1956

Film Societies of America

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The first film society in the United States, so far as we know today, was the Film Society of New York. Its first program was presented in January 1933, at Essex House, in New York City. The sponsors included George Gershwin, Eva Le Gallienne, Leopold Stokowski, John Dos Passos, Norman Bel Geddes, and Nelson Rockefeller. The program offered Pabst’s The Threepenny Opera with music by Kurt Weill; King Neptune by Walt Disney; and Brahms’ Symphony, which consisted of the lightwaves produced by the music. In the same month another newly-formed society, the Film Forum, also a New York organization and headed by playwright Sidney Howard, featured the famous Fritz Lang film “M.”

In the early thirties probably twenty or thirty groups throughout the United States could correctly be called film societies. These societies were independent, and because they were independent they were weak. No distributor or other organization existed primarily to serve the needs of film societies until 1935, when the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art was founded. Permanently housed since 1939, the Library is now one of the main sources available to film societies for their programs of both foreign and domestic films. The Museum Library also rents many documentary and experimental short subjects, and is a clearing house for information on films which it does not distribute.

After World War II new film societies were formed in the United States, and established ones gained additional members. In 1947 Amos Vogel founded Cinema 16, which was to become...
the largest and best-known society of all. Cinema 16 offered its first film series in October of that year, in the Provincetown Playhouse, with an audience of about 200. By 1949 it had grown to a membership of over 2500. Currently, Cinema 16 has over 6000 members and its screenings are held in two locations: the Central Trades Auditorium and the Beekman theatre, both in New York City.

From its beginning, Cinema 16 has concentrated on films of less than feature length, and has shown many non-commercial films. Today, in addition to its own film showings, Cinema 16 aids other American film societies by maintaining a small, but growing, library of experimental and documentary films. It is one of many organizations which now offer American film groups a wealth of worthwhile films which are not seen in commercial theatres. The vitality of Cinema 16 demonstrates the strong popular postwar support for good films. This support was only potential when Amos Vogel began his work. Although he devoted full time to the job, it was four years before he could draw a decent salary from his efforts in Cinema 16!

Aside from a few famous film societies like Cinema 16, little organized information was available concerning American film societies until last year, when the Film Council of America (FCA) published the results of a questionnaire they had circulated to prepare the way for a national film society organization, similar to the one which exists in England.

Using the data furnished through the questionnaire the American Federation of Film Societies (AFFS) was founded in April 1955, an independent organization designed to further the interests of all film societies in the United States.

The FCA questionnaire reported 258 film societies active in the United States. More than three-fourths of these had been founded since World War II. Nearly half (49 per cent) were sponsored by schools, colleges, or universities. Of the remainder, 19 per cent were unsponsored; 16 per cent were sponsored by
museums, art centers, libraries, or community centers; and the remainder were under the auspices of a great variety of organizations such as service clubs, fraternal groups, churches, and businesses.

The offerings of these societies ran rather heavily in favor of foreign films, but they also showed a good many American-made features, documentary films, experimental films, silent films, and films about the arts. A majority of the societies showed at least some films in all these categories. However, only 23 per cent of the societies showed scientific films.

More than half of all film society screenings played to audiences of from 50 to 200 persons. Only 2 per cent of the screenings reached audiences of over 1000, while 16 per cent played to audiences of less than 50. The majority of the societies offered from five to twelve showings yearly. An ambitious minority of societies went well beyond this: 19 per cent offered from thirteen to twenty-four screenings, and 13 per cent offered more than twenty-four screenings.

Membership fees supported the majority (54 per cent) of societies. Subsidies permitted 17 per cent of the societies to offer free showings. The remainder were financed by various combinations of membership fees and single admissions, and were able in some cases to hold free showings.

Most film societies consider it their function to offer programs well above the level of films shown in commercial theatres, even in the so-called "art" houses. The latter are in business to make money, and will seldom show a film which they are not sure will pay its own way. A film society, lacking the profit motive, can concentrate on the quality of its program and need not worry so much about cash returns.

