



FIVE AND TWENTY YEARS AGAINST THE ODDS

THE STORY OF THE
LONDON SOCIALIST FILM CO-OP

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'An excellent range of films that would be hard to see, some good speakers and interesting debates.'

'Excellent mix of feature films and films that aren't normally shown commercially'

(Comments from a members' questionnaire.)

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INTRODUCTION

The core activity of the London Socialist Film Co-op is organising monthly screenings featuring an eclectic mix of films and always followed by speakers and discussion. There is nothing very unusual about this in 2015¹. Several organisations in London now run special screenings followed by discussion: Do-chouse, Close Up and the Front Line Club, for example. Most are less overtly political than the LSFC and their discussions tend to be limited to a Q and A with the film's director but there is a political edge to the very practice of seeing and discussing films which are not on general release.

There is a long tradition linking left politics with an interest in the moving image, with a critique of the commercial film business and with practical attempts to develop more varied ways of showing and making films. Such initiatives were influential in Britain in the 1930s, again in the 1970s to early 1980s and since the turn of the millennium there has been a revival, signalled both by the popular success in mainstream cinemas of documentaries like *The Fog of War*, *Supersize Me* and the Michael Moore films and also the proliferation of special screenings.

The LSFC, however, long predates the recent revival and for many years seemed a lonely anachronism. It was launched at the beginning of the 1990s, the decade of neo-liberalism and the multiplex when popular interest in socialism and non-mainstream cinema appeared to be at its lowest ebb since the 1950s.

Here, I should clarify a few points about my own connection with the LSFC. I am now a member but had no connection with it in the early years. Indeed, when I first heard of the society, probably round about 1992, despite being associated, both as filmmaker and film goer, with the Left film movement of the 1970s, I was privately disparaging. This was not because I had lost interest either in socialism or the cinema of ideas but because I was doubtful that an organisation firmly announcing itself as 'socialist' would be able to promote either in such a hostile climate.

I started to go to the screenings simply to see films I wanted to see and which were not being screened anywhere else but over time I became more ap-

preciative of the organisation which provided them and the people who, against all the odds, kept it going.

When I was asked to write this short history I thought it would be interesting in itself and might be helpful for the growing numbers of people who now want to organise special screenings. The Co-op's success has been due both to the organisers' tenacity and their willingness to adapt and experiment. In the process they learned a good deal that is worth sharing about bringing audiences and films together.

HOW IT BEGAN

The miners' strike of 1984/85 became a key focus of conflict between the Left and Margaret Thatcher's radical Conservative Government. It inspired a massive solidarity movement drawing together people with a range of political views but all profoundly opposed to Thatcher's combination of neo-liberal economics with an authoritarian state. After a year of bitter and often violent conflict the strike ended in March 1985 with the miners' defeat, an outcome widely represented by media commentators as heralding not only the end of the coal industry, but the end of the British Left.

Indirectly, the LSFC grew out of the solidarity campaign for the striking miners. Some people from north London, who shared the task of shaking collection buckets at events and in the streets, formed a reading group, the St Pancras Marxist Study Group. They continued to meet after the strike and branched out into screenings after the convenor, Linda Clarke, came across Chris Reeves, a filmmaker and active socialist.

Chris had been part of the film collective, Cinema Action, one of the pioneer groups in a movement of the late 1960s and 1970s to develop the political use of film and video outside commercial institutions. In 1982 Chris reduced his involvement with Cinema Action and formed Platform Films to continue similar work in a different context. Eventually, he obtained a commission from Channel 4 TV for a series of five programmes, *The People's Flag* (1986), about the history of the Left in Britain.

Chris was among several socially or politically committed filmmakers, who were commissioned by the new channel in its early years and who aimed to use the commissions to develop, not replace, their practice of screening films for discussion with live audiences. It was in keeping with this general plan that Chris and the reading group should team up initially to screen *The People's Flag*. The programmes were projected in a small cinema that Cinema Action had opened at its premises in Winchester Road in north London especially for that kind of event, built to an unusual design intended to encourage discussion and interaction between audiences, filmmakers and political activists.

