

Continental and Otherwise: The Specialized Cinema in Britain

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ENTERTAINMENT PATTERNS VARY with location, with climate, and with culture. One of the variations in patterns applies to the specialized-cinema audiences which appear in different countries, their structure, and the means which exist to satisfy them. It is the purpose of this article to describe the situation in one country—Britain. "Specialized cinema," used in a very general way, refers both to private-membership film societies and to the British equivalent of American art theaters. Most of the following references are to Scottish situations, but it can be assumed that these indicate obliquely what is available in most specialized cinemas throughout Britain.

Despite the success of film societies in some centers, the specialist filmgoer in Britain is still—on any absolute standard—rather poorly served. Although he is able to see many of the contemporary French and Italian productions, he finds it much more difficult to sample the new films from other countries, especially those from Germany, Sweden, and Spain; and he sees practically none from Asia and South America. And what is perhaps more annoying, he is still poorly served on a relative basis.

In most Swedish cities, for example, it is comparatively easy to pick up films from five or six countries within a few weeks, and in Stockholm within one week. The reason for this richness is obviously not primarily an advanced aesthetic taste (although this may result from the richness), but a small native film produc-

tion. Swedish companies cannot satisfy all the needs of a city like Stockholm (population, 1950: 745,936), which is smaller even than Glasgow, Scotland (1951 census: 1,089,555). It is natural, because of language similarity, to look first to the other Scandinavian sources; but even this leaves a large gap, which is presently filled by American, British, French, German, and Italian producers.

But in Scotland, as in Britain generally, the situation is different. National film production is still lower than national consumption; but, the British filmgoer speaks English. This is the tragedy of the British entertainment situation, the cross which the public has to carry. It speaks English and precious little else. Thus, the absence of *La Prima Comunione* from neighborhood theaters is comparable to the scarcity of Neopolitan jokes in local pubs. Both situations are regrettable, but understandable.

There are two sources of resistance to specialized cinema in Britain: cinema ownership and mass-audience preference. Each has its different features. When a national cinema circuit—like J. Arthur Rank's massive Odeon Theatres—is tied to a producing organization (in this case, Rank's affiliated production groups), its first function is to act as releasing organization for these productions. After this is done, the national circuit will make additional contracts to exhibit other productions. Rank, to continue our example, is unlikely to enter into any such agreement with rival producers within Britain. But he does consider himself free to find contracts with American producers; and indeed his relationship with Fox, Universal-International, and United Artists goes somewhat deeper than that. (For example, United Artists has a large investment in Odeon Cinema Holdings, Limited.) However, Rank's starting position is that he cannot nearly satisfy the demands of his theaters with product from his own studios. He must go outside the country. On the assumption that there is little articulate audience demand for anything else, he goes to Hollywood for his needs. And all this applies correspondingly to his competitors, to the local circuits, to the combines, and to

independently owned cinemas. There is nothing to stop them from exhibiting foreign-language films in lieu of Hollywood productions or, in general, from moving into the specialized cinema field—nothing, that is, except audience preference.

Statistics are hard to secure; but we can go, for example, to the annual report of any film society (except perhaps the outstandingly successful Film Society in London and Forsyth Hardy's and Norman Wilson's group in Edinburgh¹). There is one report, for example, in which the founding secretary of a 16-mm. society in a town of 60,000 wonders how he can raise the membership to 300—that is, to one half of one per cent of the population.²

A large amount of the public's unwillingness to accept specialized cinema is doubtless a reaction against the Continental films included in their program—a reaction against the foreign languages used in the films. This problem came in with sound. An increasing number of contemporary producers and distributors solve it by dubbing English dialogue to the picture. By doing so, however, they more often than not (perhaps always) take the film out of the art-theater class.

Nevertheless, some independently owned theaters are making a success of foreign-language film exhibition. These cinemas fall into two groups. The first, probably the largest, is similar to what is known in the United States as the art theater. It shows foreign-language films as well as offbeat British and American productions and finds room for documentaries and other shorts made with a particular skill. This is where you will find *Rashomon*, a Sucksdorff short, a *Mister Magoo*, and a Norman McLaren dabble. These cinemas are to be found in some large cities. There are several in London, and there is one each in Manchester, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. Although they are not normally very large, they are better dressed than, say, neighborhood theaters. They

¹ It was the latter group, under Wilson and Hardy, which inspired the annual documentary film festival as part of the Edinburgh Festival of Drama and Arts.