Typical recent programs of some American film societies amply illustrate this point: During the fall of 1954 the Documentary Film Group of the University of Chicago showed these American and foreign films: A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE, THE
Strange Ones, Lavender Hill Mob, Incorrigible, Pepe le Moko, The Young and the Damned, Pit of Loneliness, The Whistle at Eaton Falls, Shadow of a Doubt, and some experimental art films, including Muscle Beach, Mother's Day, Four in the Afternoon, Pacific 2-3-1, and Geography of the Body. A subsidiary organization, the Film Study Group, showed a series titled "A Survey of War in the Film," including All Quiet on the Western Front, The Triumph of the Will, La Grande Illusion, Paisan, and Arsenal.


In addition to the film societies, many other organizations present series of unusual films to the public. Among these are the Cleveland Museum of Art, the New York Public Library, the Chicago Public Library, the New York Historical Society (whose films are introduced by the noted lecturer and radio commentator, Gordon Hendricks), the San Francisco Museum of
Art, and many other similar organizations. Some of these series are presented free to the public, others charge a small membership fee or require that persons attending be members of the sponsoring organization.

In spite of the wide variety of films they present and the low price of admission, most American film societies have trouble finding a public. One important reason is that the societies cannot afford effective advertising, and so the public is generally ignorant of their existence, or is often misinformed as to their nature. When a society is sponsored by a school or college, the public often believes that membership or attendance is limited to the students and faculty—an error in nearly every instance.

Many Americans have never seen a foreign film with English subtitles, nor a silent film, and they have no interest in seeing either sort. This lack of information and interest on the part of the public is the greatest problem film societies face.

If this were not enough, commercial exhibitors stand directly in the path of film societies in their efforts to penetrate public unconcern. While it should be to the exhibitors' interest to stimulate the serious study of films, most commercial exhibitors consider film society activities as competition. Of course, the great majority of true film societies show films which no commercial exhibitor would think of running. Only seldom do they present a film of any real commercial value. Nevertheless, and in spite of the efforts of many film societies to cooperate with local theatre owners, the commercial exhibitors frequently do everything in their power to hamper film society activities.

For example, when one of the Harvard film societies wished to show the French film MANON, it was prevented from doing so by the Boston exhibitors who had first run rights on the film for the area of Greater Boston. The Boston exhibitors themselves had little hope of showing the film, since it had been banned in the city of Boston; however, they refused to permit a 16 mm. non-commercial showing of the film in an area where the ban
imposed by the censors did not hold, on the grounds that any showing of the film at all could be in violation of their first-run rights. This precedence of 35 mm. rights over 16 mm. rights is generally the basis of interference by commercial distributors, and thereby film societies can be prevented from showing a film in their area until after it has been shown commercially, or until a certain time has elapsed, even if the commercial theatres have no interest in showing the film. The restrictions are effective because few film societies can afford 35 mm. equipment.

Rights in 16 mm. prints of 35 mm. films are often further restricted, so that they may be available for classroom use but not to film societies, or not for showings where single admissions are charged. Thus the influence of exhibitors frequently prevents a film society from selling admissions at the door, and the society is then forced to operate on a series basis, which greatly hampers its scope of activity.

The uncooperative attitude of commercial theatre owners has caused such large libraries as that of the Museum of Modern Art to rent their films only to societies which operate on a series basis. Again, the commercial exhibitors are partly responsible for the lack of publicity film societies receive. In truth, American film societies have little cause for gratitude toward commercial exhibitors.

Newly-formed film societies frequently fail financially. They must collect fees from their members sufficient to sustain their programs and any other activities in which they may engage. This means that their shows must be presented in a manner which compares favorably with the presentation of films in a commercial theatre. Most societies charge moderate membership fees, from about 25 cents per feature to as high as $1, on a series basis. Those societies which permit the public to come in by paying single admissions at the door charge from 40 cents to $1 per person. Some societies are subsidized by the school or muse-
um in which they operate, but most are furnished with a room in which to present their screenings and are expected to sustain themselves otherwise. If their management is intelligent and officers industrious, they are usually able to make a success of their showings, providing the wishes of their membership are constantly borne in mind. The series in art museums and public libraries are, of course, nearly always subsidized, and the programs are presented as part of the cultural activity of the organization.

