AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE

Programming

Written by the Independent Cinema Office

Independent Cinema Office

ONLINE GUIDE

A GUIDE TO FILM PROGRAMMING

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Foreword

Film programming is one of those jobs that at one end of the spectrum, everyone feels that they can do, and at the other end, often seems like an elitist, slightly precious vocation with an air of mystery around what it actually means. Done well however, it can transform the cultural tastes of a community and change people's lives, offering them a window on a much wider world than their own and giving them a visual and emotional experience that is quite different to any other art form.

As with many things, it takes practice and experience to be the best you can be as well as imagination, passion and knowledge. Film programming starts with the audience, so you should begin by thinking about possible entry points to what you want to show: what will encourage your potential audience members to buy a ticket and turn up?

It's very important to watch everything – from the whole history of cinema, from every country you can find material from, from every genre and every aspect of the form. Only by doing this can you truly understand contemporary work by knowing what has gone before and articulate why the work you champion is so important.

It's also crucial that it is not about your tastes. We all have our passions and inevitably they will influence what you are interested in, but if your programming starts and ends there, you will be limited in your reach. You need to be creative and think about the wider tastes of a community or a location – all the stories, all the possibilities of a particular title which may touch someone else, all the potential synergies between films. You will be better at the job if you can embrace a wide range of work yourself and be articulate about what it offers the audience.

You need to be creative, imaginative, and engaged. You must love the experience of cinema yourself and should genuinely respond to and wish to engage with audiences. Audiences are often quite broad in their tastes and will take risks with what they watch, but you must help them by signposting films clearly and by being inclusive rather than exclusive. Remember that your role is to open work up to audiences, not close it down with one interpretation or a monocultural view.



It's not just about watching films, it is also about administration, so you must be conscientious, tenacious and develop your negotiation skills. It's important to have a good sense of your own place in the industry so that you can make intelligent arguments about why distributors, filmmakers, rights holders and sales agents should co-operate with you.

The best programmers are infectious in their enthusiasm.

They teach us to be curious, to be interested, to embrace what is offered, to lose ourselves in all the glorious moments of cinema – and be transformed.

Catharine Des Forges, Director, ICO

(Originally published in 2018 on the ICO blog)





Welcome to the ICO guide to film programming....

In this internet era when we have more direct access to a wider range of films than ever before – access which enables everyone to become their own 'curator' of films, and in which streaming services and even cinemas use algorithms to efficiently deliver content to target audiences – it is easy to assume that the role of the traditional film programmer has become obsolete; first challenged, then replaced by this range of alternatives.

At the ICO, however, we believe that this is far from the reality in 2021, and that the skilled and knowledgeable film programmer continues to play a key role in shaping and supporting a thriving film culture; precisely as audiences seek ways of navigating their way through the increasing number of films that are made and released, as cinema admissions continue to rise and as film festivals assume greater importance alongside the proliferation of films on other platforms.

Indeed, new digital technologies have transformed the workings of the film industry at almost every level. The day-to-day activities of a film programmer look very different today than say, 20 years ago. As well as the record numbers of films being made available, communications systems and access to data have in some ways changed the programmer's job description. And yet, throughout this transformative period, it is still possible to trace through some of the key principles and prime considerations of film programming. The more it changes, the more it stays the same.

This guide is an introduction to the role of the film programmer and the range of contexts in which a programmer operates – as part of the UK film industry and film culture, and as an independent creative and curatorial activity. The role requires a combination of skills, experience and knowledge which have not yet been fully replicated by either the enthusiastic self-taught curator nor the finely tuned algorithm – and so film programmers continue to perform a unique and valued function, especially in the film-cultural contexts of independent cinemas and film festivals.

In the end, we hope that this guide feels less like a glimpse behind the emerald curtain at the mysterious workings of film programming, and more like the opening up of the toolbox of a highly skilled and professional activity.



About the contributors to this guide

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When you think back to your most treasured cinema experiences – whether as a child discovering the wonders of the big screen, or perhaps more recently unearthing a hidden gem at your local independent cinema – it's worth remembering that whatever film you were watching, it was chosen by a film programmer.

Simply put, film programming is the selection and presentation of films to an audience.

When it comes to selection, there is a huge number of films released theatrically each week in the UK which, until the onset of COVID-19, was rising all the time: from an average of 11 films per week in 2010 to 17 per week in 2019.

Add to this the incredible library of films from the past 120 years or so that are available to programme, as well as films sourced from sales agents or directly from filmmakers, and you potentially have many thousands of titles to choose from. In a world where there is so much content available to everyone, everywhere, at all times, the role of the film programmer may be more important than ever before.

"Surely it's easy," I hear you say. After all, everyone watches films and can see what's good and what isn't, right? Well of course that's subjective, but programming isn't about choosing to screen only the films you like, though individual taste remains a factor in selection. A programmer's job can be to develop taste, share knowledge, provide access, broaden audiences, increase cultural diversity or simply communicate a love of film. More often than not, it should be all these things at once!

Who are you programming for?

Whilst your knowledge of and passion for film are essential skills, it's important to always keep in mind that ultimately you are programming for an audience – not for yourself. This doesn't mean you can't programme the films you love or have a special interest in; more that you need to balance your personal passion and taste with a clear sense of what your available audience will be drawn to.



Who your audience is will of course vary dramatically depending on the type of role you are doing, where your venue is based and several other factors, but serving them should always be your focus. Whether you are working for a cinema, a film festival or another arts institution, you will be programming within the context of your organisation and its own individual cultural and/or commercial objectives. To a certain degree, this will influence your decision making when it comes to which films you show and which audiences you try to reach. However, it shouldn't limit your ambition as a programmer, as there is always room to develop new audiences and/or existing audience tastes.

In addition, when thinking about your own taste, it's important to recognise your blind spots and check your unconscious biases. Every programmer has these and the sooner you start to recognise them, the sooner you can see how they may be affecting your programming choices. As a programmer you are a cultural gatekeeper of sorts, so it is your responsibility to do all you can to ensure you are representing a broad range of voices that serve and speak to a diverse range of audiences.

What tools do you need?

Probably the most important tool you'll fall back on again and again is your own film knowledge. You don't necessarily need to have studied film in a formal setting, but understanding the language of film (narrative, cinematography, editing, sound, etc.) and how this is used to convey themes and ideas will help you to better understand a filmmaker's intentions and who the audience could be for a particular film.

A solid appreciation of film history and the sheer range of films available to you will also help greatly. Fortunately, we are living in age where so much content is available to watch affordably at home that you can constantly expand your knowledge, discover new films and filmmakers, and delve into the treasure trove of cinema's rich past.

On top of this, you will need to develop an affinity for and an understanding of the audiences you are trying to reach. It goes without saying there are different audiences for different films, so try and learn to identify who they are, but again try to keep your biases in check – it's all too easy to write off a certain audience for a particular type of film based on inaccurate assumptions.

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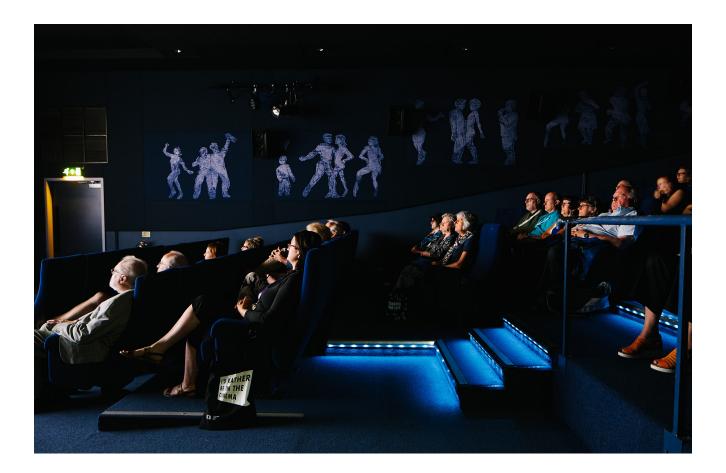
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To learn more about developing audiences for films, read the *ICO's How to Develop Audiences for Independent Cinemas guide.*

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The other main tools you'll need for film programming include understanding rights and materials, film formats, and how to work with distributors, and are explored in the sections that follow. However, one key element we should touch on briefly here is instinct.

Over time you'll develop an instinct for where a film will play best, who its main audience is, how it will be received critically and how it will perform. It's important to understand and interrogate this instinctive response before you accept it – if you feel that a film you watch won't work for its intended audience, can you articulate why that is? If you're sure a film is going to take a fortune at the box office, what is it that makes you so certain? All of this takes time but will become second nature and the more you programme and the more experience you accrue, the more you'll begin to trust your gut.







Rights and materials

Professional film programmers deliver their programmes through cinemas or film festivals. Working within the technical and financial parameters of their specific organisation, they need to know what they can show in terms of sourcing the right format for presentation in their venue, how to obtain permission to show specific films and how much they should pay for them.

As well as watching films to develop inspiration for exciting programmes, an understanding of how to obtain film rights and access the best possible screening materials is therefore an essential part of the film programmer's skillset.

Researching and negotiating film rights

Almost all film content is under copyright. This means anyone intending to screen a film in a public setting, whether in cinemas or in any other type of screening space, must first obtain a copyright licence to show it. Film copyrights are more commonly called 'rights'.

In film, rights are generally owned by the producers but are then divided up into both different media – theatrical (in a cinema) and non-theatrical (a public screening outside of a cinema setting e.g. at a film club), digital, home entertainment (Blu-ray/DVD or streaming), traditional broadcast (for TV) – and into different territories, before being sold on to other companies for a fixed period. For example, a producer might sell the theatrical rights (media) to a film for the UK (territory) for seven years (fixed period) to a UK-based distributor.

Therefore, film programmers who work for cinemas or film festivals first need to find out who owns the rights to the films that they want to show, and then obtain a licence to screen them. This second part will almost always involve negotiating a fee for the licence.