Around the first screenings at Cinema Action a group coalesced and redefined themselves as the London Socialist Film Co-op. A constitution was agreed in 1991, a simple one page document which states that:

the main object of the Co-op shall be to promote socialist ideas and culture, primarily by the showing (and possibly making) of films, videos etc. and by associated discussions. The Co-op will not be affiliated to any political party or political grouping, although it may arrange from time to time to work with any other organisation to promote its main object.

CHALLENGING TIMES

To launch an organisation with these aims in 1991 was a perverse act, radically out of step with political, cultural and market trends. These were bleak years not only for socialists but also for anyone promoting film for purposes other than commercial entertainment. When the Berlin wall came down in 1989 and the Soviet Union began to self-destruct, neo-liberals were quick to claim a world-wide victory for free market capitalism. In Britain trade unions and the small far left parties haemorrhaged members.

At the same time the informal framework that had supported a non-commercial film culture was disintegrating. For some years after Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, independent film and video culture was partly protected from her radical right agenda by the success of campaigns in the 1970s which had influenced Channel 4 and also convinced some local authorities, particularly the Greater London Council and metropolitan counties, to support socially oriented film practices.

But the big authorities were abolished in the mid-1980s and smaller ones were starved of cash while, by the end of the decade, Channel 4, under new management, was responding to pressure to be more 'commercial'.

Cinema Action was one of the victims of the time. It was forced to close in 1993 and its cinema was demolished. This space had provided an ideal venue for the Co-op's first years, and founder-members comment on the personal encouragement given by Schlake, then effectively in charge of Cinema Action. This support was an important factor in the LSFC's development as, by the time it lost its first home, it had been running for around two years and already had a sense of identity. One founder-member recalls: 'The excitement of these early days is imprinted on my memory,' and relates:

We used to make sandwiches and bake cakes and offer them plus tea to our audiences at a price. They were very popular and helped us financially. It also, looking back now, was a sign of our unbounded enthusiasm for the whole venture that we found time to carry out this additional task which certainly enhanced the atmosphere.

The organisers were determined that the screenings would continue and searched for a new venue. They never found the perfect home but this ar-

guably proved an advantage, since during the years of searching and adapting it has been clear that people, not a place, define what the LSFC is. Even if the little cinema still existed it would have become too small to hold some of the audiences attracted in recent years.

WHAT DOES THE 'CO-OP' PART MEAN?

Despite its name, the LSFC was formally registered as a community co-operative only in 2002. Until then, as a legal entity it was an association, although the link with the co-operative movement was emphasised by the name, by inviting members to join the Co-operative Retail Services (CRS) and by the custom of including in every season one screening relating to the co-operative movement.

The constitution of 1991 was that of a standard voluntary association, the main points being: the governing body is an Annual General Meeting of all members which elects a committee to manage activities and finance until the next AGM; membership is open to anyone who agrees with the objectives.

The main reason the organisers worked towards registering properly as a community co-operative was to gain protection against possible third party accident claims. This is a problem that voluntary organisations have to consider, because members of the managing body - usually the committee - risk being individually sued as a result of an accident's happening at a society event. Organisations can protect their officers by taking out insurance or by turning themselves into a limited liability company or co-operative. For the LSFC a co-operative was an especially appropriate choice. The co-operative movement has been central to the project of putting socialist theory into practice by developing forms of enterprise based on mutual benefit, not on exploitation. As the international umbrella organisation, the International Co-operative Alliance put it, a co-operative is:

an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise based on the values of:

- self help
- self responsibility
- democracy
- equality
- equity
- solidarity²

Under the law a co-operative is registered as a company with the Financial Conduct Authority (previously the FSA) and so, for activities for which company structure is desirable or necessary, forming a registered co-operative is an alternative to forming a private company. You do not need to be a company, however, to operate a film society and the main noticeable difference in the LSFC

after 2002 was that its rule book expanded. The process of becoming a co-operative is quite complex, governed by the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts 1965 to 1978 which impose certain requirements, among other things, about a society's rules. So, nine pages of the LSFC's rule book are model rules relating to co-operative status while 'interpretations' which describe the particular objectives and management arrangements cover only two-and-a-half pages.