CENSORSHIP IS NOT much of a problem for most film societies, even for those which operate in states which have censorship laws, such as Ohio and New York. Cinema 16, for example, showed the American Museum's LA TUKO to over 5000 members after it had been denied license for public showing by the New York censors. The film was banned in New York because many of the scenes featured undeniably nude natives. Alexander Hammid's THE PRIVATE LIFE OF A CAT was denied public license because it showed the birth of kittens; again, Cinema 16 enabled anyone interested to see it. However, in Ohio in 1954 two film society officers were arrested during a showing of a 16 mm. print of a French film banned in that state. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court has tightened its rulings holding censorship of most films illegal, and it seems that soon American film societies will no longer have to worry about this threat.

Some societies bow to public pressure and refuse to show the films of Charles Chaplin, or Russian films. In the western United States the circulation of Chaplin films is off about 25 per cent from four or five years ago. Part of this decrease is because there are no new Chaplin films available; the only Chaplin films which societies here can legally show are the old Mutual and Keystone comedies which Chaplin made before he founded his own company. If such films as CITY LIGHTS, or MODERN TIMES, or THE GOLD RUSH were available to Americans there would certainly
be a sudden and dramatic increase in the booking of Chaplin films. Nevertheless, some timid societies, frightened by public pressure, will not show any Chaplin film.

The Museum of Modern Art and commercial distributors report that circulation of Russian films is down considerably since the end of the war. This is explained, in part, by the disappearance of the Communist and left-wing groups which were the largest users of these films. A few groups, though not many, no longer use Russian language films because of fear of public reaction. Most groups continue to use the better Russian films, of which there are far too few in this country. The circulation of Russian films is down perhaps 20 per cent from four or five years ago, but only half of this decrease can be charged to groups fearful of public opinion; the rest must be attributed to the comparatively high quality of other films from Italy, France, Sweden, Britain, etc.

A few films have been actively attacked for other reasons. OLIVER TWIST received far fewer showings in this country than it should have because of Jewish pressure, but it was freely shown by many film societies. Some films, such as THE WAGES OF FEAR, are badly cut and altered before they are distributed in this country. Some of the cutting is done in anticipation of the supposed taste of American audiences, and some simply to shorten the features to allow greater turnover in the theatres. Since the 16 mm. prints are made from the 35 mm. negatives, the film societies here have no chance to see the original versions. The most recent example of a foreign film suffering cruelly at the hands of American distributors was Bresson's DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST. This, of course, is not censorship in the usual sense, but it is just as effective in depriving the serious cineaste in this country of the opportunity to see a great film as the director intended it to be seen.

Most of the films which are distributed commercially in this country eventually become available on 16 mm. for film society
use. This is less true today, however, because of the growing popularity of television. Most foreign language films become available to film societies from three to eighteen months after their New York premieres, but many of the best British films go directly from a commercial run to television; some even open on television and then are shown in the theatres. Rex Harrison's *The Constant Husband* had its American premiere on television, as recently did Laurence Olivier's *Richard III*. Such outstanding films as *The Tales of Hoffman* and *The Man Between* have never been released for film society showings, but were held for theatrical use until recently and then released on television. In fact, the whole pattern of distribution of the films controlled by J. Arthur Rank is most unsatisfactory from the standpoint of American film societies. There seems to be no fixed policy on any of these films; one can expect to see any of them, from the oldest to the newest, on any television station. A film society can ill afford to show many films which are shown at about the same time, in some cases at the same hour, on television. This means that most film societies prefer to book foreign language films or old American films which have not been released to the television octopus. And even these are a rapidly vanishing species.

Many distributors today are anxious to cater to the needs of film societies. The Museum of Modern Art library can be counted upon to supply the best of the old historical films, both American and foreign, and they always send out good, usable prints. About a dozen large commercial libraries handle most of the current foreign films, and many of the best of the older films, foreign and American. Usually these libraries supply good prints at fairly reasonable cost, but it is always best to preview their prints before running them before an audience. Sometimes the sound is poorly recorded; occasionally the film has not been rewound or has breaks in it.