² "Film Societies: The Other Side," *Sight and Sound* (January, 1950), p. 45.

consider themselves first-run houses, exclusive but not pretentious; and they aim their programs at a very particular section of the film audience.

The second class consists more or less of neighborhood theaters which often exist in university towns and in some cities. They are found for example in Cambridge, Oxford, and St. Andrews. University-town cinemas show occasional foreign-language films while the university is in session. At other times they exhibit the normal run of American and British films.

Since London, like New York, is a peculiar entertainment situation, and the envy of the rest of the country, it will not be discussed in this article. Glasgow, however, can be taken as representative of the contemporary situation in the provinces. Here, three houses regularly show foreign-language films; and other houses offer them from time to time. (In the last year, the number of houses showing an occasional foreign film has at least doubled.) The Cosmo, one of the three regulars, belongs to the first class, mentioned previously. Whereas, the others—the Tonic and the Grand Central—are in the second class.

The Cosmo, which was opened in May of 1939, was the first British cinema (outside London) to be built specifically for the exhibition of foreign-language films. Situated near the center of Glasgow's main shopping district, it seats 825 people—about the same size as the Filmarte which was reopened in New York for much the same purpose about the same time. When the Cosmo was planned, the project was given little articulate encouragement. Most published opinion was pessimistic, and many groups had other plans ready for the use of the building if the specialist cinema failed. But from the beginning it was a success, and continues to be so.

The Tonic, by comparison, is unpretentious. It is part of a circuit of six small theaters in Glasgow and neighboring towns. The manageress often doubles as receptionist and usherette. She has intimated that foreign films are being shown by way of an

experiment. Success may lead to the gradual spreading of the policy to include the other cinemas in the circuit.

Most neighborhood theaters in Scotland have a change of program in the middle of each week, and are closed on Sundays. At present, the Tonic shows foreign-language films—advertised under the heading “Continental”—Monday through Wednesday and English-language films—termed (happily) “Otherwise”—Thursday through Saturday. Thrown in under “Otherwise” during May of 1953 were such English-language gems as *Blue Blood*, *Cave of the Outlaws*, *Forest Rangers*, and *Francis Goes to the Races*. The layout of the published program suggests that these theaters are aiming the two kinds of entertainment at different sections of the public. The “Continental” films are listed together on one page, and only for this type of program are screening times given. This is for the fastidious who think that the beginning is the time to go in.

Glasgow’s Grand Central cinema lies in the center of the city, but for the last fifteen or twenty years has not been recognized as a first-run house. It is properly a neighborhood theater in the city center. There has been a tendency for the Grand Central to make its choices from the more sensational Continental productions. And this deserves some discussion.

In Britain, as in America, there is an established system of film censorship. But unlike America, Britain has centralized its public censoring, so that each film shown publicly in a commercial cinema must obtain and display a British Board of Film Censors certificate which classifies it as falling into one of three groups. The nature of this censorship and its basis in moral and civil authority need not concern us. What is interesting is that in 1951 a new classification was added. Previously, there had existed the “U” classification which passed a film for general (or universal) exhibition, the “A” classification which passed a film as more suitable for adult exhibition, and (since 1937) the “H” classification which passed a film for exhibition only to adult audiences

(over sixteen). The new "X" certificate replaced the third or "H" classification, and was conceived to help secure the exhibition of films which might otherwise have been banned in whole or in part for moral grounds. The "X" would prevent the film from being shown to children, so that the morals of the young would be saved.

However, some exhibitors, knowing man's weaknesses (or at any rate his tastes), have found it profitable to exploit a film on the basis of its "X" certificate. One London exhibitor proudly presented a program as being the "Xiest program in town," and the Board of Censors immediately wished they had chosen another letter for the third classification. This is in line with some contemporary West Coast (American) advertising for Italian films, and is becoming an established part of motion-picture technique. It is important to remember when considering the growing popularity of Continental films in Scotland that this trend has its supporters—and they are, by no means, only in the management of the Grand Central.