FILMS, SPEAKERS AND DEBATE

An introduction from the 1992/93 programme sums up what most seasons have been like and why they are so varied:

From the multimillion pound feature film to the low budget video, this latest programme of Co-op screenings is nothing if not diverse both in form and content. As such it reflects the diversity of the struggle for socialism itself and the attempt to capture that struggle as a moving image.

The films are not necessarily political, although they are chosen because they are thought relevant in some way to the society's aims and because they lend themselves to a useful discussion. In the first few years, the group experimented. The 1990/91 season had a unifying theme, 'the construction of the news' and consisted of examples of news and programmes about how the news is made, relating mainly to television.

Members felt that the format was not entirely successful, too lacking in the pleasures of cinema. A few years later in 1994/95 a season entirely of cinema fiction was tried but that again was not repeated. Each season usually mixes new releases and films from the archive, British and foreign productions, fiction and documentary, big budget to no budget work.

In 1998/99, one screening called 'Cinema of Protest' was a collection of overtly political shorts, some from the past but mostly work from the present, just finished or even still in progress and dealing with current issues. It proved to be a great success with the audience and a 'Cinema of Protest' screening became a regular feature of subsequent seasons.

To illustrate the mixture, a few examples of films shown between 1992 and 2006/07 are:

Roger and Me, Michael Moore, 1989 - feature documentary
Ulzana's Raid, Robert Aldrich, 1972 - classic cinema feature, drama
Reds, Warren Beatty, 1981 - cinema feature, drama
The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp, Powell and Pressburger, 1943 - classic cinema feature, drama
Hoop Dreams, Steve James, 1994 - feature documentary
Bandit Queen, Shekar Kapur, 1994 - cinema feature, drama

October, Sergei Eisenstein, 1928 - classic silent cinema feature, drama
Black Athena, Christopher Spencer, 1991 - TV documentary
Compañero, 1974, and *Patchworks of Santiago*, 1978, two films by Stanley Forman - documentary
My Love Has Been Burning, Kenji Mizoguchi, 1949 - classic cinema feature, drama
The Serpent, Marc Karlin, 1997 - TV experimental drama documentary
My Name is Joe, Ken Loach, 1999 - cinema feature, drama
Hospital, Frederick Wiseman, 1970 - feature documentary (one of the first products of direct observational 'fly on the wall' documentary)
Street Angel, Yan Muzhi, 1937 - rarely seen Chinese classic cinema feature, drama
In This World, Michael Winterbottom, 2002 - drama documentary
The Battle of the Ten Million, Chris Marker, 1970 - documentary, and *A Brief History of Cuba in D-Minor*, Emily James, 2001 - musical comedy
The Fourth World War, Big Noise Films, 2004, - activist video
The Revolution Will Not Be Televised, Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Brien, 2003 - documentary
Hue and Cry, Charles Creighton, 1946 - classic cinema feature comedy (that screening gave free admission for children)
Hammer and Flame, Vaughan Pilikian, 2005, *Dear Mrs Blair*, 2005, *The Ladies' Bridge*, Karen Livesey, 2006, and *One Man and His Island*, Platform films, 2002 - activist shorts.

Discussion is an important part of every screening. Speakers - at least one, often two or three - are always invited to introduce the films and open discussion afterwards. Sometimes the speakers are invited because they contributed to the film. A few examples include:

Ken Fero, director of *Injustice*;
John Pilger, producer of *Paying the Price*, *the Killing of the Children of Iraq*;
 The makers of the shorts shown in the 'Cinema of Protest' screenings.

Sometimes speakers are activists from a relevant campaign or offer other kinds of special knowledge about the issues or the film. A few examples include:

Bernard Regan from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign spoke with the documentary *Wall* directed by Simone Bitton;
Bob Crow, General Secretary of the RMT, spoke with Platform Films's *Rail Against Privatisation*;
Nur Masalha author of *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestine Refugee Problem* spoke at a programme of Israeli and

Palestinian films;
Sam Lesser, former member of the International Brigade, spoke at a programme of films about the Spanish Civil War;

Tony Benn spoke with Martin Ritt's *The Front*, a rarely seen early Woody Allen comedy about the McCarthy witch hunts in the USA.