If a UK-based programmer wants to show a new or recently released film in a cinema, this licence for theatrical exhibition will be obtained when the programmer books the film from its distributor.

A distributor is a company whose role is to sell a film to cinemas and to try and attract the biggest possible audience for it. A distributor will produce materials for a film's release, including the film itself and all of the marketing and promotional materials (ltrailers, posters, etc.). See the section 'Working with film distributors'.

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It's likely that the programmer will have referred to the UK Release Schedule, a constantly updated list of UK theatrical film releases published by the Film Distributors' Association (FDA), to find out when and by which distributor the selected film is being released. For more information, see 'Working with film distributors', page 21.

The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) offers a database of all titles that have been certified for a commercial release in the UK for both cinema and home entertainment. Using the search facility on its *website*, it is therefore possible to trace the commercial release history and identify distributors for all films the BBFC has certified.

The BBFC provides guidance on film content and offers suggested age classifications e.g., U, PG, 12A, 15, 18.

Of course, these initial searches won't cover all the films that a programmer may wish to screen. For older films – let's say, more than five years old – or any title whether old or new that has never been released in the UK, a programmer may need to undertake deeper research to identify the rights holder who can grant a licence to screen it.

Given the way that film rights can be divided up by media and by territory, and how they are usually only held for limited periods, researching them to try and identify current rights holders for a film for a particular medium or territory is often both circuitous and challenging. There are no comprehensive catalogues of film rights in existence, neither globally nor for the UK alone. In addition, it's worth remembering that every film has its own unique history of screenings and distribution, which means that each line of research into a film will be different to that required for another. There are no short cuts!

Your research is likely to involve a combination of online resources, searching through local and international distributor and festival catalogues, contacting a network of other cinema and festival programmers for information, and, over time, your own accumulated knowledge as a programmer.

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UK RELEASE SCHEDULE

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BBFC

Here are some resources from which it's possible to see whether a film has been released in the UK and even draw some conclusions as to who might still own the film.

- > As well as the current week's UK theatrical film releases, the FDA's UK film Release Schedule also lists all (currently slated) future releases and past, present and future releases from 2004 on.
- > BBFC website a searchable online database of all films ever given a UK release (in cinemas or home entertainment) with distributor information
- > IMDb lists major film releases by country with company information available on individual films (for example, see this company credits page listing production companies and distributors for the film *After Love*).
- ➤ The BFI offers an online catalogue of its holdings, searchable by format on 35mm, DCP and DVD.
- > Park Circus takes bookings on a vast catalogue of repertory films handled on behalf of a wide array of theatrical distributors. Search their website.
- Cinando is an online network for film professionals run by the Cannes Film Festival's Marché du Film. It offers a wide range of services including sales agent and distributor information for festival films.

When researching rights to screen a film in the UK, it's important to ask the following questions:

- > Does the film have a current UK distributor?
- ➤ Has the film ever been released in the UK theatrically or in any other media?
- > If yes, which company distributed it most recently? Does this company still exist?
- > If no, has it ever been shown in a cinema or festival? If so, where?
- ➤ Is the film being handled by a sales agent/international distributor? Or for older titles, is the film part of a bigger library that is managed by an agent?

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FDA'S RELEASE SCHEDULE

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IMDB MAJOR FILM RELEASES

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AFTER LOVE

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BFI DISTRIBUTION

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PARK CIRCUS

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CINAND

INDEPENDENT CINEMA OFFICE



If the answers are no to the above questions, it's likely that the film rights will have reverted to the main owner – usually the film's producers – in which case you will have to work out who this is, using a combination of the resources and networks suggested above.

In creating a programme for an independent cinema in the UK, you are likely to come across the following examples of film sources:

Older titles (repertory) that have had previous UK distribution

As above, it's possible to find the UK release history of a film via a search on the BBFC website, which covers every film that has been granted a certificate for public exhibition. The key information to find out is when the film was most recently released and the identity of its distributor. If this doesn't lead directly to the current rights holder, it will at least point to the most recent distributor, who may be able to advise you where rights are now. However, it's worth bearing in mind that the BBFC database doesn't include titles that were previously 'released' in the UK but not submitted for advisory certification. This includes a large number of films (typically, independently distributed and 'cult' films) that were screened in independent cinemas under previous licensing conditions which did not require them to screen only BBFC-certified titles.

Old and new titles that have never had UK distribution

If a title is not listed on the BBFC website, and you find out nothing from further enquiries with the BFI, the ICO or other distributors, it may not have been given a formal theatrical UK release (though you may be able to find information about international releases on a film's IMDb page). In this case, you will need to dig deeper to find out the rights holder by tracing back to the original producers of the film.

This can be done through online searches to trace the production credits of a film and as much of the film's history as is accessible, and additionally through further enquiries with national film institutions, archives, distributors in other territories, sales agents and so on.

Through undertaking this deeper research, it's usually possible to begin to trace the rights history of the film and to see the most recent points at which it might have been licensed to distributors in other territories, assigned to an international sales agent, or included as part of a bigger library which has then been sold on.



Paying for film rights

Once you have identified the film's rights holder, you will need to negotiate a licence fee – how much should you pay?

The final amount depends on a combination of the scale of the licence being sought – the number of screenings and screening days, the size of your venue and your ticket prices – calculated alongside any existing conventions around the fee for the type of licence being requested.

For programmers, it's useful to use existing conventions as a starting point for negotiation and as a guideline for forecasting licence costs. In the UK, the conventional fee for a theatrical licence to screen a film in an independent cinema is 35% of the box office versus a minimum guarantee (MG) of around £100, whichever is greater (see 'Working with film distributors' for more information on terms).

So, if you start a negotiation of the fee with a rights holder who is not a regular UK film distributor, this should be your starting point. If the licence were for a small number of screenings in an independent cinema, you would expect to agree a fee close to the above. If the screening were planned for a much bigger venue, as a one-off 'event' and with much higher ticket prices, the rights holder would expect to apply a higher fee.

There exist a range of broadly accepted conventions for UK theatrical licence fees and for the booking of pre-release previews from UK distributors. There is a wider range of conventions at work in the international festival sector, depending on factors including whether the licence is being offered by the producer, through an international sales agent or a local distributor, so festival programmers are likely to enter into many different licence fee arrangements with rights holders or their representatives (fees will usually be higher than those charged by a local distributor).

Film formats and materials

At the same time as discussing the licence to show the film, you will need to make sure that you can access a screening copy in a format that can be shown by your cinema or festival. Liaise closely with your cinema's technician on what range of formats your venue is able to show and in drafting a schedule for the receiving, preparing and presenting of films.

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In 2021, most screenings in cinemas and festivals will be presented in the industry standard digital cinema format, Digital Cinema Package (DCP). DCPs consist of a series of files that can either be sent to cinemas electronically or delivered on a portable hard drive. There are many other digital formats that cinemas and festivals have the capacity to screen; and many UK cinemas also retain analogue film projection systems in various film gauges and video formats.

For more information on the presentation of different print and digital film formats, read our *Introductory Guide to Film Projection*.

When requesting a screening copy of a film, your starting point should always be to find the highest quality format available for their screening. If a film is not available in this optimal format, then you can consider screening other feasible formats, mindful that each alternative will be a compromise that requires some assessment of screening quality versus the value of including the film in your programme. All seasoned film programmers will have had the experience of securing a licence to a film, but then being unable to locate a suitable screening copy.

For newer titles from UK distributors, the booking of the screening material is part of the same overall transaction as the booking of the film, and the DCP should automatically be supplied by the distributor ahead of your screening date (your cinema may need to set-up a contract with a film courier for the regular delivery of films).

For both older titles and newer films in international circulation for festivals, it's often the case that the source of the materials is different from that of the licence, and so a separate arrangement and fee agreement must be made for their 'loan'. For example, in the case of many classic world cinema titles, a programmer may have to obtain the screening licence from a rights holder in one territory and the best materials from a film archive or distributor in another. This can also happen in a UK context, where a commercial distributor may grant you a licence, but the best (or only) print is held by the BFI.

Alongside the availability of the best possible presentation format, you should also consider the accessibility of the film. Most high-profile commercial film releases on DCP now include closed caption files for hearing impaired audiences and audio description files for visually impaired audiences. With both digital and film prints of foreign language films, programmers should also check that the booked screening materials include English subtitles.

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After agreeing the use of screening materials, you should liaise with your technical team on the practicalities of receiving and preparing the materials for screening. For films on DCP, when does the material need to arrive by to ensure there is time to ingest it on to your cinema server? Is there sufficient capacity on your server to retain the film if it is due to arrive long before the screening date? With prints, consider that the projectionist will need to check and prepare the print for screening, and its likely quality (is there a recent condition report?). If you're planning a more complex programme involving material in multiple formats, discuss the feasibility of switching formats during the programme with technicians in detail beforehand. With all film formats, consider the costs, timings and practicalities of their transport and return.

In conclusion, it's always worth remembering that it's not possible to show every film. Even in the most well-resourced national cinematheque, or following the most meticulous research, there will be occasions in a programmer's life when a programme will end up feeling compromised, or a retrospective incomplete, because there no longer exist copies of or available rights for a key film.

In fact, at any given time, the range of films available to programmers for theatrical exhibition in a particular territory is always a small proportion of the wider set of films made, with availability dependent on distribution history, your ability to identify the rights holder, the existence of suitable screening materials and so on. It's important to remember that you can only work with what's available, and that it's generally only the best resourced cinematheques worldwide that can consistently present 'complete' programmes in the best available versions and formats for each film.

A strong programme might nevertheless incorporate some of these aspects into its presentation, describing the programme research in contextual notes accompanying the films so the process is visible to the audience.

In this context, the research of rights and acquisition of materials together form the first a stage of the programming process – of selection, contextualisation and interpretation, aiming always to show audiences films that can be screened in their best possible light.





