

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative governments were unsurprisingly hostile towards state funding for the arts, and the established pillars of official film culture in the UK rapidly tumbled in the early 1980s. The exhibition quota, which pre-dated the BFI as a public intervention in the industry was increasingly being flouted and was soon abolished, as was the Eady Levy, which for several decades had channelled funding from the exhibition sector back to producers. The National Film Finance Corporation, a major beneficiary of the Eady Levy, was privatised in 1985 and became British Screen. Despite this challenging operational environment, the BFI struggled on with meagre resources and attempted to fly under the radar of Government interference. For example, the Production Board struck fruitful co-production deals with the new broadcaster Channel Four which led to films such as Peter Greenaway's *The Draftsman's Contract* (1982) and Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988) which

won the Critic's Prize at the Cannes Film Festival. The Museum of the Moving Image was also a product of this era, as were other avenues for income generation such as BFI Publishing and Connoisseur Video. Meanwhile the *Monthly Film Bulletin* was folded into a new look *Sight and Sound* magazine with a broader public appeal.

These concessions to free market economics may not have been popular with the bodies radical fringe, but were significant in turning around its fortunes in the New Labour era. The most visible symbol of this market-informed approach now dominates one of the largest roundabouts in Waterloo, the enormous BFI IMAX screen, which was opened in 1999. The National Lottery, instigated by John Major's government in 1994, began to channel money to the arts and filmmakers the following year, and it was something of a surprise that the BFI lost out in handling this money to the Arts Council, who had little previous experience of dealing with filmmakers outside of the artists' film sector (Caterer, 2011). In 2000 New Labour's film body, the Film Council (later UK Film Council) took over this funding stream, leading to a decade in which the BFI had little or no direct interest in film production. Instead the body revitalised its archive with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, began to modernise the ageing National Film Theatres into the current BFI Southbank, and kept an eye on new technology through web services such as *Screenonline*, and its open access viewing service, the Mediatheque, which was facilitated by the digitisation of its vast video archive (BFI, 2013).

The present BFI, having absorbed the UK Film Council in 2011, would appear to have finally realised the ambitions of its creators as laid out in 1932. It has its Royal Charter secured, along with a vastly enhanced budget bolstered by extensive commercial operations. The most recent Government film policy review published in 2012 calls the BFI 'The New Lead Agency for Film' and calls on the body to "take a 360° approach to its responsibilities connecting education and skills with development and production with distribution, exhibition and heritage" (DCMS, 2012, p. 87). This sounds like a tall order for any cultural institution, not least the British Film Institute, whose history, present and future has been, and will be, characterised by internal divisions and external pressures.

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