The discussion, as in any open forum, is unpredictable, and a members' questionnaire reflects both appreciation and irritation. While one person refers to 'interesting debates' another calls them 'off putting' and someone else complains of 'domination by hard line Stalinists'. The latter is a concern I have had myself on occasions when people have got up, seemingly one after the other, to read prepared statements with little relevance to film or speaker's comments. But that is one extreme.

At the other are the moments when someone in the audience, previously unknown to the platform, turns out to be deeply involved in a current issue or to have played a part in relevant historic events and can offer new information and insights, possibly ones which have never been aired before. This tendency to contrast underlines the value of intelligent and tactful chairing. It is my impression that the general level of discussion has improved over the last six or seven years and it is notable that, despite possible reservations, a good proportion of the audience remains to participate.

WHERE AND WHEN?

Deciding where and when to hold screenings means juggling factors such as audience preferences, cost, availability, projection facilities, and the suitability of the space. The nature of the screenings creates extra problems, firstly, because it is an advantage to be able to project different kinds of material, 35mm and 16mm film, various formats of tape and now DVD and, secondly, because the space needs to be suitable both for viewing and discussion.

There are nearly always compromises, particularly because the best venues for screening tend to be cinemas but they are usually not available at convenient times and their fixed seating plan is not ideal for discussion. The following are the different places and times the LSFC has tried:

1991/92 - Cinema Action, Swiss Cottage, Monday evenings
 1992/93 - Cinema Action, Swiss Cottage, Sunday evenings
 1993/94 - Conway Hall, Holborn, Sunday evenings
 1994/96 - Marx House, Clerkenwell, Monday evenings.
 1996/97 - Marx House, Clerkenwell, Sunday afternoons
 1997/98 - season split between Lux Cinema, Hoxton, and Whitechapel Art Gallery, Sunday afternoons
 1998/99 - Lux Cinema, Hoxton, Saturday afternoons

1999/2001 - University of London Union, Mallet Street, Sunday afternoons
2001/03 - Birkbeck College, Sunday afternoons
2003 - Renoir Cinema, Brunswick Square, Sunday 11am to 2pm.

The Cinema Action cinema, being purpose built for such use, could project most kinds of material and was designed for discussion as well as viewing. It was perfect in the first years but was too small to allow for audience growth, a problem which never had to be confronted because it was closed down before this became an issue.

Of the other venues, the Lux cinema was all round the most satisfactory. It was also purpose built and intended for specialist repertory screenings, was central and easily accessible, about the right size and at first was available at a convenient time, Sunday afternoon. The problem there was cost and the fact that after the first season the Sunday time was no longer available and Saturday proved less popular. The Lux, which was partly grant aided, was under heavy pressure at the time to be more 'commercial'. It was closed down a few years later.

The non-cinema venues were much more trouble to use as the LSFC had to bring some or all of the projection equipment and one of the committee had to operate it. The Co-op purchased a 16mm projector early on and subsequently a second one so there were no breaks for reel changes. It was never possible to show 35mm, and for video formats it was necessary to hire until a video projector was purchased in 1997/98 with a loan from Co-operative Retail Services.

There were also problems because these venues were not designed for projection. A committee member recalls that at the University of London Union (ULU):

It was necessary to install blackout curtains at each showing. This was often at risk of life and limb, using tall steps.

As spaces they were often unsuitable for viewing and not much better for discussion. The Conway Hall and Birkbeck were particularly unsatisfactory as the acoustics were bad and blackout inadequate. The space used in ULU was a hall with an unrailed floor which meant that for much of the audience the lower part of the screen was obscured, making it impossible to read subtitles. At Birkbeck, which was about to be refurbished, the roof leaked and on rainy days there was a shower down one side of the room.