The vast majority of current theatrical rights for films in the UK are held by film distributors. In order to screen any given film, exhibitors must make an agreement to license it with its distributor before showing it to the public.

When planning a new release, distributors will pick a specific release date, decide on hire terms, outline the release's intended size and scale and devise a marketing campaign to support it. Distributors are responsible for delivery of all filmed content and marketing materials to exhibitors.

In the UK, film distributors can broadly be broken down into three main groups:

- > US studios (e.g., Disney, Universal, Warner Bros., Paramount, Sony)
- > International independents (e.g., Lionsgate, Studiocanal, eOne)
- > UK independents (e.g., New Wave, Curzon Artificial Eye, Verve Pictures, Dogwoof)

Once you have identified a film you want to programme and have established which distributor holds the theatrical rights for that title, you should contact its sales team to secure a booking; in effect, a licence to screen the film.

Sounds simple, right?!

On the face of it, booking a film is a fairly straightforward process and is usually carried out over email. However, there are many variables to consider which may dictate when you can book a particular film and for how long. This may not be the most glamorous section of this guide, but it's essential to have a firm grip on the following factors, especially if you are programming from the current release schedule.

On-date or off-date?

The first thing you'll need to decide when programming a new release is whether you want to play it on- or off-date. Simply put, an on-date booking starts on the theatrical release date, and an off-date booking is any time after the first seven days.



The film week runs from Friday to Thursday, so if you are looking to play a film on-date, it is standard practice to have to screen for either seven or 14 consecutive days from the first Friday.

If you want to book a film off-date, particularly after weeks one and two, there will almost always be more flexibility applied to the number of days required to secure a booking.

On top of this, you must negotiate how many times per day the film is screened. Again, the closer to release you want to book a film will usually have a direct correlation to how many times per day you must agree to screen it, with distributors showing more flexibility further away from the release date.

Common distributor requirements:

- > All shows All the screening slots in one screen must be given to the film you are booking, and no other films can play in that screen during the agreed booking period. This is a standard agreement for wide/saturation release studio films when screened on-date.
- > Split shows This term is used quite loosely, but generally means a film's screenings may be 'split' with those of another film in one screen. Typically, each film is given two screenings per day, though this may vary depending on how many slots are available in your cinema. This is a more commonly used convention for a smaller studio or an independent release on-date.
- > Single shows and one-off screenings Some distributors will offer a lot more flexibility on how you screen their films, even in the first week of release. This may range from a single screening each day through to one-off screenings. This is most common on specialist releases, such as event cinema.

As well as looking at the number of screenings/days for bookings, distributors place different value on different screening times based on when they are likely to be most lucrative. For example, in general a main evening slot is seen as more valuable than an early evening slot, and a weekend slot more valuable than a midweek one. Performance doesn't always play out in this way of course, and it's down to the programmer to find the best shows for the right films and negotiate with distributors. For more info, see 'Scheduling', page 34.



It's important to not only understand these terms and practices, but also what distributors' expectations are on particular films before you begin the booking process. This will enable you to structure your programme without having to make too many changes and will also aid your relationships with distributors.

Terms

When making a film booking, one of the main points of negotiation with the distributor is the agreement of payment terms for the film hire. The most common deal is a percentage split of the box office revenue between exhibitor and distributor

The percentage film hire figure can be anywhere between 25% and 60% of your box office proceeds (after deducting VAT from the ticket sales). It typically won't be lower than 35% for a new release and can often be much higher. In addition, each distributor has a minimum guarantee (MG), which you will pay if the agreed percentage of your box office revenue doesn't exceed it.

For example, if a cinema only sells five tickets across a film's run, they will still have to pay the MG to the distributor, which is usually around £100 but can be higher. This is something to keep in mind when planning your programmes; if you want to hold a high number of single screenings, you can easily end up paying lots of MGs if you aren't attracting big enough audiences.

Bear in mind that terms are usually applied to each booking contained within a cinema week – from Friday to Thursday – and so when looking at extended bookings, wherein a film plays in a cinema for several weeks, terms may change after the first week of screenings.

In the age of digital cinema, it's also worth noting that most distributors will only apply the MG to the first booking, for which the distributor must supply the screening materials. If the cinema chooses to bring back the film and programme further screenings, there will be no MG applied to subsequent bookings if the cinema has retained the film files on their server and redelivery is not required. For cinemas that have a more developed repertory style of programming, this is one of the benefits of digital cinema.



Distributors concentrate most of their publicity and advertising (P&A) spend on the opening week of a film, as that is when it will likely take the lion's share of its box office revenue. Due to this, terms are highest for on-date bookings. For a big studio release, you can expect to be paying back up to 60% of box office revenue for weeks one and two, with terms usually declining by 5% for each subsequent week.

You can sometimes negotiate other deals, including a one-off payment (a 'flat fee' or 'screening fee') which is often offered for private hire screenings or when booking films direct from sales agents.

There remain some UK independent cinemas that operate with 'house' terms – which means that for that cinema, there is a fixed agreement for film hire which applies to all films that show there. This is usually a progressive set of terms based around a break figure, where the cinema pays an agreed percentage on box office revenue up to the break; then a different, much higher percentage on box office above it. The terms are agreed in this way to incentivise the cinema and the distributor to work in partnership to maximise box office revenues.

Working with house terms can offer programmers some opportunity to take risks with their film choices, given that the hire cost for an unsuccessful film is potentially lower than for a cinema that operates on standardised terms (as described above). It provides a partial financial safety net. However, it's worth bearing in mind that for a programmer, making a seven- or 14-day commitment to what turns out to be a poorly attended film will feel the same no matter what terms have been agreed.

Relationships

A key and often overlooked element in film programming is the relationship between exhibitor and distributor. It's a symbiotic relationship as both parties have something that is of benefit to the other; the distributor has the content and the exhibitor the means to screen it. It's also worth remembering that the distributor and the exhibitor share the box office, and so have a mutual interest in making a success of each screening. The various stipulations around terms and screening requirements described above make it prudent for programmers to have strong working relationships with distributors to ensure favourable negotiations and access to previews or talent.



Get to know the sales team at as many distributors as possible. Be friendly and responsive, ensure you report box office returns for their films on time. It will make your job a lot easier, especially when dealing with holdovers!

Holdovers

Another important area of negotiation between distributors and exhibitors is whether a film will be 'held over' to the following film week or not.

After the weekend, cinemas review their weekend takings to see how the films they screened have performed for them, using the national average box office figure – how much money a film has taken over the weekend in the UK divided by how many screens it played on – as a benchmark.

If a film is performing well, especially within a national context, it's an easy decision to hold it over, and the only thing to negotiate will be the number of daily screenings it receives that week and the terms.

Likewise, if a film has performed very poorly, there isn't much of a decision to make. The real negotiations begin when performance is somewhere in between.

Distributors will always want you to play their film for as long as possible (that's their job after all!) so any information you can provide as to why you can't hold it over will help you negotiate. For example, you may be starting to screen other films that week or want to hold over titles that are performing better than theirs. Often a compromise can be reached (for example, fewer days or screenings). Of course, there is no obligation for you to keep a film playing longer than indicated in the original agreement, but it's worth being strategic with holdovers if the distributor has another film you might want to secure further down the line...

The conversation about holding over films takes place every Monday morning following the weekend box office results – so make sure you have your coffee and put everything else on the backburner!



Theatrical window

The theatrical window is a term used by the industry to describe the period of time that a film is available to watch exclusively in cinemas before it is then made available to the public on home entertainment formats. In the UK this window is 16 weeks long and has been in place for decades.

However, the rise of streaming and Video on Demand (VoD) services, coupled with consumer demands, has led to distributors re-examining the traditional theatrical model, resulting in many starting to shorten the length of theatrical exclusivity. This is known as 'breaking the window'.

Major cinema chains have always been opposed to breaking the window in any form, fearing it will lead to reduced cinema admissions, and in response the studios have always respected the full 16-week window. However, the emergence of streaming platforms such as Netflix has begun a move towards a shorter window, as they look to move their own films onto their platform after only a few weeks of theatrical screenings in cinemas.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this shift, as, with cinemas forced to close, distributors have sought other solutions for their output. We've recently seen examples of major studios releasing their films theatrically and on VoD at the same time (known as 'day and date release') or even bypassing theatrical release altogether. The major cinema chains have reluctantly accepted this shift as necessary in the current climate, and it is hard to see a way back to the 16-week window even post-COVID.

Many independent exhibitors accepted these changes at a much earlier stage and have been working with distributors to programme films with reduced windows for years. As cinema admissions remained at a high level, there appeared to be little evidence that the emergence of streaming and VoD was having a detrimental impact on cinema attendance, at least in the independent sector.

For programmers, working with distributors in this way offers even greater choice and access for audiences, and whilst it's impossible to say exactly what will happen over the next year, it's expected that a new, shorter theatrical window will become the industry standard, with theatrical and VoD finding a way to co-exist.

In general, we don't see a shorter theatrical window as a huge threat to cinemas so long as some exclusivity is on offer and the films are accessible to smaller cinemas earlier than has typically been the case in the past.





Working in exhibition and types of programming

Different programmes for different cinemas

Every independent cinema is different and unique. Each has its own individual history, is housed within its own unique building, caters to its own unique catchment area, and has a different story to tell about how it was established and the funding models that brought it to life and keep it going.

Therefore, to be successful, every cinema programme needs to be bespoke. Though cinemas might share some of the same staples – such as showing a mix of the latest blockbusters, arthouse and foreign-language films, archive content and artists' moving image work – the breakdown of how many of each of these types of films make it into your programme will differ greatly between cinemas, as well as differences in which specific titles cinemas choose to show. While some titles can be considered to have a universal appeal, other selections will take more discernment. The aim of a well-functioning programme should be to both satisfy existing audiences while also identifying and drawing in new ones.

Each tailor-made programme must cater to the needs of individual cinemas and their audiences, so it's important to regularly monitor what's working well and what might need changing in order to meet your cinema's needs and goals. Venues should have a firm sense of what people locally will respond to.