Recently, the managers of the three Glasgow cinemas were sent four questions to which they were invited to reply:

1. Why is your theater showing Continental films?
2. How successful are these programs?
3. Are admission prices altered for these programs?
4. What are some recent titles?

The answers show certain similarities. None of the theaters makes any change in admission prices. The price range is kept in strict competition with neighboring theaters of the same class. The answers to the second question are uniformly favorable. The Grand Central says, simply, "Very successful." The Tonic says, "We have been pleased with the response," and continues, interestingly, to point out that the Italian operatic films which they show are especially popular. The Cosmo is a little more modest: "Our average attendances must compare very favorably with cinemas showing what are termed everyday programs." Each

manager replied that there was a definite public demand for foreign-language films of the type which his cinema shows. The Grand Central was content to leave the matter there; but the other managers went a little further, and their answers suggest that their policies are based on certain economic considerations, not aesthetic ones—although we shall have to qualify this shortly in relation to the Cosmo.

The Cosmo, to repeat, was intended from the first to be a specialist theater, with the status of a first-run, first-class house. It is independently owned and operated. As such, if it attempted to make a living from engaging first runs of British and American productions, its life would be a continuous pitched battle. This battle would not only be tiresome; it would be expensive. But in the specialist field, the Cosmo has almost completely a free hand. And this, quite apart from aesthetic considerations, is desirable—is so indeed with any commodity.

The Tonic's problem is slightly different. This cinema finds that it can afford contemporary British or American "A" pictures only when the demand to see them has fallen below the profitable level. Thus, there occurs the experiment of leavening what sound like outrageously bad American "B" pictures with what turns out to be an exceedingly catholic selection of foreign-language productions.

However, the Cosmo manager also gives what amounts to an aesthetic justification for showing foreign-language films. He says, "There is a more even standard in excellency than is found in American or British films." This has long been a favorite claim of a certain minority—whether in Glasgow, Hampstead, or Greenwich Village—and it is most interesting to see the Cosmo manager, a business man, come out into the open and say so. If it sounds like an overstatement, it need not be. He is not necessarily denying the considerable postwar achievements of some American and British directors. The works of these men find their way into the commercial cinemas in Glasgow; and, if they do not, they are considered for exhibition in the Cosmo.

This brings us to a statement of the films shown recently in the three cinemas. (The lists are those offered by the managers.) In the Cosmo: *Souvenirs Perdus*, *Caroline Chérie*, *Les Septs Péchés Capitaux*, *Rashomon*, *Prima Communionne*, and *Casque D'Or*. The Tonic had a different set: *Un Grand Patron*, *Le Voyage en Amérique*, *Fröken Julie*, *Los Olvidados*, *Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Quixote* (Spanish), *Edouard et Caroline*, *Furia*, *Rigoletto*, and *Trois Télégrammes*. The Grand Central had the first three mentioned for the Cosmo plus: *Les Enfants Terribles*, *Le Garçon Sauvage*, and *Three Forbidden Stories*. This list reads rather well; and, although some are better than others (even much better), this is not unhealthy and is not peculiar to foreign films.

Thus, the situation, at least in Glasgow, is undoubtedly improving. The owners and the managers of the Cosmo can take a large amount of the primary credit for this. True, there is not yet the richness of Sweden; but this is largely because a different (film) economic situation exists in the two countries. There is little critical support for specialist cinema in provincial newspapers—and this is all part of the same problem. Provincial critics (or at any rate their editors) tend to follow, not lead.

The dominant influence will remain the film society. There are two societies in Glasgow, and we might turn our attention to them. However, a change of scene will permit us to examine the role of the film society in a city which has no other source of specialized cinema. The city we go to is Aberdeen. It lies in a windy northeasterly corner of Scotland and is the third or fourth city of Scotland, rivalling Dundee some miles to the south. In the commercial field, Aberdeen has five first-run cinemas and many more neighborhood theaters. Two of the major houses are owned by a local circuit, which also controls all the neighborhood theaters as well as the only professional legitimate theater in the town. Two of the other major cinemas are in the Rank Odeon Circuit; and the fifth belongs to the Gaumont group, a Rank subsidiary. Rank's main competitor, Associated British Pictures

Corporation (ABC), has at present no theater in Aberdeen, although it would like one.