The final source of films is the numerous collections of private
collectors. Most of these have good prints in usable condition, although some do not maintain their prints and force the society which shows them to do extensive repair work on them. It should be borne in mind that in most cases the collector has not secured a clear legal title to the film, or the right to distribute it, and hence on occasion the owner of the legal rights can cause considerable trouble for the society showing such a film. In general, though, the legal ownership of most collectors' films is obscure and there is little risk involved.

The Film Society of the University of New Mexico typifies the problems and activities of American film societies. It is sponsored by an educational institution, and operates in University buildings, with the recognition and approval of officials of the University. However, the society has never received financial aid from the University, nor does it expect to. Like most groups whose aims are primarily cultural, the Film Society of the University of New Mexico had small beginnings. In 1942 a few devoted cineastes met occasionally without publicity to screen some of the great films of the past. The screenings were held in a small basement room in the Student Union Building, using a single 16 mm. projector and a tiny screen. In spite of these unfavorable conditions the group continued operations and soon moved to Rodey Theatre, where the University's dramatic productions are presented.

Rodey Theatre offered nearly 200 comfortable seats, a foyer, and a projection booth. However, the Department of Drama had first call on the theatre, and the Film Society frequently had difficulty in obtaining use of the theatre on the Saturday nights when the Society's screenings were scheduled. Often the film series did not begin until more than a month after the start of school, owing to the difficulty of booking films on such short notice. The Society never succeeded in showing more than twelve programs in Rodey Theatre during the course of one
academic year. Even so, the quality of the programs in those days was high. In 1948-49 the series included The Wave, La Marseillaise, The Overlanders, Walter Ruttman's Berlin, Brief Encounter, Shoeshine, Amphytrion, Dead of Night, and Le Puritain.

In the fall of 1952 the Society abandoned Rodey Theatre's comfortable seats and transferred operations to the largest lecture room in Mitchell Hall, the University's new classroom building. The lecture room seated nearly 160 persons, and was available practically every Saturday night of the year as well as on many other nights. The Society could now plan its programs a year in advance, if it wished, and no longer needed to accept whatever films were available at the last minute. The Film Society presented two series of ten films each in Mitchell Hall that year, including Paisan, Dead of Night, La Grande Illusion, Murnau's Nosferatu, Flaherty's Moana, The Magic Horse, Ivan the Terrible; a program of the films of George Melies; a Chaplin program; God Needs Men, Siegfried, The Forgotten Village, David Bradley's Julius Caesar, Janosik, The Blue Angel, The Black Pirate, The Dybbuk, and Beauty and the Beast. The two series were extremely successful.

The fine climate of Albuquerque has permitted the Film Society for some years to present series of films outdoors each summer, in an enclosed courtyard on the campus which seats about 230. After a disastrous experience in the summer of 1952 with a series that included The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, "M," Kameradschaft, Potemkin, and Nanook of the North, it has become the policy to present a lighter series in the summer. Recent summers have found the society relying heavily on English sound films from the studios of Rank and Korda—Elephant Boy, The Man Who Could Work Miracles, Things to Come, Rembrandt, The Private Life of Henry VIII, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickelby, Quartet, Passport to Pimlico, and others.

During the summer of 1955 the society changed an old regu-
lation against Hollywood sound films, which had been made to avoid competition with local commercial theatres. That summer it was decided that Hollywood sound films made before 1945 would be safe to show; *Lost Horizon* and King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* inaugurated the new policy. The 1956 summer series will consist of *The Cruel Sea*, *Topper*, *Green Pastures*, *The Promoter*, *The Magnet*, *Rain*, *Island Rescue*, and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*.

In the fall of 1953 the Film Society had the unique opportunity of collaborating with the Robert Flaherty Foundation in presenting the first Festival of Flaherty's Films ever to be held for the benefit of the Foundation. The Festival included *Industrial Britain*, *Moana*, *Louisiana Story*, *The Land*, *Man of Aran*, and *Nanook of the North*. In addition to these the Festival also presented two other films made in the spirit of Flaherty's work. They were *La Riviere Et Les Hommes*, and, just three weeks after its New York premiere, *The Little Fugitive*. The program notes for all the films were written by Mrs. Flaherty, and during the intermissions she spoke about her husband's films and the aims of the Flaherty Foundation.