Trial and error is part of the process of figuring out what works well at any venue, especially if your cinema is newer and doesn't have much insight into its audiences yet. You can try out different types of films, programming titles you're less certain about alongside ones you have more faith in in order to reduce risk.

Audience profiles and development

While catering to existing audiences is important, venues should also seek to thrive and expand by developing audiences further and bringing new people into the building. Being nimble and adaptable have always been important skills in maintaining a sustainable cinema business, but during the pandemic, their importance has been made especially clear.



If you have developed (or are in the process of developing) audiences for cinema outside of the main blockbuster releases, your venue will still be able to find success when bigger linchpin releases move or drop out of the release calendar. While we've seen this happen to its most dramatic extent during the pandemic, there will always be periods where blockbuster and awards-nominated titles will be scarce, so trying to attract a large number and variety of different audiences is always a sensible way to future-proof the success of your venue.

It's important to be realistic about the fact that this will not happen overnight and is something that takes steady and consistent work. But every incremental gain made in this area is a huge win; and can be achieved alongside building or retaining the reputation of your venue as a space of high quality, trusted programming.

Cultural aims

Alongside thinking about the sustainability of your venue, it's also important to consider its cultural aims with regard to providing audiences with access to world cinema, documentary, archive film and artists' moving image work from as wide a variety of voices as possible. Beyond being a business, independent cinemas should be spaces of cultural learning, exploration and growth, offering audiences memorable and thought-provoking experiences which challenge and broaden their perspectives.

Commercial success is of course a critical part of running a business, but the cultural profile of the programme is an equally important measure and the two don't have to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, the most successful and resilient independent cinemas are those that have achieved a level of commercial success through the strength and breadth of their programming. Many cinemas have seen great financial success with a broad range of independent and arthouse titles, with box office results that sometimes far exceed how those films perform nationally. To keep an audience engaged, interested, and invested in your venue, your offering needs to be distinct from what they can find in other cinemas (such as multiplexes). This is where offering a wider range of film titles, and really distinguishing your venue via its programme, will work to your benefit.

As part of the ICO's commitment to anti-racism and inclusion, we encourage cinemas to show films which speak to all their audiences, including those created by and featuring Black, Asian and ethnically diverse people, and those created by and featuring disabled talent – not just as part of separate strands or seasons but within your regular programming. This inclusion gives voice to histories, identities, lives and stories which might otherwise be buried under the slew of American and British cinema which often does not adequately represent everyone's experiences.

By prioritising the selection of a diverse and inclusive range of films, a programmer will contribute to making audiences feel included and that they are welcome at your venue. However, it's important to stress that films made by and starring Black, Asian and ethnically diverse people are not only of interest to audiences from those communities and that their appeal extends far beyond those limits. While it is incredibly important for all audiences to see themselves represented on screen, it is also important for cinemas to engage in programming that simply routinely includes films and stories about everyone, for everyone. As cultural organisations, independent cinemas can play a key role in championing voices that have traditionally been undervalued in film and the film exhibition sector specifically.

This includes but is not limited to ensuring that your cinema, and its film culture more generally, both welcomes and caters to audiences from a range of social classes, those with disabilities, different genders, and sexualities.

For more on supporting specific audiences for films, read the *ICO's How to Develop Audiences for Independent Cinemas guide*. Our wider *Advice & Support* section also includes guides on how to best support *visually impaired*, *Deaf* and *disabled* audiences specifically. You can also read the ICO's response to Black Lives Matter and our Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Action Plan on our website.

Fixed programmes vs holdovers

Generally, there are two different ways to organise the structure and booking cycle of your programme: via a fixed or 'calendar' programme or by utilising holdovers.

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INDEPENDENT CINEMAS

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ADVICE & SUPPORT

LINK

DEVELOPING VISUALLY IMPAIRED AUDIENCES TOOLKIT

LINK

DEVELOPING DEAF AUDIENCES FOR FILM

LINK

HOW DO I MAKE MY CINEMA
INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE?

LINK

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

A fixed programme is one that is chosen and booked in advance, with film titles and screenings locked to specific dates and screening times. Planning a fixed programme usually entails looking at the upcoming *UK Release Calendar* and deciding which films you'd like to bring into your programme over a given period. Some cinemas create fixed programmes on a monthly basis, while others with longer lead times (often due to factors such as deadlines for their print brochure) try to book two or three months' worth of films at a time.

We recommend booking fixed programmes as close to films' release dates as possible as their marketing and PR campaigns will already be in motion. Booking a month ahead of release is a good rule of thumb. Some distributors may not have decided on rental terms for a film further in advance, and some may not even be able to take formal bookings until closer to date. For cinemas booking in advance, there are also advantages to be gained from timing the announcement of your programme with the UK release of key titles, where your cinema will benefit from some of the national marketing deployed by distributors to support their release.

Both first- and second-run cinemas can use fixed programmes. A first-run cinema is one that will try to play a film either on its release date or as close to it as possible. Second-run cinemas – which tend to re-showcase films no longer available in first-run cinemas – generally show films later, from around weeks three and four of release onwards. Of course, when building your programme, you don't need to show only new release titles; you can and should show a variety of films, including re-issues (rereleases of older/repertory titles), archive film and/or repertory cinema, depending on the needs of your audience.

The benefits of a fixed programme are that you can prepare early and begin marketing your programme with a longer lead-time, enabling your audiences to book in advance. The downside is that it doesn't allow your cinema to be responsive to changes in the release schedule or to critical reactions to certain films. If a new title appears on the release calendar after you've booked your programme, you'll have to wait to screen it until further down the line or forego it altogether.

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UK RELEASE CALENDAR

ONLINE GUIDE

A GUIDE TO FILM PROGRAMMING

It also means more educated guesswork in terms of what titles you think will work for you, as they will be booked in prior to release. If you have booked a film in for 14 days, you won't be able to take it out, even if it's not working as expected. With early booking, you lose the benefit of being able to read reviews or see how successful a film is in terms of box office on release.

While it's helpful to look at past UK box office figures of titles like the one you're weighing up programming (on websites such as *Box Office Mojo*), as well as reviewing your own figures for comparable titles you've screened before, there are always a handful of films which are harder to predict the success of and may take you by surprise.

Cinemas that operate with holdovers – limited to first-run cinemas only – have the capacity to be more flexible and reactive, helping them avoid some of the downsides of fixed programmes. While these cinemas can and do still book some of their programme in advance, they're able to leave space each week to assess what is and isn't working, and what new titles they might want to bring in at short notice.

If the distributor agrees to a film coming off due to its underperformance, cinemas can look at what has worked well nationally over the weekend and bring in a new title from that coming Friday. It might be a title they were unsure about booking upfront, but that has taken them by surprise in terms of box office takings and/or unexpectedly good reviews. In this way, holdovers can be a helpful tool in really focusing on what is connecting (or not) with your audience. (For more detail on holdovers, see page 15)

As many exhibitors will be aware, during the pandemic, lots of films have been moved back in the release calendar, resulting in lengthy periods of relative scarcity, with few films to choose from to build upcoming programmes. During this time, day and date titles (those released simultaneously in cinemas and on streaming platforms), re-issues, and bringing back titles that were previously popular have been programming lifelines for many venues.

While the release calendar is not usually this volatile, there will always be surprises and late changes, and cinemas that already work more flexibly will find responding to them easier. Alongside changes to programming, many cinemas in this period have tested pivoting from their traditional print brochure to online, encouraging audiences to browse their websites to see what will be playing closer to time, and have found it possible to change their audience's habits too.

LINE

BOX OFFICE MOJO



In general, we see these shifts as a positive and believe they should be given more thought post-pandemic. This doesn't mean that you should move to a holdover system if you're a first-run cinema, just that you'll be able to best serve your audience with more flexibility. While programming during COVID-19 has proved tricky and often frustrating, it has in most cases brought to the fore underlying issues rather than creating brand new ones.

Scheduling

Once you've chosen and booked in your programme and know the number of films you'll be working with over a given period, as well as how often you'll need to show them, you can begin to look at scheduling.

Scheduling is a crucial part of programming. It's one of the aspects that cinemas have a high degree of control over and can therefore flex according to need. For all cinemas, there will be times when they need to alter their schedule, when either adding or reducing screenings can be effective in fulfilling an audience development aim.

The distributor will let a cinema know the screening requirements for any film they license to them, i.e., how many screenings the cinema must hold of that title, either on each day or across the whole booking. If you're screening the film on or close to release, it's likely you'll have to play it at least once a day for a minimum of seven days. If you're screening a film on release, it is not unusual to have to play it for 'all shows' for 14 days, especially if it's a blockbuster (all shows means that, in one screen, the film will play in all screening slots available that day).

How many shows is 'all shows' for your individual cinema depends on your opening hours – for some it's two, for others it's three or four. For one-screen cinemas, it's often preferable to bring a film in after its show requirements have been reduced, i.e., later in its release cycle, so you can show a variety of titles instead of just one.

If your cinema is a multi-screen, you can also divide the shows of certain titles between different screens. This might mean that you're able to give preferable screening times to specific films – such as prime evening slots – than you'd be able to offer if you restricted them to one particular screen but had other titles to show in there too.



After the first two to three weeks of release, show requirements are usually relaxed, perhaps enabling you to screen certain titles only once a day or to reduce a booking down from seven days to only a few (or even one). When screening a title once a day early on in a film's release, it's not uncommon for a distributor to specify which slot they'd like it to play in, i.e., a matinee or evening screening. Different distributors allow more flexibility at different points of release.

As long as you are meeting the distributor's requirements, you can place the films where you like in terms of what gets a morning, matinee, early or late evening show, depending on both the type of film and your audience, and when you think it will best connect. For example, a horror film which may be aimed at a younger audience could work better in an evening slot, while a costume drama whose primary audience is the over 50s might work better as a matinee.