During a typical four-month period (July–November, 1951), there was generally at least one commercially exhibited film each week which was worth reviewing. Some of the titles from the period were *Born Yesterday*, *Lavender Hill Mob*, *City Lights*, *Ace in the Hole*, *Teresa*, *A Walk in the Sun*, and *Strangers on a Train*. Nevertheless, during this period, the commercial cinemas were virtually closed to contemporary foreign-language productions—with one unremarkable exception, *Clochemerle*, which was shown at a Rank theater. And apart from *City Lights* (and *All Quiet on the Western Front* at a neighborhood theater), no old classics were revived. Thus, although the standard of the best of British and American productions was high, there was still a large gap which could only be filled by a specialized cinema or a film society. Aberdeen, to repeat, has none of the former, but has two film societies.

The first of Aberdeen's film societies, and the oldest, is called the Film Society. The second, formed since the war, is known as the Film Appreciation Group. A letter circulated recently to interested bodies in Aberdeen sums up the present situation. The combined membership of the two societies is 2,500, with a supposed overlap of 500. This is the largest combined membership in proportion to population for any city in Britain. (1951 census: 182,714; percentage membership: 1.4 per cent). In an eight-month (autumn to spring) season, the Society and the Group both offer eight 35-mm. performances on Sunday evenings in two major theaters. The Group also offers a subsidiary series of eight or nine performances in 16-mm., and there are occasional additional shows.

Two general aspects reveal themselves as regards the broader policy of the two societies: the presentation of world cinema for its entertainment value (Society) . . . and interest in the aesthetic and historical side of film appreciation (Group).⁸

⁸ From a letter circulated by the Committee for a Civic Arts Centre Association for Aberdeen and the North East.

Clearly the two societies are thus ideally complementary. The Society provides the same kind of entertainment as a specialized commercial cinema. It has the disadvantage of not being in the commercial market and must, accordingly, wait for a contemporary Continental film which is still successful commercially in other cities. (This applies to all film-society choices.) But the Society has the advantage of a subscribed membership and can rely on a period of financial stability which is sometimes necessary for experiments—even those of a delicate nature.

And the Group is thus able to give most of its time to consideration of the film as art. Originally, there was some suggestion that the Group should not try to compete with the established Society, but should build its programs from films not considered contemporary. But this was soon found to be an artificial limitation. In recent developments, the secretary of the Group has attempted to give point to his programs—particularly in the subsidiary historical series. Here, he tries to offer double features on directors—as far as possible, an earlier and later work of each—and this has been especially successful.

To balance the list of films shown commercially in Glasgow, there follows a list of the programs shown by the two Aberdeen societies in the period September–November, 1951. The Society's first three programs included the following films:

1. *Berliner Ballade* (Stemmler, 1949), three selections from *The Poet and the Painter* (Festival of Britain, 1951, John Halas, etc.), and *Strandhugg* (Sucksdorff).
2. *Jofroi* (René Pagnol) and *Shakespeare of Kronborg* (Dreyer).
3. *Molti Sogni Per le Strade* (Camerini, 1949).

The first three of the Group's 35-mm. series were

1. *Il Miracolo* (Rossellini with Magnani) and *L'Onorevole Angelina* (Zampa with Magnani).
2. *La Grande Illusion* (Renoir, 1937), *Shadows on the Snow* (Sucksdorff), and *The Train* (Gösta Werner).
3. *Les Parents Terribles* (Cocteau, 1949) and *Adventure in Bokhara* (Production Protzanov, 1943).

The first three of the Group's 16-mm. series were

1. *October* (Eisenstein, 1927) and *Storm Over Asia* (Pudovkin, 1928).
2. *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915).
3. *Julius Caesar* (David Bradley) and three James Broughton shorts.