The move to the Renoir was in most respects a relief. It was central and easily accessible both by public transport and by car, the projection was excellent and the space, if slightly large for the usual audience numbers, comfortable. It did not have the range of projection equipment that Cinema Action and the Lux had so that for some formats it was still necessary to bring in and operate another machine. A more serious disadvantage was that the cinema was in use for its own shows from about 2.00 pm, so that the Co-op screenings were at 11.00 am Sunday morning, rather too early for many people.

The use of such a comfortable and centrally located cinema would probably have been ruled out by cost had it not been for the support of the Renoir's owner. The cinema belonged to Andy Engel, who also created the distributor, Artificial Eye, and played a key role in independent and political film from the 1970s. He

welcomed the approach from the LSFC and agreed to rent the cinema for a charge which only just covered the costs of the staff required, in this case four people because LSFC did the box office themselves.

Andy Engel died in 2006 and, a few months before, sold the Renoir and Chelsea Cinemas to Curzon Cinemas Ltd. LSFC feared the new owners might charge too much but the Curzon management in fact, for their first season encouraged the LSFC and negotiated a new arrangement so that the LSFC would show in association with Curzon Cinemas.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS AND HOW ARE THEY MET?

The single most important practical condition which made the LSFC possible was that the group which conceived the idea included people able and willing to give large amounts of unpaid labour. Labour is by far the most significant running cost but one which never appears in the accounts because it was and is provided entirely on a voluntary basis, even down to the auditing of the accounts. The volume of work is considerable. A description of the tasks actually performed by the Secretary one year lists about 70 activities.

The broad categories are: work out dates for the following year's showings and book the venue; write to sponsors and see that cheques reach the treasurer and receipts are sent; gather information about films and speakers, stills and other materials for the printed programme and allocate writing and designing jobs; book the films and videos and organise mailing of programmes; organise jobs to be done at each show and prepare tickets, money, etc; attend shows and collect audience statistics; mail committee for committee meetings; keep membership list up to date and mail members about the General Meetings.

In addition to the Secretary there is a Chairperson and Treasurer and usually a Membership Secretary (although the list suggests that in the year in question the Secretary was doubling in that role) and a Technical Officer. Other committee members all contribute some work apart from attending regular meetings and helping at the screenings.

Each show requires four to six people to deliver materials to the venue, sell tickets and membership, project the film (unless the venue provides a projectionist), introduce the films and speakers and chair the discussion that follows each screening; the discussion is enabled by one of the Co-op members who provides audio equipment and a roving mic.

The other main costs are the production of a programme, film hire, hire of venue, advertising and postage. These are financed partly by ticket sales and subscriptions and partly by small grants from sponsors. The organisers wanted to keep the costs of membership and screenings as low as possible and from the beginning looked for sponsorship, initially from trade unions and co-operative societies and once from the Lottery.

The first applications were made to the Member Relations and the Political Committees of Co-operative Retail Services (CRS) and the result was a grant of

£800 for the first year which was renewed subsequently but reduced each year. The most significant grants received were £4,950.00 received from Arts for England in 1997/98 and £4,000 received from the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) in 1999/2000. (The CWS and CRS have since merged to become The Co-operative Group.) The table below gives details of the finances for the fourth, ninth and fifteenth years of operation.

Income and Expenditure, select years

Income	1994/95	1999/2000	2005/06
Balance	342.00	2,227.82	4,048.39
Balance (shares)			732.00
Shares			170.00
Door takings	480.00	1,536.50	2,965.00
Membership subscriptions	100.00	765.00	1,232.00
Donations		274.50	393.00
Co-op grant	375.00	300.00	
Sponsorship	45.00	325.00	645.00
Other	29.00	62.50	78.70
CWS grant for 2000/01		4,000.00	
TOTALS	1,371.00	9,491.32	10,264.62
Expenditure	1994/95	1999/2000	2005/06
Production of programme	248.06	842.51	1,270.00
Hire of hall	160.00	875.21	548.88
Hire for Oct and Nov*			635.00
Publicity	199.97	391.99	34.18
film hire	630.61	341.41	347.09
Speakers expenses			36.00
Post, stationary, telephone	142.05	488.51	739.27
Loan repayment to CRS		500.00	
Equipment for screenings		599.25	135.13
General meeting exp			50.00
other	21.21	114.24	
Transferred to Share Account			732.00
Balance	168.80	5,338.20	5,567.07
Balance (Share Acc.)			170.00
TOTAL	1,570.70	9,491.32	10,264.62

*This was for emergency accommodation at Birkbeck, because the Renoir was being refurbished.