While it's up to programmers where they decide to place certain types of films within their schedule, this should be given a lot of thought – and later reflection – with regards to how successful different kinds of films have been in different slots. For example, many cinemas will reserve their weekend matinee slots for family films and find that this works well in terms of attendance. Some may choose to programme commercial films in their main weekend evening slots, while others may find success programming arthouse films and/or documentaries on a designated weekday slot. There is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to how you choose to schedule your programme, and a degree of experimentation and trial and error may be helpful for you. However, some choices (such as playing kids' films on weekend afternoons, when they're not at school) should work across the board.

When looking at the different show times available in your venue, make sure you consider each individual slot rather than just filling your grid without thought. Use your knowledge of your cinema and its audience to navigate your schedule. Perhaps you see a specific audience demographic in your building on particular weekdays of the week – this could be a good guide as to when to play the titles they may be most interested in viewing. If you find there are weaker slots in your schedule that aren't well-attended, work to develop them. For example, a Monday matinee slot could be developed as an education slot, which could cover a variety of topics such as history and social justice, explore specific themes, and make use of different types of films, such as archive footage.



It's also important to think about how programmers can flex the schedule to maximise a wide range of audiences as well as box office potential. Consider adding and removing shows from your regular schedule when you think it might benefit your venue. For example, if a film is being released that you feel confident will do very well at your cinema, you could add in a morning or late-night slot to give it further exposure. If there is exceptional anticipation around a certain film, and you've had lots of enquiries about it, consider using the opportunity to maximise the film's potential to make an impact at your venue.

Conversely, don't feel you have to use a slot just because it's there. If you don't have the right film to fill it with, it may end up costing you more to use it for a screening (if staffing costs outweigh your ticket sales, for example) than to not. Choosing to leave a film out of your programme that you're not confident about allows your cinema to focus marketing resources on titles that are more likely to resonate with your audience.

We have seen a lot of this kind of decision-making taking place throughout the pandemic, as cinemas are not only working with a reduced release schedule and less content, but also with reduced capacities in venues due to social distancing measures. In response, many programmers have taken greater care in selecting titles they think will work for them and have put aside slots, or even full days, that aren't serving them at present.





What is archive film?

While repertory film generally refers to classic or notable older fiction features, the term 'archive film' can encompass fiction features, shorts, silent film, non-fiction local and/or social history films, from documentary television news pieces to home movies.

Much of the advice offered in this section applies to all these types of film – whether re-issues from distributors or collections in regional and national film archives – though some of it is specific to social history shorts in particular.

Why programme archive film?

- > Screening films from the past can capture the imagination, whisking people back to a bygone era and tapping into the appeal of reconnecting with the norms, fashions and quirks of the past.
- > As well as nostalgia, there is tremendous sociocultural and educational value in offering audiences the chance to review and reassess both familiar and unfamiliar histories on screen.
- > Programming archive film can help differentiate your venue or festival from mainstream cinemas, as a place to experience something unique and largely unseen.
- > Screening social and/or local history film in particular can position a cinema as a community venue making a valuable contribution to social cohesion. Working with a national or regional film archive can help expand your networks and potentially open up further opportunities for projects and funding.
- > Programming archive film also gives you the opportunity to experiment with screening from various formats by presenting analogue film. This can also be used as a marketing tool to make the screening feel like a rare experience for your audience and enables the format to become part of the film's presentation.

Sourcing archive films and practical considerations

In the UK, there are a number of *regional and local screen archives* with which programmers can work to devise programmes of specific interest to local audiences. These public sector archives – often attached to academic institutions, libraries or museums – collect and preserve mostly non-fiction film, including regional television content, amateur films, home movies, industrial films and early cinema. In order to research a programme, it's now generally possible to see a good part of these collections on the relevant archive websites, though always with the caveat that not everything held in a particular archival collection can be used for a public screening – the fundamental rules of obtaining rights clearances and suitable screening copies pertain to archive material as with any other film.

The UK's largest film archive, the BFI National Archive contains a vast array of both fiction and non-fiction film and television content, ranging from commercial feature films to home movies and films from private collections. Access to these collections for public screening is limited to a small number of cinemas that can demonstrate a high level of technical expertise to ensure the correct handling of archival prints – the BFI holds a list of titles with 'viewing prints' which can be screened in cinemas – and to programmers who are able to work in partnership with the BFI to develop specific programming enabling the content to be shown to a broader range of audiences (as described below).

Finally, there are several commercial film distributors who have over the years acquired the theatrical screening rights and materials for various libraries of repertory feature films. The main company operating in this part of the market is Park Circus, which manages the theatrical rights for a large number of commercial film libraries. In recent years, it's true to say that most commercial film distributors have acquired theatrical rights in older titles, as the UK audience appetite for revisiting 'classic' films of all genres has been developed.

An easy way of programming archive film is to book a single title re-issue on national release or a pre-packaged specialist programme from an organisation such as the BFI, the ICO, Park Circus or your regional film archive. LIN

SCREEN ARCHIVE

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BFI NATIONAL ARCHIVE

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ICO DISTRIBUTION

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PARK CIRCUS

- > In some cases, clearing the rights to screen a specific film is straightforward if the archive or distributor has already ensured it is available for screening. However, be aware that archives do not usually own the rights to the films in their collection, so the licence to screen a film must often be cleared elsewhere. Identifying, locating and securing clearances with rights holders can prove tricky if rights have been passed between film companies acquiring each other's catalogues or between descendants of the filmmaker. In some cases, the rights holder cannot be identified at all. The film may also feature music or images under copyright requiring separate clearance. Talk to the archive in the first instance about rights and what is available to screen and accept that unfortunately, you may not always be able to show your first choice of film.
- > Film festivals often include archive titles as part of their programme. This includes new restorations as well as titles the festival wishes to spotlight. Therefore, festivals will often list the booking details for each title, and which archives they have partnered with to present their screening. There are also festivals which will solely specialise in showing archive film, such as *Il Cinema Ritrovato*, which screens new restorations from archives around the world. Similarly, cinemas will often list the name of the archives which have supported and provided materials for their screening. Looking at existing archive programmes at cinemas and festivals is an inspiring way to discover films as well an indication of what may be available to book for your own programme.
- > Alternatively, if you have a theme in mind perhaps a special event for your festival or a local history night at your cinema you may choose to research your own programme. Screening local archive film is highly recommended, as community audiences are always attracted to films with local interest. This can be very rewarding, but don't underestimate the time involved. You could begin by getting in touch with the BFI National Film Archive or your regional film archive. Much of the BFI's archive content is available for free viewing online via *BFI Player* or their YouTube channel, and usually lists which archive each film is from. Search Your Film Archive is a combined online catalogue, hosted on regional film archives, which allows the public to search across 11 national and regional public sector film archives' collections and watch clips of some of the films. It can be accessed via any of the participating film archives. You can also research archive films in person at BFI Mediatheques around the UK.

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IL CINEMA RITROVATO

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BFI PLAYE

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YOUTUBE CHANNE

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YOUR FILM ARCHIVE

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BFI MEDIATHEQUES

- In the UK, archives like the June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive, the Cambridge South Asian Archive and the Black Cultural Archive hold valuable films that speak to the history of specific communities.
- > There is also the potential to seek material further afield from international film archives and organisations, which can result in curated programming that offers audiences a rare and exciting viewing opportunity. In terms of repertory cinema, The Film Foundation's World Cinema Project is doing incredible work restoring important, hitherto neglected features from around the world for exhibition by a global audience.
- > Other UK sources of archive film include museums, libraries, colleges, community groups and private collections, although they are not all set up to cater for screening requests. For further guidance on screening archive film, see our *Archive Programming guide*.
- > The costs involved in screening an archive film can vary depending on the type of screening, the film format, and rights context. You may be charged a set fee (from £25 for DVD to around £150 for print or DCP), a box office percentage or minimum guarantee, or a few hundred pounds for a bespoke programme curated especially for you by archive staff.
- > Some archive films will be available for screening on DVD, DCP or 35mm. While the BFI's *Unlocking Film Heritage Digitisation Fund* has done a lot of work around digitising archive material in order to make it more accessible to the public, many films are still not yet available in a screenable condition or format, meaning that unfortunately, the titles you want won't always be available for public viewing. If there is a screening copy available, check what format it's on, as some films that have not been digitised may require special equipment such as a 16mm or a twin projector in order to screen. If it's a fragile celluloid print, the archive may also have specifications about how your projectionist or technician handles the film to ensure it remains in its current condition.

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CAMBRIDGE SOUTH ASIAN ARCHIVE

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BLACK CHITHDAL ADCHIVE

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INTERNATIONAL FILM ARCHIVE

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WORLD CINEMA PROJECT

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ARCHIVE PROGRAMMING GUIDE

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HERITAGE DIGITISATION FUND

Looking beyond the canon

Programming archive film is also an exciting opportunity to showcase work by filmmakers who are overlooked or not frequently celebrated. There could be various reasons why certain films haven't been widely seen or discussed, such as the film not having been available due to rights issues as well as potential issues with existing screening materials. It's also possible that such films may have been created by, or focused on, those from marginalised and/or under-represented groups which led to their unfair exclusion from more mainstream discussions around cinema history and the canon. Therefore, programming archive film can be an important way to challenge mainstream notions of what films and stories are deemed historically important, and re-highlight films and creative teams that may have fallen through the cracks.

Programming archive film can be a beneficial tool in creating a more inclusive programme which will appeal to a broader audience; especially valuable during periods when the upcoming new release calendar does not offer you a diverse range of films to choose from.

It's true that it can feel like more of a risk financially to include lesser-known work in your programme, especially if easily screenable materials are not available in the first instance. Therefore, it may be more financially viable to present the film as part of an event – for which you may be able to charge a higher ticket price if the offer is appealing enough – or to partner with a local organisation who will be able to help draw in a broader audience.

For inspiration, read independent film curator Herb Shellenberger's ICO blog post, *Tips for supercharging and diversifying your archive film programming*.