The Film Society has long felt that in addition to presenting good films it should provide as much factual and critical information as possible about the films shown. For this reason, the group's officers have prepared careful program notes for each film. These list the complete cast and technical credits for each film, and contain reliable information about its background, and a certain amount of objective criticism. The Film Society tries to discourage its program annotators from writing reviews or appreciations of the films, on the grounds that the audience is capable of making up its own mind about whether or not it likes a film.

To aid in writing program notes the Film Society buys as many of the important books in the field as it can afford. A fairly wide variety of books on films are available to the Society's
members; the library has the standard reference works in English—The Film as Art, the Library of Congress copyright entries on all films from 1894 to 1950, and The Educational Film Guide—as well as historical and critical books, such as Sadoul's Histoire General du Cinema, Rotha's The Film Till Now, Bestetti's 50 Years of Italian Cinema, Grierson on Documentary; theoretical books by Eisenstein and Pudovkin; miscellaneous books by Clair and Cocteau; and biographies of Chaplin, Laughton, Eisenstein, Fairbanks, and Flaherty. While these books are primarily for the writer of program notes, any member of the society may borrow them for his own instruction and pleasure.

To maintain close contact with the Society's members, questionnaires are passed out to the membership four times each year. On these questionnaires members are asked to rate each film they have seen on a scale of 5 points: 1 for excellent down to 5 for very bad. They are also asked to rate as many of a selected list of commercial films as they have seen. Finally, they have the opportunity to indicate what films they would like shown in the future. The Film Society of the University of New Mexico is one of the few which uses this method of informing itself as to the tastes and preferences of its audience.

Keeping these preferences in mind, the officers of the Society go on to book a series of films. Foreign language films are balanced by American and English films; silent classics and full length documentaries also have a place on the program. The officers know that the average cost per program should not rise above a certain figure; therefore they rent both expensive films and films with low rentals, and they try to keep the series as attractive as possible without sacrificing quality, because the Society's only means of support is the dues paid by the membership.

Since the members of the Society have such convincing ways of expressing their opinions and desires, it has not been found necessary to establish democratic procedure in governing the Society. The future officers of the Society are selected by the cur-
rent officers. They consist of a faculty sponsor, a director, an assistant director, a publicity director, a cashier, a house manager, and an editor. This group meets each Thursday evening preceding a Saturday showing, to screen the coming film. The principal purpose of this screening is to give the writer of program notes a chance to see the film before he writes the notes. The condition of the print is determined, and the faculty sponsor, who is the Society's official connection with the University, makes sure the film is suitable for public showing. We might add that only once has a film been deemed not suitable for public showing, and that only a very short film. Besides all these more or less official reasons for having a screening, the preview gives the officers an opportunity to meet and discuss the affairs of the Society at their leisure.

In addition to its local program the Film Society of the University of New Mexico plays an active part in national film society activities. In the fall of 1954 the Society made a great effort to launch a periodical, Montage, which was to be devoted to the interests of film societies in the western United States. Montage published one issue and perished for lack of funds. The single issue contained an article by the well-known Herman G. Weinberg, summaries of new 16 mm releases, notes on western film societies, book reviews, and an article on the future of the American film society movement. While the Society could not continue to publish Montage at a complete financial loss, it can and will continue to distribute its Newsletter. The Newsletter, now in its eighth issue, informs members and others here and abroad of the activities of the Society. In the summer of 1955 a special number of the Newsletter was issued, containing sixteen pages. The Society expects to make this sixteen page issue an annual, as well as to continue publication of the smaller edition.

The Society also sponsors a half-hour radio program weekly, over KHFM in Albuquerque, featuring Gordon Hendricks in
"The Sound Track," a program in which he plays and analyses the sound tracks of important films.

But the principal function of a film society is to show good films. In Albuquerque, with over 200,000 people in its metropolitan area, most foreign language films, great English language films, and virtually all the silent films and classic documentary films are presented by the Film Society of the University of New Mexico. At present the Society is offering more than forty separate showings each year. Attendance ranges from 60 to 500 per showing, averaging about 150. Regardless of the difference in size and scope of activities, this is typical of the service rendered film enthusiasts in the United States by that growing institution, the film society.