

Cinema at a Dead End

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IT is easy enough to lament the dismal state of the British cinema, and tempting to point out how much we have to learn from the Poles or the Swedes or the Japanese. The dangers of this particular temptation are the chances of coming to believe that British films are dull and unexciting because life in Britain is dull and unexciting. In fact, they are dull because the industry is run by a few unadventurous old men who are interested in making money, and have a rigid—not to say extremely odd—idea of the sort of film which makes it. The biggest name in British films—we are unlike any other country in this respect—is not a director, actor, writer or anyone creative, but a monopolist. And while he has poured away millions in expensive flops, directors of imagination have been overlooked. Free Cinema is still a minority movement hamstrung for lack of funds; Mackendrick has had to go to America for his first major film; Jennings produced his finest work for the Government; the pre-war documentary school (before it lost its nerve) worked for various official bodies. Commercial cinema has been an artistic failure.

It is even a financial failure. The record of loss and subsidy since the war is fairly well known by now: the industry seems to have been in permanent crisis. But the

present crisis is not a crisis of production brought about by lavish spending in the studios: competition from television and sociological changes in cinema audiences have created a long-term trend of falling receipts and admissions, leading to cuts in production and unemployment. Ultimately, the problem is the position of the cinema in our society: whether a contracting audience is to mean a declining industry; whether we think the cinema is worth subsidizing; whether an entirely new system of production and distribution should not be organized. In the Spring 1958 issue of *Sight and Sound*, Penelope Houston has made an exhaustive analysis of the financial state of the industry and its implications for future policy: some of her most important statements concern the relevance of American experience for British producers. Her argument (roughly) is that the American industry was faced with very similar problems to ours, and has evolved new production strategies to meet the situation; it is thus worth considering these strategies. The outstanding development in the American situation is the decline of the "middle-of-the-road" film, designed for family audiences, which is exactly the type of film favoured by British studios in the past. It has been replaced by high-finance films, which are an impossibility for the

limited resources and market of the British industry, by films of specifically "teenage" appeal, whose audience is necessarily limited, and by the new school of critical realist cinema. A relaxation of political and social pressures has made possible the realization of *Twelve Angry Men*, *Bachelor Party*, *No Down Payment*, and so on. This unexpected renaissance of American cinema—films made mostly on a low budget by independent companies—indicates an attempt to meet the challenge of television with quality rather than sheer size. It seems the obvious way for British producers—until you realize that the producers are firmly convinced that intelligent and serious filming means dull filming, specialized audiences and financial failure. As long as the people who actually *make* the films equate cinema with "entertainment," with the corollary that all films should be tartyed up for easier consumption, the outlook is dim. The answer seems to rest with independent producers: the most striking feature of the American scene is the recent growth of independent production. And here we come right up against Arthur Rank's brick wall. With Rank-ABC control over the major avenues of production, distribution and exhibition, the chances of a British feature film covering costs without a booking on a major circuit

are minimal; and the chances of an independent producer obtaining such a booking with a "deviationist" film are practically nil. The advance of the independents was made possible in America by anti-trust laws, which divorced production from exhibition. Equally in Britain, it is a political responsibility.

This, I think, is a suitable point at which to mention the Rotha plan. In 1945, at the invitation of Sir Stafford Cripps, Paul Rotha drew up a memorandum on the film industry: it was never acted on, for reasons which remain obscure, and only now has it been published in *Rotha on the Film*. The plan was for a Film Corporation which would provide financial and studio facilities for independent units, and to ensure the distribution of their films. To this end, the proposed corporation would own studios which could be rented out to independent producers, and used for production of the Corporation's own films. It would encourage experimental work, and establish a plan for documentary production; it would institute a training and apprenticeship scheme; and it would acquire about 500 cinemas averaging 750 seats each, sited in towns of over 50,000 inhabitants. At the Corporation's cinemas, priority would be given to its own films and the films of independent producers using the Corporation's studio. Second priority would be continental films, and third American films not considered by the trade to be of wide appeal. (This rule could be relaxed in view of the easing of the dollar position from 1945.) Performances would not be limited to a week, but would run as long as justified by demand (as some circuit cinemas have started to do recently, with the Bolshoi Ballet film and *Bridge on the River Kwai*).