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DIVERSIFYING ARCHIVE FILM



Programming tips

Programming an archive screening or strand can be a great opportunity to demonstrate your creativity and showmanship.

Consider:

- > Inviting a special guest such as a local historian to introduce your screening or to provide a running commentary to put the material into context particularly if the films are silent.
- > Encouraging the audience to participate in the commentary, by identifying people or locations that they recognise.
- > Engaging audiences by bringing in guests for a panel discussion and Q&A.
- > Inviting live musicians to accompany silent film (do consider the ethical implications of choosing an appropriate soundtrack).
- > Providing food before or after your screening, and other ways to make the event more immersive e.g., asking people to dress in period costume.
- > Is your screening a one-off event or part of a regular archive programme strand? If the latter, consider branding it in a particular way to create appeal and encourage audiences to return. A regular slot on a certain day and/or time will also help so audiences know when these screenings run and can plan to attend.
- > Focusing on showcasing a particular type of film or subject of interest so there's a common strand to help define and contextualise your programme. This could also be complemented and/or enhanced via programming choices in other strands of your offering, giving your programming a real sense of character.



Repertory programming

Repertory programming is where a cinema regularly features a particular set of films in its programme, where individual films are part of a 'repertory' and repeatedly shown in the cinema on a regular and usually quite frequent basis. In the UK, North America and in major European cities, a number of notable repertory cinemas operated between the 1960s and 1990s, when this style of programming was very much presented as a cultural alternative or counterpoint to the first-run, new release programming found in most commercial cinemas.

In London, the most well-known repertory cinemas are perhaps the Prince Charles, which continues to feature a broad range of classic, cult titles and special events that completely distinguish its programme from those of its commercial neighbours in Leicester Square; the Electric Cinema in Portobello Road which closed as a repertory cinema in the 1980s; and the Scala in Kings Cross, which closed its doors in the late 1990s but whose repertory programming spirit lives on in the annual Scalarama project that runs across the UK.

When these cinemas were thriving, there was audience demand for a more interpreted film programme than commercial cinemas offered; especially one which placed films in various cultural, social and political contexts and re-presented them for repeat viewing. It was through this style of programming that certain films developed a 'cult' following or became elevated into the 'canon', through repeated presentation and the consequent development of a contextual discourse. This depth of contextualisation and the repeated featuring of individual films are the main features of repertory programming.

At the time, repertory programming thrived because it offered audiences access to films that were otherwise rarely available – seldom shown on TV, often hard to find on home entertainment formats and certainly not shown in conventional cinemas. Indeed, repertory cinemas often showed films that couldn't legally be shown in conventional cinemas, and might have had access to the only available print materials of a particular film.



It's probably true to say that all of the UK's film theatres incorporated, to a greater or lesser degree, strong aspects of repertory programming until the 1990s. Therefore, film theatre programmers working until this point were generally trained as repertory programmers, looking to position old and new films in deeper historical contexts and constantly seeking to re-present often screened films.

Repertory cinemas declined in the early part of this century, as the number of films released in the UK began to increase markedly. Included in this growth was a large number of re-issues; as independent cinemas increasingly focused on new releases; and as the home entertainment market began to better serve the cinephile audience, reissuing the widest possible range of historical film, in technically better formats and often with the filmmakers' involvement.

In recent years, repertory programming has made a comeback of sorts, but with a subtly different purpose. The Prince Charles continues to thrive, offering through its alternative programming and lower ticket prices, 35mm shows alongside digital cinema. Repertory programming can be found at established cultural cinemas like the ICA, where the Institute's own past programming and distributed films are often repeated; or at BFI Southbank, which often brings back thematic seasons or retrospectives on a much bigger cycle. Other new micro cinemas and film clubs have also emerged, with the purpose of re-presenting old films and reviving the big screen life of titles that have long since passed into a broader collective archive. Many of these smaller exhibitors set out to be non-canonical and can be recognised by their repertory of film interests rather than the repeat screening of particular films. In this way, they are able to offer a broader of range of films for many different audiences, as opposed to commercial cinemas which offer many different titles on many screens, but for a narrow range of audiences.

Repertory programming is also beginning to find its way back into the broader programming approach of many independent cinemas. No longer is it about rare films – as so much of film history is now accessible – so much as films that are rarely shown on a big screen. Satisfying a renewed audience interest in film 'curation', contemporary repertory programming is more of a negotiation between a cinema's audiences and its programmer and is less likely to be shaped by the programmer single-handedly.



During the pandemic, when there were fewer films released in the UK and many independent cinemas sought to engage more deeply with local audiences through bespoke programming, some of them effectively began to reintroduce repertory elements into their programming alongside their choice of new films. The repeat screenings of a small set of films across several programme periods, the development of 'house' films that become associated with a particular venue, the slow build of audiences across a longer time period for individual films through regular re-presentation – all of these tactics have helped some independent cinemas build an identity which is distinct from that of their competitors.

Repertory programming requires perhaps the greatest level of film-historical knowledge of any type of programming featured in this guide. Repertory programmers will also need to draw extensively on their knowledge of film material sourcing and clearing rights for theatrical screenings, as they may have to work with distributors, Blu-ray/DVD companies, film archives, filmmakers and production companies to source films.

Repertory programming also requires some programming space. It's unlikely to work to its best effect if a programmer just uses it fill off-peak slots in a schedule, as it is different to niche programming – audiences have to see the repertory as an integral part of the cinema's identity.

Repertory programmes can shift, and are often refreshed on a regular basis, so some titles may drift out of a cinema's rep selection as others are introduced to provide new contexts. Above all, repertory programmers need to develop an understanding of how this style of programming can help build cinema audiences and deepen their loyalty, and have both the opportunity and patience to work to establish their programming over a longer term.





Different shapes and forms

Film festivals come in all shapes and forms. A key part of the film exhibition sector, they offer programmers the opportunity to celebrate and showcase all types of films and to build a sense of community around their events. There are many kinds of festival in the film exhibition landscape, including international festivals such as Cannes, Toronto or London, festivals more closely aligned with the cities, towns or rural locations they are sited in (such as Borderlines Film Festival or Flatpack Film Festival) and festivals specialising in particular genres of cinema (such as Sci-Fi London, Leeds Young Film Festival, Annecy International Animated Film Festival, FrightFest).

Festival models are individual and diverse. Developed in line with their original aims and concept, they may also evolve over time as they establish their status and audience. Although audiences are an integral part of festivals, most of the big international events play to industry attendees as well the public. For example, Cannes Film Festival, the most well-known international film event, is only attended by film industry personnel since a significant component of the festival is the marketplace, where different industry players can meet to buy and sell upcoming films.

The BFI London Film Festival, established in 1957, was originally set up to showcase a roundup of the major international film festivals around the world, hence it is held towards the end of the year. As well as supporting and nourishing UK talent, the programme incorporates UK premieres of international titles, presenting new films from all over the world. Unlike other major international festivals, it does not offer a film industry marketplace, and therefore puts the emphasis on bringing new films to UK public audiences. However, over the years, it has increased its offer for industry members with a growing programme of screenings and panel discussions on various topics and trends that are key to film festivals and exhibition.

Some festivals emphasise a particular type of film programming, carving out a niche which has been previously overlooked. The International Film Festival Rotterdam has maintained a focus on independent and experimental filmmaking practices by presenting emerging talent as well as established auteurs. Since its beginnings in 1972, the festival has highlighted films from the Far East and developing countries, later launching the Hubert Bals Fund to support filmmakers from developing countries.



On the one hand, festivals function rather like a research and development division of film exhibition, 'testing' new films and filmmakers in front of audiences for the first time; and on the other hand, by offering audiences programmes that may not be feasible for cinemas to present in their venues year-round. In this way, film festivals supplement cinema programming and have become an increasingly important contributor to the more rounded film culture of new and historical film in the UK today.

Launching films

All festivals have their own set requirements when it comes to the premiere status of a film in their programme. International festivals such as Cannes and Venice Film Festival will only hold world premieres, thereby giving the festival exclusivity whilst helping dictate what films will continue on the festival circuit and potentially gain theatrical release. Aside from world premieres, there may be differences in premiere status among certain countries and regions. Other international festivals, including the Berlinale, offer a combination of both world premieres and films screening for the first time in the host country. International festivals are spread throughout the year in order to differentiate and showcase new work exclusive to their programme. In some cases, filmmakers, sales agents and distributors with an established relationship with a particular festival will only premiere new work at that event. Premiere status tends to apply to feature length films; however, some high-profile festivals may also ask for premiere status for titles included in their short film programme.

Most of the film sector focuses on international festivals when premiering new work; again, at events like Cannes, Venice and the Berlinale. Festival selection and screenings play a significant role in which films are picked up for distribution and made available to cinemas and smaller festivals to include in their programmes. In addition, festivals give programmers the opportunity to plan in advance by seeing what films receive awards, early critical praise and positive word of mouth.



An international film community

Although the presentation of new films is the key objective for festivals, they also offer a communal event experience, bringing audiences from all over the world to meet and watch films together. In addition, they play a key role as an alternative distribution channel for non-commercial films. Festivals are also a way for different parts of the film sector to meet; in particular, sales agents, filmmakers and distributors. The marketplace at international festivals is a key meeting place, a forum where films can be bought and sold by sales agents and distributors to ensure they are released in different territories around the world.

Approaches to festival programming

Many of the same underlying principles for programming cinemas apply to programming film festivals. A festival programmer starts with an understanding of the cultural aims of the festival – its publicly stated aims and/or more subtle factors such as the history of the event, its intended audiences, a widely held perception of the purpose of the programme – and brings these together with its key economic objectives (budgetary concerns; target box office, admissions, sponsorship) to create a programme which serves both. Where festival programming deviates from cinema programming is in the practicalities of delivery to audiences.