Sponsorship continued to be important in keeping prices to users relatively low and yet allowing for increased investment in publicity and the production of an improved programme. In the year 2005/06 sponsors were: BECTU, NATFHE, CWU Central London, CWU London NW C&C, GMB/APEX Holborn, Greater London Association of Trade Union Councils, Brent Trades Council, Camden Trades Council, Hammersmith & Fulham Trades Union Council, Sutton & Merton TUC, and South East Progressive Co-operators - North Area.

Subscriptions for new members in 2005/06 were £8 (£6 for unwaged, students and OAPs) including a member's shareholding of £2. Those re-subscribing paid £6/£4. Ticket prices were £6 (£4 concessions) for members and £7/£5 for non-members.

The Co-op decided not to register for VAT although VAT is charged for the hire of the venue and the films and on some smaller items. The Co-op was advised that the extra work in recouping the VAT charges would not be offset by adding VAT to the ticket price.

MEMBERS AND AUDIENCES

Membership has fluctuated considerably. The society began with about 20 members. In 1996 it increased to 71 and in 1997 it reached 138. The highest recorded membership was 261 in 2001. At the beginning of 2004 it was down to 179 and in 2006 it was up again to 258. There is a stable core of members and also a considerable number of people who join but do not renew. Altogether 632 people had at some time been members up to 2007. There were 451 shareholders, by the end of the 2005/06 season.

All that is known for certain about who the members are is that they come from all over London and beyond. In 2006 the breakdown was as follows:

London N	46
NW	34
SE	29
W	27
E	26
SW	19
WC	14
EC	1
Other Greater London	33
Outside London	29

The stable core probably consists of people with a long association with the labour movement, who have been members or associates of co-operative soci-

eties, trade unions, the Labour Party or the Communist Party. The average age is high.

Audiences vary in size and character from one season to another and from one showing to another. From 1999, statistics were gathered based on ticket sales and on head counts of the audience. The method results in reliable figures for total numbers and numbers of concessions but records estimates for a breakdown by age, ethnic minority and people with disabilities. The largest audience,³ excluding the platform, was 189 (February 2011, for *Capitalism: A Love Story*, Michael More, USA 2009). The next largest was 149 (Nov 2010, *Salt of This Sea*, Annemarie Jacir, Palestine 2008); the smallest was 23 (May 2000, *Our Daily Bread*, King Vidor, 1932)

It is difficult to correlate the size of audiences closely with particular kinds of programme or even venues or times. The show considered by one of the founding members to have been the most successful ever was in February 1998 before detailed statistics were kept. It was at the Lux and was called 'Treasures of the CPBG' (Communist Party of Great Britain) and consisted in films and clips of films from the 1930s to 1970s made by filmmakers or film groups affiliated with the Communist Party and introduced by Stanley Forman from Educational & Television Films, the company that distributed and archived the films.

A similar programme shown in November 2000 at ULU was also one of the most successful of that year and drew an audience of 92. Part of the success can be explained by the appeal to a social network for whom these were almost like family movies, a network of people who had been involved in the events and knew Stanley Forman and many of the people in the films. However, this was also one of the shows which attracted a considerable number of people under thirty, possibly because these were rare historic documents now hardly ever shown on a big screen.

As for venue, the Lux, as might be expected, appears to have been popular but higher attendances were registered for ULU and Birkbeck where projection and space were far from satisfactory. The most popular times were Sunday evening or Sunday afternoon.

The average age of the audience is very high compared to the general cinema-going public and some respondents to the questionnaires identify this as a problem. Members naturally want to attract new audiences including more young people and the current screening time, 11am on a Sunday morning, is seen as a considerable handicap from this point of view.

