

From Boardroom To Bijou: Exploring Cinema Distribution & Exhibition

PART I: DISTRIBUTION: INTRODUCTION

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It has become somewhat of a cliché to say that cinema distribution and exhibition are poor relations within film scholarship—playing second fiddle to content and creators. Indeed, I too have said this. The cliché rang true for a long time, but happily is losing its currency, as more and more scholars turn their attentions away from the screen, towards the technologies, processes, practices and histories that lie behind (and in front of) it. *From Boardroom to Bijou* was named to reflect this end of the industry. It was planned as a single *Post Script* issue on cinema distribution and exhibition; however, the quantity and quality of current work in this field has justified two issues: the volume you are reading, covering elements of cinema distribution, and a forthcoming issue with its eye on exhibition. More on the rationale for these choices later.

For Film Studies to shift its emphasis towards wider histories of one sort or another is, to my mind, no bad thing. So many attempts to squeeze screen product into monolithic theory seem to ignore simple, practical considerations. Sometimes the decisions made by directors are based less on their love for their mothers and more on the fact that the budget ran out, or that a choice location was too expensive. In his 1933 biography of William Fox, Upton Sinclair offers this insight:

I think the production of which W. F. is proudest is the picture called "Over the Hill," produced about 1920.¹ This picture had no stars. It cost \$100,000 to make, and netted over \$3,000,000—which is very high praise for a picture. (59)

To ignore the business end of the movie industry is to lose a good deal of its story.

In his introduction to Volume 5 of the updated version of John Barnes' groundbreaking work *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England*, Richard Maltby expands this point with a methodology to underpin a wider historical approach to cinema scholarship:

The study of cinema has lodged itself firmly in the academy and turned slowly away from an adolescent enthusiasm for grand theory towards a recognition of the need to rewrite the history of the cinema...unencumbered by theories of ideology and spectatorship, and rooted instead in the detailed observation of the material of cinema itself; its recording and projecting equipment as much as the films themselves and contemporary accounts of their exhibition. (Barnes *xii*)

Maltby clearly favors a deep-rooted, empirical approach; the approach of John Barnes, who, with his brother William, spent more than 70 years researching early

cinema. He was "...in the very best sense of the term, an *amateur*, a scholar inspired by an unqualified love for the object of his scholarship, whose work is conducted outside the institutional frameworks which now dominate academic research" (*ibid.*).² Maltby's dig at The Academy is gentle, for he understands the importance of those institutions to the housing, archiving and restoration of expensive collections; however, it also reminds us that the professional scholar has her limitations. That she must never take for granted the contribution to be made by those amateurs.

My own interest in histories of what might be termed the fabric of cinema—and specifically my fascination for the American movie palaces of the 1920s—springs from the enthusiasm of one such gentleman amateur (in the very best sense of the term), my friend, Tim Hatcher. Among the best teachers I have known in any subject, with the best library I have seen in this one, Tim has—to venture another cliché—forgotten more about cinema exhibition than I am likely to know. His recent essay on the Holophane cinema lighting system is testimony both to his enthusiasm and to the rigor that he brings to the field. I was particularly pleased to secure his services for the compilation of a bibliography to be published in the second issue of this double bill.

However, like many enthusiasts, Tim does not feel a desperate need to publish. His knowledge serves as fuel for the passion which in-turn creates it; a self-contained fire that does not require the oxygen of publicity. This is a right, of course, but for a lifetime of knowledge—with its depth of expertise, broad-ranging connections, and cumulative insights—to remain locked away strikes me as a dire loss to the subject. Enter the professional.

The academician must of course publish—and often. Regular papers, chapters and books earn bread and butter; but regardless of their depth and quality, they will inevitably also encourage the stifled smile of the experienced amateur who has spotted a missed trick, a dodgy date, an incomplete thesis. This

may highlight the dangers of a subject being wrested away by the ambitious professional; however, the active academic, like nature, must fill a vacuum.

I realize that I am in danger of diminishing the academic here, which is not my intention. I merely note that if events are laid down over time, then it stands to reason that they should be picked up over time—which presents a head start to the time-served amateur historian. The Academy, of course, brings its own considerable skills to bear. Well able to do its own research and, crucially, trained to apply discipline and rigor, the academic brings a degree of objectivity so often missing from the amateur approach. This lies at the heart of Maltby's "detailed observation of the material of cinema itself."

Perhaps what we need then is more collaboration between cinema's communities, in order to share skills, insights and expertise. Grand theory may safely remain in The Academy; histories belong to everyone.

From Boardroom to Bijou: Exploring Cinema Distribution and Exhibition draws consciously upon a number of approaches, bringing together practitioners, historians, amateurs and professionals, to shine lights on fascinating areas of cinema history. Contributors to these articles employ a range of research methodologies, as well as discipline and rigor, to explore some of the more arcane corners of cinema history—often for the first time. In so doing, they deepen our understanding of a wider cinema. For example, in "Mapping Film Exhibition in Scotland Before Permanent Cinemas," the first essay to appear in Issue 2, Maria A. Velez-Serna takes the 19th century fairground showman beyond his oft-cited contribution to the exhibition of early films, and highlights his importance to what would become official cinema industry distribution routes.