When booking films for a festival, you may find they don't yet have a UK distributor attached – if so, you will need to contact the sales agent or the filmmaker directly (you may be able to find the right contacts by reviewing recent festival programmes/catalogues which list film booking details). There is also a chance that a distributor will shortly be buying the rights from the sales agent; if so, the relevant contact details can rapidly change. Sales agents often quote high fees on their films and it is always worth negotiating to see if you can reach an agreement, perhaps one giving you the chance to screen other films from their catalogue too.

As well as showcasing new work, festivals are an important model for highlighting a specific area of film as well as carving out a particular focus that appeals to an existing audience. For example, there are festivals that focus on and celebrate different film genres, and festivals which present various types of cinema including documentary, artists' moving image and archive film.

In addition, there are festivals which also exhibit new films from specific countries around the world, which is an exciting way of presenting films that may not otherwise get UK distribution or find a UK audience outside of a festival setting. Furthermore, there are many festivals that exist to celebrate and highlight films that challenge the mainstream view of the sorts of films available and distributed in the UK.

From a cinema's viewpoint, partnering with or hosting a festival can be beneficial, as collaborating with different organisations can bring you expertise and perspective outside your current programme. Hosting or partnering can also be an invaluable way to connect with a festival's own audiences, giving you the chance to bring them into your venue and introduce them to the rest of your programme. Individual festival themes can also be beneficial to your audience development – many festivals explore issues of identity or contemporary politics, which can be a great way to highlight conversations your organisation wants to have with new and existing audiences.

Using the online space

Some cinemas programme their own in-house festivals, which can be an exciting way to present a group of films alongside your usual programme. Festivals allow cinemas to create unusual events as well as take risks with their programming, as the films screened will not need to be booked for an extended run. Furthermore, it is also an opportunity for first run cinemas to be creative and put together a programme of films which is not necessarily linked to the new release calendar.

During the pandemic, we have seen film festivals move online and present virtual programmes. Though this may revert after the COVID-19 period is over, there are some benefits to this model. While some sales agents and distributors may not allow their films to be presented online, there is still a wide choice of films available to programme in this way, and conversely these limitations can offer you an opportunity to be more creative by showcasing smaller titles.

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HOW FLATPACK TOOK THEIR
FESTIVAL ONLINE DURING THE
CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

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WATCH: VILNIUS FILM FESTIVAL

- THE CHALLENGE OF REALISING
A DIGITAL FESTIVAL DURING THE
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There are lots of ways you can continue to create the communal experience associated with festivals online. For example, you can schedule screenings at set times to ensure audiences are accessing films simultaneously. In addition, an important part of film festivals is inviting filmmakers and other talent to present their films, giving audiences further insight into the titles presented in the programme. An online event still allows you to schedule online Q&As and introductions, either live or pre-recorded – but, as the event are online, you won't have to fund their travel and accommodation, and you may have access to more high-profile talent, even if they live far from your festival location. Providing these elements is an invaluable way of reminding your audience of the communal aspect of the festival, even though they are watching from home. Online festivals are also an invaluable way of both appealing to and serving a broader audience, as you may attract new audience members who were previously unable to attend due to travel restrictions or accessibility needs. While film festivals operated online out of necessity during the pandemic, many of them plan to continue to offer at least some online element to audiences in the future due to these benefits, even as they return to holding most of their events in venues.







Working with other rights holders

Though most of the films in your programme will likely be booked through UK distributors, there may be times when you want to play titles without UK distribution. These might be UK-based films that are being self-released by the filmmakers, or international films, the rights of which are looked after by international sales agents.

As discussed throughout this guide, trying to broaden your programming offer and make it distinctive is always a worthwhile aim, and looking outside the regular release calendar can be fruitful for the programmer and engaging for audiences. There's a variety of reasons you may look to book films from alternative rights holders, whether it be to inject some life into your main programme, to develop a particular strand or season, or perhaps as part of a festival you're running at your venue.

When looking at what you might wish to play, reviewing recent festival line-ups can be very helpful in assessing what's actually available to screen. Festival websites will often list contact information for the rights holders too, making it easy to get in touch.

While screening films that have only been seen on the festival circuit and/or won't be screened widely in the UK can be an exciting offer for your audience, it's important to note that licensing films from international sales agents is usually more expensive than doing so from UK distributors. This is for a variety of reasons, including import costs and established conventions around festival fees. It's also common to be charged a flat fee rather than the box office takings split that most UK distributors offer. This doesn't mean that booking these titles should be avoided, rather that you should make your selections carefully and be mindful of how many of these titles you play, so your programme remains financially viable.

If licensing films directly from producers or filmmakers in the UK that don't have a distribution deal, it's usually fine to work on the same basis as you would with a distributor, via an agreed box office split of a film's takings. Even when working with a flat fee, this should be about the rate of a standard minimum guarantee; usually around £100-£150 depending on the nature of the screening (it's common for rights holders to ask for higher fees for both preview and Q&A screenings).

To further broaden your cultural, archive and artists' moving image offering, it's also worth looking at UK organisations whose films aren't part of the new release landscape, such as *Cinenova* and *LUX*. Cinenova is a volunteer-run charity preserving and distributing the work of feminist film and video makers; it currently distributes over 300 titles including artists' moving image, experimental film, narrative feature films, documentary and educational videos made from the 1910s to the early 2000s. LUX represents a significant collection of artists' film and video. The only organisation of its kind in the UK, it is also the largest distributor of such work in the whole of Europe.

Touring programmes

A touring programme is a package or collection of films made available to book and screen together. Sometimes cinemas can select which films from the offering they'd like to screen, other times – as is often the case with short film touring programmes – the material is edited together as one showable file.

Touring programmes can be organised and themed in many ways, such as by highlighting the work of one director or a group of directors, or by focusing on a particular genre, era, aesthetic, or social justice issue. There aren't really any limits when it comes to the lens through which you want to explore or re-examine film work.

Touring programmes can give you the opportunity to screen overlooked and underappreciated titles, as well as examining older cinema through a new critical lens or framework.

There are many advantages of booking films in touring programmes for cinemas. Firstly, as the films will likely be part of a wider, often national campaign, you will benefit from the wider awareness it generates in terms of marketing and PR. This awareness is heightened by the fact that these packages are usually only available for a short window, creating a national 'moment' or buzz around their availability. The organisers of the tour may also offer additional benefits such as film talent (e.g., director or cast member) or speakers to come to your venue and take part in introductions or O&As.

It also means that films that may have been out of circulation for a long while can be screened again with affordable terms while the tour is running. As the films' availability is likely to be temporary, distributors and/or sales agents will want to encourage as many bookings as possible.

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When new materials are created, it also provides a great opportunity to provide added elements such as closed captions and audio description, so you can offer your audiences an added benefit in terms of accessibility.

As a venue, you might decide to create a programme of your own which could tour to other cinemas. For example, if you have put together a season of films which other cinemas might be interested in – especially if you have spent money on licensing or accessing screen materials on lesser known or harder to obtain titles – you could look at touring your season in other venues as a way to recoup some money spent. This has the added benefit of raising awareness of your venue beyond your region, as well as expanding access for audiences.







Programming collectives often form around a deficit in general exhibition. "Where are all the [queer films/working class stories/films showcasing New Baltic talent]?" people ask – and then are moved to answer the question themselves by organising to put on screenings.

Programming collectives have a long history in the UK as part of the wider movement of film clubs, cineclubs and film societies. Indeed, it's arguable that arthouse cinema came to the UK as a result of programming collectives who worked to bring films that had been rejected for their commercial potential, drawing together groups of likeminded people to watch European (especially Soviet) cinema in the 1920s.

This spirit remains alive today: the best collectives build trust with their audience, who sense the same deficit in mainstream exhibition. By building an overall banner of types of films screened, collectives can often overcome the lack of cultural profile of individual films.

In general, groups are more agnostic about where the material is shown, moving itinerantly across venues. However, it's also often the case that collectives form around a general local deficit of screening venues, working as a co-operative to build a DIY space for showing all kinds of films.

Collectives are an important influence on mainstream film culture who have kept works now considered canonical from slipping into the margins. Collectives work as a group, often in non-hierarchical, shifting patterns of organising and screening, with working members moving in or out as the event and life demands demand.

Key UK collectives

- > *A Nos Amours*, a repertory focused series wherein directors champion others' work
- > Badlands Collective, focused on repertory cinema shown on celluloid film
- > Caribbean Pop-up Cinema, bringing more Caribbean cinema to UK audiences

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CARIBBEAN POP-UP CINEMA

- > CinemaAttic, a Scottish group focused on Spanish and Latin cinema
- > *Club des Femmes*, a queer feminist collective which contextualises radical work and creates forward-thinking spaces
- > Come the Revolution, focusing on exploring black life through cinema
- > *Deptford Cinema*, a south east London collective founded to address the lack of cinemas in Lewisham
- > The Final Girls, showing horror films through a feminist lens
- > *Invisible Women*, taking neglected female filmmakers from archive to screen
- > *Matchbox Cine* are seekers of the cinematically weird, the outcasts, orphans and outliers of rep cinema
- > The New Black Film Collective offers access to black filmmakers' work, whatever its origin and sensibility
- > Other Cinemas, dedicated to sharing films in ways and spaces which aren't alienating to Black and non-white communities
- > Star & Shadow Cinema, Newcastle-upon-Tyne's co-operative cinema
- > TAPE Collective, championing women of colour in front of and behind the camera
- > The Twelve30 Collective, curating Caribbean Cinema for the UK
- UNDR LNDN, supporting emerging filmmakers and creatives in London
- > We Are Parable give audiences the chance to watch black cinema in memorable and engaging contexts

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THE NEW BLACK FILM COLLECTIVE

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STAR & SHADOW CINEMA

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T A P E COLLECTIVE

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WE ARE PARABLE



Film collective/touring programme case study: 'Revolt, She Said'

Selina Robertson, Co-Founder, Club des Femmes

During summer 2018, film collective Club des Femmes (CdF) in collaboration with the ICO programmed a UK-wide touring season of films considering the 50th anniversary of May 1968. Funded by the BFI, 'Revolt, She Said: Women and Film after '68' comprised nine feature films and eight accompanying shorts, exploring the legacies of 1968 on contemporary feminisms, art and activism transnationally. With valuable support from the ICO, during one of the hottest summers since 1976, together we achieved something quite remarkable: between 6 May and 31 August 2018, we programmed 99 screenings at 30 cinemas nationwide across all nations and regions, totalling 2,346 admissions.