It is perhaps surprising that, even at this hour, all the shows attract some people in the 19 to 30 category, sometimes accounting for a third of the audience and at least once for more than a half. A few children come, usually very young ones brought because their parents want to be there, although there have been older ones when a film has been chosen deliberately with the idea that it will be fun for families. In recent years the 16 to 18 age group has hardly been represented at all.

As for the audience breakdown by other factors, a rather high proportion was classified in the statistics as economically disadvantaged (mainly because of the high numbers of pensioners) and around 10% was counted as belonging to an ethnic minority.

DECIDING THE PROGRAMMES

Putting the year's programme together involves a good deal of work and consultation. The process starts with an appeal to members to suggest films, adding, whenever possible, details on availability, costs, relevant campaigns and possible speakers. The suggestions are added to a list accumulated from previous years and then, usually in the late spring, there is a members' meeting at which possible combinations of films and speakers are discussed and a rough programme decided. The committee then work on it, checking availability and costs, confirming speakers, allocating dates and finally booking the films in time to get the programme out in the late summer.

The finalising stage often requires extensive research. In order to show a title it is necessary not only to locate a physical copy but also to find out how to obtain the right to show it. In the case of recent films which have played in British cinemas a distributor will probably be able both to supply a copy and grant the right to screen it in return for a hire fee. The task, in that case, is limited to locating the right distributor⁴ by looking the title up on the internet or, if that fails, on the database at the British Film Institute. This will also provide details such as release date, cast and crew and synopsis that may be needed for the printed programme. Another national body, the Independent Cinema Office (ICO), will help research any British film. The British Film Institute is also one of the distributors with which the LSFC regularly deals; others are Contemporary Films, Filmbank, Fox, ICA, Metro and UIP. In the case of old films, TV programmes or non-broadcast video, the problems are likely to be greater. Old films may not be available at all. In the case of TV programmes the filmmaker may own a copy but may not own the copyright and so cannot legally give permission for a screening. In some cases legal obstacles have been got round by restricting a screening to members only.

MONITORING

From the beginning the committee kept records of ticket sales and membership which they referred to when considering the merits of venues, times and the programme. Since 1998, as already noted, they have compiled more detailed records on the basis of a head count in order to break the audience down by age, gender, ethnicity and whether they are economically disadvantaged. This has been done partly to provide the members with a better understanding of who the audience is but partly to facilitate applications for grants which usually require this kind of information. Collecting and organising the data adds considerably to the burden of work and the committee is undecided as to whether the benefits justify the effort.

PUBLICITY

Some members feel that publicity is not good enough and it is probably true that it often reaches only a small proportion of the potential audience but advertising one off, monthly screenings of diverse films is not easy.

Until recently the LSFC relied almost entirely on mailing the printed programme, on personal contact and advertisements in publications. Now, it has moved into the electronic age, adding email and a website to its methods. The printed programme, however, continues to be important and has developed from a dull black and white flyer to a well illustrated, coloured leaflet which can be unfolded to form a poster.

The print run for the programme increased over the years reaching 22,000 in 2005/06. Two copies are sent to the members and there is also another mailing list of 270. Committee members between them pass on another fifty to two hundred to their contacts. Programmes are also sent to organisations such as trade unions, trades councils, co-operative societies, relevant political organisations and libraries.

The publications where screenings are advertised or listed include *Time Out*, *Morning Star* and *Camden New Journal* and sometimes the *Guardian* and *Tribune*. Posters are sometimes put up in universities and halls of residence near the venue.

For each showing the committee tries to contact especially interested organisations. For example university classics departments were notified when *Black Athena* was shown, CND and local CND groups when *March to Aldermaston* was shown. Speakers and filmmakers are also encouraged to publicise the screenings via their own networks. Some of the largest audiences have probably been attracted through such targeted publicity for particular screenings.

A successful web site ran pre 2007 but ran into maintenance difficulties, closed, and created negative publicity. The template of the original web design has now been restored and is regularly updated.