Maria's essay could easily have been placed in the current issue, which emphasizes an observation made by Douglas Gomery in his Foreword: namely that the many cross-over points between distribution and exhibition encourage a merger into a single category, "Movie Presentation."

In the very early days of cinema, film makers maintained close ties with their audiences; indeed, production, distribution, exhibition and reception might well have been merged into "Movie Entrepreneurship". As an industry emerged, its elements diverged and mutated through the likes of vertical integration, company breakup and a home video revolution to the current online revolution. In many ways, today's digital paradigm has collapsed production, distribution, exhibition and reception back to something akin to the model employed by those 19th century pioneers. Images of individuals staring intently at seemingly silent movies on their mobile devices are strangely reminiscent of photographs of patrons peering into the viewers at a Kinetoscope parlor, circa. 1894.

Categorization, then, can be a hostage to history. The rationale used for these volumes is as follows: Issue 1 is concerned with getting the product out to the market (nominally distribution); Issue 2 deals with creating environments to bring the market to (nominally exhibition). The essays appear in chronological order of their subjects, and have been selected to span more than 100 years of cinema, as it has been distributed and exhibited in or by industries in the UK and the US.

DISTRIBUTION: TAKING THE PRODUCT TO THE MARKET

Issue 1 deals with the business of identifying and analyzing the market and getting the product out to audiences in their own environment. It runs largely in line with the process: find the market, advertise, supply the market.

We open with an examination of the politics and practicalities of selling American films through the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, in "The Good, the Irresponsible and the Un-American." Jindřiška Bláhová's essay exposes surprising frictions between the Hollywood majors and US Independents - prompting the question: who were the real enemies during this fractious period?

A seemingly more gentle approach to distribution is discussed by Ian Goode in "Cinema in the Country. However, his illumination of the logistics of supplying a rural community, and the development of a supply guild in Orkney, does expose much of the politics (personal, local and government) which come into play - not least when governments discern a need for films to educate.

Back across the Atlantic, an examination of the supply of movies out to US universities in the 1960s and 70s reveals the influence of these educational communities in the development of film studies as a discipline. Andrea Comiskey's useful comparative analysis deepens our understanding of the preoccupations driving student film enthusiasts, and the methods used to get their messages out to their constituencies.

"Where Nothing is Off Limits" examines the explicit, implicit, and sometimes comic, messages lurking in the Teen Horror poster of the early 1980s. In his discussion, Richard Nowell analyzes iconic imagery, and reveals the surprising influence of failure on the development of direct-advertising methods.

The ethics and politics of direct distribution (via home DVD) are writ large in Andrew Scahill's examination of the technologies that claim to keep our families safe from the iniquities of the modern Hollywood product. At a time when control of that distribution is becoming increasingly problematic, "The Sieve or the Scalpel" asks to what degree the law should intervene in the battles for commercial and moral control.

Cinema distribution is brought up to date in Charlotte Crofts' essay "Distribution in the Age of Digital Projection." Once again, we see the majors and the independents vying for a universal distribution (and exhibition) model that best suits their divergent needs. The jury seems still to be out on the optimum resolution for digital projection, but what seems ironic is that the industry's agreed medium for archiving, even those films "born digital", is celluloid.

Issue 1 closes with “State of the Nation”, which takes a look at the current British film industry largely from the perspective of a personal attempt to view all British cinema releases in 2009. Andrew Clay writes with wit and bite, as he highlights variable success of interventions by the UK Film Council (UKFC)—a body that is being axed under British Government financial cuts. Andrew seems agnostic about the efficacy of the UKFC, and my personal experience reveals as many advocates of this body and its work as there are detractors. It remains to be seen whether its demise has a positive or a negative effect on British cinema.

This final paper then ties together the themes of business, politics, ethics, technologies, advertising and supply which pervade this issue. Further conflating elements of the production-distribution-exhibition-reception model, it ends with a call to change the mode of distribution by re-thinking methods of exhibition—which is what we will look at in Issue 2.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before finally leaving you to read these essays, I would like to register here my gratitude to individuals whose names do not appear on the Contents pages, but who have made invaluable contributions to this issue as readers and advisors. It would have been impossible to put this issue together without them. For their time, effort and support, I

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Professionals, amateurs, experts and enthusiasts. I salute them all.

Notes

¹It is likely that Upton Sinclair means *Over the Hill to the Poorhouse* (Millarde 1920). This was remade in 1931 by the Fox Film Corporation as *Over the Hill* (King), around the time that the author would have been preparing his text.

²For more on John Barnes, see “Obituary: John Barnes.”

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