When asked to estimate the impact of the two societies on public taste, secretary William Thompson of the Group was not optimistic. He does not think that much has been done in either society to open up public response to "genuine creative film making." There is a combined membership of approximately 2,500. According to the secretary, the "really interested enthusiastic nucleus in Aberdeen amounts to about 500, maybe less"—that is, one fifth of the combined membership. This minority he feels more sure about, particularly the "young people—birds of passage—who support the societies for genuine reasons and take away a zest for the best they have seen." For the rest, the film societies, in a town which has no established tradition to break the Sabbath for a film show, appear to be providing a pleasant way to pass a winter Sunday evening, and possibly also a minor exercise in snobbism.

According to the secretary, there are three main sources of difficulty for a society organizer. First, the availability of good films; second, the financial limitations; and third, the lack of adequate screening facilities. Of these, film availability is a persistent problem for the film society. Two primary sources are the Central Booking Agency and the National Film Library, both of the British Film Institute in London. The National Film Library continues to strengthen the film society's position by a developing policy of assistance.⁴ But this does not yet solve all the booking secretary's problems. And, since importation of selected films is beyond the reaches of most society budgets, this leaves a recurring problem for a society which makes an honest attempt to present constructive and lively programs. It is embarrassing

⁴ H. Forsyth Hardy, "Help for Film Societies," *Sight and Sound*, VIII (Spring, 1939), 12-13.

to have to apologize to an audience which has been attracted by an advertisement for *The Magic Garden* and *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* that instead, they will see *La Grande Illusion* and *Shadows Over the Snow*. And it is infuriating to plan a program to illustrate the work of a director and, instead of the classics for which he is famous and which were promised you, to have to make do with his insignificant work—the only films available at the last hour.

Not much money is necessary to run a film society. The expenditure of the Film Appreciation Group for the year 1951–1952 was a little more than £1,000 (\$2,840), and this covered the costs of seventeen performances and the operating overheads. Although this is not a large sum of money, each penny of it is hard earned. An examination of the accounts for the above period shows that there is a net profit of only about £70 (\$198), and that for each member of the Group there is spent or invested (in some negotiable property like film journals) an average £1 (\$2.84). Clearly, without considerable rise in membership, the relative costs of film hire and transport (almost 30 per cent) and of cinema rental (about 45 per cent) will eat into the subscriptions. (The highest individual subscription for the seventeen performances is thirty shillings or \$4.25.) Further, the Group is probably nearing its peak. Membership for 1952–1953 was slightly higher than the previous year, with a cash-in-hand figure of £140—twice the previous year's balance. This slight improvement occurs against a background of falling membership and financial losses in most other societies throughout the country. In the south, television is blamed for quite substantial drops; but this has not yet affected the north of Scotland to the same extent. (However, the Coronation boosted TV-set sales.)

Thus, any possible expansion of activities must be accomplished by cutting costs, not by increasing income. Without some national reorganization (and its nature is hard to envisage), the cost of film rental must be treated as a constant which is liable to

rise rather than fall. Almost two thirds of the costs after film rental are consumed by cinema hire and other projection expenses. Here is a possible source of future economy—given central premises at the disposal of both societies. And there is an Arts Council-backed plan to achieve this. A recent appeal from the Civic Arts Centre Association said, “Lectures, amateur film-making, library formation, frequent previewing”—all of these out of the reach of the two societies as they are at present organized—“would at last become a reality . . . on the establishment of a Civic Arts Centre.” The Group’s secretary, in writing of this, is enthusiastic. Central premises are, he says, “the one great hope to provide a truly generous implantation of serious film ‘edification’ in a community dominated by commercial exploitation.” Such facilities will give the societies a chance to establish their work, he continues, as something “worthwhile and potent in enlarging the creative field of film.”

Perhaps this is the beginning of a trend—not a lone example in Scotland—in which film watchers will be encouraged to become film makers, even at an amateur, exploratory level. If so, this is a development in the right direction. There comes a time when a man cannot listen to another word about film criticism. He simply has to forget talking, and go out and shoot some film.

These notes on Aberdeen and Glasgow should convey some of the problems facing the specialized cinema in Scotland—and thus, in Britain generally—and how they are being met. In the cities at least, the outlook is promising; but in the end, the specialists—like everyone else—may be at the mercy of changing conditions within the world’s film industry.