

National Film Lending – Origins and Context

At this time of discussion of the functions of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), it may be worth putting on record the origins of the National Lending function. There was a profound reason why National Library was ever involved in servicing film societies, a role expanded after Barrett Hodsdon's report in the 1970s when media studies had opened up in tertiary institutions.

The film society movement had by the time of the Olinda film weekend (January 1952 – see <http://miff.com.au/festival-archive/year/1952>) realised that a central non-profit institution would be needed to tap the holdings of the film archives in Britain, US and the continent. The Australian Council of Film Societies decided to create an Australian Film Institute for exactly that purpose. For curious reasons, AFI was not actually formed until 1958. The initial AFI board included people of distinction like Stout, Hawes and the National Librarian H.L. White as well as some people active at the time in film societies and film festivals. I was one of the latter.

For a long time, the National Library had been the sales agent in 16mm for the productions of the National Film Board/Department of Information/later Commonwealth Film Unit. It acted in the same way for some overseas government documentary sources e.g. Ireland and Belgium. Then it had begun lending those same films to the burgeoning documentary film showing bodies. Later, to a limited extent, it had begun to obtain and lend some classic silent films from the British Film Institute. In the scene of the 1950s, the National Library was a principal source of films for film societies and community groups. The commercial feature distributors of the period would never supply such groups, which they regarded as competing with cinemas.

For a couple of years, the new AFI still did not seem to make progress on the central purpose for which it had been created i.e. obtaining the fabled 'classics' of the silent and sound periods. At one board meeting, White made an offer: turn over the project to his National Library, which did have film handling facilities and some sourcing know-how, and "once this activity is a line in the federal budget, it will continue forever" (pretty much his exact words). A wide variety of documentary films and some very decent silent and early sound feature films did begin to arrive. They were lent without any charge in the great process of bringing the 1950s-60s Australia into the world of audio-visual information.

Then came the big expansion into more recent, in some cases current, feature films and short films for media studies purposes as proposed by the report done by Barrett Hodsdon. Thus evolved the National Library's marvellous film library of the years up to mid-1990s. Naturally, in a different kind of budget system, the NLA was all too ready to devolve the non-theatrical lending function on to first Cinemedia, then NFSA.

It may be that in some countries the film archives do not operate lending services to the community. In those countries, non-theatrical film lending services, commercial and institutional, have always existed since the 1930s. But here in Australia, the promotion of film showing and the supply of documentary and non-commercial film had early become a government matter (thanks to John Grierson). There were government film libraries in all the states, those in Victoria and South Australia, and less so in NSW, being notable for the breadth and quality of their holdings. The National Library of Australia provided a further breadth and depth with often high quality of cataloguing.

An unintended consequence was that *no substantial other non-commercial supply sources* developed in Australia. Numerous community and private enterprise film libraries were set up and then faded out. Two of the gallant attempts, Sydney Film-makers Co-op and AFI Distribution, were killed off abruptly by none other than the federal government.

That brings us to where we are now. Whatever is the practice in the rest of the world, the NLA-NFSA was for half a century the central rock of film supply to the non-theatrical field, including education, in this country. As a matter of history, the lending activity and leadership function are not accidentally located in NFSA. They are central, not extraneous, to NFSA, in the structure of non-entertainment audio-visual supply in Australia.

Yes, circumstances are very different now. Yes, film sourcing has changed immeasurably. Yes, a great deal of re-thinking is needed, indeed is long overdue. The various institutions failed to provide policy leadership from when the writing appeared on the wall with the arrival of video-tape. The arrival of digital media has much exacerbated the problems of audio-visual distribution to non-theatrical audiences, but no policy thinking seems to have been done. Whether for that difficult re-thinking the organisations, the ability and the will exist will have to be seen.

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