There are good reasons why this project should be preferred to total nationalization in one stage. There is a limit to the number of directors, producers, actors, writers and technicians who can be expected to work in the new Corporation in its early stages, although there is every reason to expect this number to grow as the advantages of freedom in subject-matter and opportunity for experiment are seen. Initially, however, to make Rank personnel work independently under the roof of a new organization would not be a guarantee of better films. But

assuming a take-over in stages as the Corporation proved itself and gained strength at the expense of the circuits (a large and long-term assumption), a more fundamental problem arises: how to ensure producers' independence. It is quite conceivable, particularly if the state undertaking was instituted more with the aim of maintaining employment and financial stability in the industry than as a stimulus to better film-making, that bureaucratic control might develop, accompanied by a stereotyping of attitudes and a growth of social and political pressure on units. This possibility is inherent in the public ownership of any cultural medium (see, for example, the B.B.C.), and as likely—let's face it—under a Labour government as under the Conservatives. This seems to be a strong argument for limiting the scope of the state sector, so as not to constrict the channels of communication; but there *may* be a long-term sense in which this problem is entirely misconceived, although I think it is not. The argument here is that the traditions of Labour philistinism are so deeply embedded that it will require a small revolution within the Party to get anything done at all about films; and that if this revolution takes place, it will have the corollary of changing the whole attitude on cultural matters, so that the problem of interference would not arise. I think this is not how the situation will develop. It is far more likely that the crisis in the industry will force government action on financial grounds, without any real thought being given to the artistic issues involved; and that the fear of being accused of political interference with art will lead the Corporation to lean over backwards to appear safe and democratic and English.

The crucial point is the criterion for selection of Corporation officials: and here the Rotha plan gives us a blank cheque. "Corporation officers will require to be selected according to their knowledge of public taste, of film production methods and of adult education, as well as their ability to see the information policy of the Government interpreted in dramatized feature production." Suitable distortion could render parts of this clause acceptable to Zhdanov himself, while the criterion of "public taste" is open to the widest interpretation. This method of selection in fact

lays down no principle, and only throws the problem a stage back to the people responsible for the selection. Since the question is so wide open, I think it is an opportunity and a responsibility for discussion in this journal and elsewhere to attempt to clarify our requirements. As a very broad outline, I would suggest that the sort of person needed is one who believes both in the desirability and the practicability of a popular art, as opposed to the theory of art as the preserve of an intellectual coterie, while the popular need is for "entertainment." Ultimately, we need to persuade the Labour Party about this; but first we have to persuade them that the cinema is too important to be allowed to die. This means a campaign. The Fourth Circuit is inadequate—it would leave the bulk of power and initiative with Wardour Street; but the Rotha proposals form a basis for a campaign which could attract strong support. If put into operation by people who believed in them, they could make a revolution in the cinema. The attitude which underlies the weekly showing of a double-feature programme is that of films as fodder for an indiscriminating habitual mass audience. That audience has gone over to television; it is time to explore the possibilities of single-feature programmes, extended runs, minority-appeal programmes, and liaison with film societies.

The Rotha plan sees cinemas as local cultural centres. There is no reason why they should not be owned by the local authority and integrated for programme purposes with the Corporation-owned halls; but whatever their ownership, they should be made available in the mornings and on Sundays at special rates for schools, film societies and any local organization in need of a hall. The management and policy of each cinema should be such that people feel it as a place which belongs to them, and where they belong. This should be our aim. The record of the 1945 Labour Government's dealings with the film industry makes depressing reading: it would take a separate article to detail the history of their lost opportunities. But the enlightenment value of commitment discussions needs to be reinforced with some political moves: it is not, after all, so long now before the next Party Conference.