BEYOND THE SCREENINGS

Running monthly screenings is the Co-op's main activity but not its only one. It acts more widely as a film resource for the Left. It will give advice about arranging one-off screenings and it offers a projection service for organisations wishing to show films or DVDs in venues which do not have projection facilities.

The Co-op's original statement of aims included a tentative reference to 'possibly making' films as well as showing them. It has not, as an organisation, made films itself but Chris Reeves continues to make films through Platform Films; some of the members make films and audiences usually include other filmmakers and film students.

The society actively tries to facilitate and encourage production. It makes a point of including in every season work by British-based filmmakers - some

who are members and some who are not. The Cinema of Protest screenings in particular provide a platform for short films, some by experienced filmmakers but others by newcomers, students or non-professionals.

The format of all the screenings is intended to link the processes of making, viewing and commenting on films and, although discussion tends to be primarily about issues raised by the films, it also addresses questions about film itself and the context of production and dissemination. Another way that the Co-op helps filmmakers and their potential audience is by promoting sales of their DVDs.

Apart from encouraging filmmakers, the Co-op also tries to encourage organisations and campaigns to think in terms of the moving image. It is often a first point of call for those seeking advice on working with film or video and can put inquirers in touch with members or associates who can give more advice or practical help. The Co-op belongs to the British Federation of Film Societies (now Cinema for All) and supports the Independent Cinema Office, two national organisations which support film societies and independent exhibitors.

While the Co-op was able to host its showings at the Renoir Cinema in Bloomsbury, it enjoyed the luxury of real cinema comfort and the added status of a prestigious venue. In the past, film clubs have usually had to make do with makeshift venues and *ad hoc* equipment, so it became a real benefit to have the Renoir.

Despite the explosion of media formats, and the associated democratisation of words and imagery through the web, public venues for the showing and discussion of radical films and DVD's will still be essential. With the loss of government funding, the closure of virtually all independent cinemas and the centralisation of film-making and distribution, radical filmmakers are increasingly reliant on alternative outlets. Organisations such as the London Socialist Film Co-op will continue to play that vital role of bringing films to a wider public and offering radical filmmakers an audience. Let us look forward to many more years of successful activity ahead.

UPDATE 2015

This history, bar a few details, ends in 2007. Between then and the end of its 2012/13 season, the LSFC continued the Sunday morning screenings at the Renoir, recording average attendances of around 90 per screening with fairly small annual variations both up and down. In 2013 screenings moved to Bolívar Hall, 54/56 Grafton Way, London W1T 5DL thanks to the support of the Venezuelan Cultural Centre.

The years since 2007 continued rapid growth in the use of the internet by makers and users of alternative media but so far this has apparently not affected audience numbers, suggesting that the two ways of viewing complement rather than compete with each other. The internet, where available and uncensored, is most effective for delivering up to date news and keeping activists informed. Screenings on the other hand do more than deliver a film to a viewer. By bring-

ing people together they focus special attention on the material screened; they can provide context and offer a forum for debate.

Clearly an important potential influence is that the broader political context has changed significantly as the series of economic crises since 2008 have shaken public confidence in free market capitalism and opened the way to a revival of socialist ideas.

In the media the phone hacking scandal delivered another blow to the Right by discrediting that leading exponent of neoliberalism, the Murdoch press. It is too soon to tell whether such developments signal a real turning point in political practice but by creating a more favourable climate of opinion they certainly constitute opportunities for the LSFC and the challenge of how to make the most of them.

© Margaret Dickinson

April 2015

Original history written in 2007

NOTES

- ¹ This history was written in 2007 to cover the LSFC's experience up to that year. Publication has been delayed until 2015 and a few minor amendments have been added in the interim (page 3)
- ² <http://2012.coop/en/what-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles> retrieved 26/10/2012 (page 6)
- ³ This is not counting an audience of 211 in March 2008 for *Memories of a Future*, Margaret Dickinson 2008, because this was the film's London premiere and the audience included participants and special guests (page 14)
- ⁴ The *Community Cinema Sourcebook*, published by the British Federation of Film Societies in 2009, has excellent contemporary information on this and many other aspect of running film societies (page 15)

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