We knew the public memory of May '68 was predominantly one of male revolt, heroism and failure, yet we wanted to reflect on these changes and revive the rich and underacknowledged connections between feminisms, film, revolutions and their aftermath. We focused on sharing intersectional, queer and feminist stories, shining a light on women film histories and feminist activisms, arguing that these stories are inspiriting and disquieting to this day. Our programming provocation was thus: one hundred years since the first women got the vote in the UK, fifty years since the protests of May '68, where is the feminist revolution now? As Anna Coatman noted in her feature on the tour for Sight & Sound, "Revolt, She Said' aims to shift the focus away from the riots in Paris to show how people were agitating for change across the world throughout the late 20th century... challeng[ing] conventional narratives about radical political movements, reminding us of the women and queer artists, activists and filmmakers who have been written out of them.'

The urgency of the task fell into sharp focus when we discovered that we had six weeks to pull everything together from the moment the BFI confirmed the funding to the tour's launch in May. It helped that CdF member Selina also works at the ICO; this 'two hat' position enabled a trusting collaborative relationship between a grassroots group with activist aims and a publicly funded institution.

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CdF and the ICO worked closely to confirm film titles, source materials, create new DCPs where needed, clear rights, commission new artwork, plan a nation-wide online and print marketing campaign and create a special 'Revolt, She Said' zine with commissioned new writing on each film, to generate new feminist film knowledges and wider cultural exchanges. The zine was produced as a paper publication available at all tour venues, and online for people who could not get to the screenings. Making the zine confronted the ongoing difficulty of securing mainstream press coverage for feminist cinema, retrospective programming and film tour projects, although feminist ally Pamela Hutchinson's influential article in The Guardian appeared in print and online. Our community outreach work via social media was essential, we knew we had to create an alternative digital infrastructure for online audiences help create new contexts, encounters, memories and new feminist consciousness. Moreover, the omission of women's heritage cinema from the canons of mainstream film histories and regional archives has had a generational impact on preservation, restoration and digitisation.

An alternative 'Revolt, She Said' programme lives on in CdF's collective imagination; films that we wanted to include in the season but could not because the materials were too challenging, too complicated or too expensive to obtain.

As a typical piece of counter-programming, the tour ran for four months over the summer, a season at the cinema that is traditionally a time for blockbusters and tentpoles. There were six national flagship events, each highlighting one of the feature films. These events took place at independent cinemas that were part of the ICO's client cinema network or where CdF had feminist alliances with venue programmers. In each case, CdF provided specialist speakers, in collaboration with the venue programmers' wishes, who could contextualise the films within both cinematic and activist frameworks.

'Revolt, She Said' is our most ambitious project to date and at times we found the complexities of working in multi-partner collaborations – where everyone is operating on tight budgets and with limited time and capacity – demanding in the relationship between our collective ethics and practical delivery.

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Queer feminist programming is about valuing films by women, queers and people of colour, it concerns activism and advocacy, production and reception, programming and criticism, theory and practice: this is often an unstable position, but it is where we want to be.

Club des Femmes are a queer feminist collective who curate film screenings and events. Their mission is to offer up a freed-up space for the re-examination of ideas through art. They are: Jenny Clarke, So Mayer, Selina Robertson, Alex Thiele and Sarah Wood.

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CLUB DES FEMMES









Non-theatrical screenings

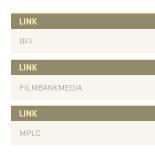
Screening films to the public outside of a traditional cinema context is known as 'non-theatrical exhibition'. Non-theatrical screenings can be implemented by both established cinemas as well as film collectives, film clubs, film societies and community cinemas, and can take place in all types of venue and outdoor spaces including village halls, churches, galleries, and community spaces. Programming in temporary spaces can be an inventive way of connecting with different audiences, allowing you to be creative with the location and surroundings.

This strategy can also be adopted by established urban cinemas as a way of extending reach and developing new audiences, as well as a beneficial way of bringing films to an intended audience who may previously have been unable to visit your venue due to travel restrictions, distance or other factors. Therefore, it can be an innovative way to engage with both different communities and audiences who may not be avid cinemagoers. As well as reaching new audiences, it is also an opportunity to cater to existing audiences by offering them a new and original way of accessing your programme. A film you plan to screen may have a local interest; therefore, it could be exciting to screen it in a chosen location that connects the audience with the film and its surroundings. Furthermore, many cinemas operate in multi arts institutions, therefore holding external screenings in this way can also be an imaginative way to connect with local audiences who are not familiar with the cinema space and the type of programming that is screened there.

Film copyright licensing for non-theatrical screenings

As with any other type of screening, to show a film in public you need permission from the film's copyright owner, usually its UK distributor. Films screened non-theatrically are usually screened from Blu-ray, DVD or digital file.

Licensing for the majority of films in the UK is available through three major gateway distributors – the *BFI*, *Filmbankmedia* or *MPLC*. Depending on the rights holder, permission may be granted in the form of a licence product or a film booking, usually over email.



The BFI and Filmbankmedia offer searchable online catalogues (see the BFI's *DVD catalogue*, Filmbankmedia's *film catalogue*) where you can search to see if they have the rights to a particular film. For details of MPLC's catalogue, *contact* their licensing team. To book films non-theatrically from the BFI, email their *bookings team*. To book films from Filmbankmedia and MPLC, you will need to purchase one of their licences. They offer options for both commercial and non-commercial screenings with guidelines to help you decide which is appropriate for you.

If the film you want isn't held by the BFI, Filmbankmedia or MPLC, it may be available from the title's original, individual distributor, in which case you will need to book it directly with them. For more information on finding out who holds rights for specific films, see 'Researching and negotiating film rights', page 6.

These organisations and catalogues all include new release titles as well as archive and repertory titles so you can offer your audience a diverse range of films. Bear in mind that new release titles will only become available to book and screen non-theatrically after the film's theatrical release period is over.

For more information, read the ICO's guide to Film copyright licensing.

Premises licensing for non-theatrical screenings

As well as obtaining a film copyright licence for the title you want to show, you will also need to check if your venue has a premises license if you are intending to sell tickets with a view to making a profit, as opposed to covering your costs. This includes screenings held for fundraising purposes. However, many public-facing buildings already have the relevant licensing in place.

Premises licensing is available from the local authority in which your chosen venue is based. For one-off for-profit events, you need not purchase a full premises licence but can seek a Temporary Event Notice to cover you.

Remember that even if you plan to hold a non-for-profit screening, while the need for premises licensing is waived, you will still need a film copyright licence.

For more information, read the ICO's guide to premises licensing.

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Outdoor screenings

Every year more and more outdoor screenings take place in the UK, in a wide variety of locations from relatively simple one-off community shows to fully designed event series themed around particular films.

If you are fortunate enough to have a space, outdoor cinema events are a very effective way to attract audiences on a large scale. Due to COVID-19 restrictions placed on UK cinemas in 2020, many venues and events organisations held outdoor film screenings to reconnect with their audiences over the summer period. The government restrictions also fostered a revival of drive-in cinemas as a safer option for audiences to watch a film with their households.

For more information, see the ICO's guide to *outdoor screenings*.

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Technical considerations

If you've never shown films (or have never shown films outside a cinema before) the technical side of things can seem like a steep learning curve! Working in a space that wasn't designed for screening films can present many challenges and even if you already have the equipment, set up is not always easy. That said, many public spaces will already have some of the necessary technical equipment in place, and for your first external event it may be worthwhile seeking out spaces that have previously held screenings.

To put on a screening, you need a projector, sound system, screen and a device that can play your chosen film format. The most popular devices tend to be a laptop or a disc player. and although both devices raise different complications, the laptop can allow you to be more versatile, particularly if you also plan to show other onscreen content. Your device will need to connect to the projector, so you will need to check that they are compatible.

Most non-theatrical screenings play from Blu-ray or DVD, with an obvious preference for Bu-ray due to the higher resolution quality, which means the on-screen image will have more clarity and your screening will be more impressive. If you have a trained projectionist in place, there is also the option of playing from analogue print formats, helpful for artists' moving image or archive material which is not available in digital formats. Without the facility of a projection box in a cinema, the presentation of the projection can become part of the screening experience.

When working in a new space, we recommend consulting with a professional projectionist or technician who can provide you with detailed and specific advice. There are a number of existing technical bodies in the UK that offer training and support to film exhibitors including organisations like the *International Moving Image Society* (formerly BKSTS), a membership organisation for individuals employed in the technical areas of film, television, sound, or related industries.

In addition, there are a number of organisations who loan or hire cinema equipment including Cinema For All, whose *Equipment Hire Scheme* is open to community cinemas and film societies and offers starter screening kits at reasonable rates in all regions of the UK.

For more information, see the ICO's *Screening films in community cinemas* guide, especially *How to project films for beginners*. In addition, see our exhibitor resources page on *equipment suppliers*.

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Adding live elements to your cinema programme is an effective and exciting way to attract new audiences and deepen your engagement with existing ones, giving added value to both the films you screen and the overall experience. During the pandemic, audiences have become more used to consuming content from the comfort of their own homes, and creating special events in your venue will help bring them back in. Putting on distinct events is also a great way to support the release of a specific film, whether you want to highlight its subject matter or help it reach a key audience.

Introductions, Q&As and post-screening panel discussions can enthuse audiences, develop their understanding of and interest in film and make screenings a real social occasion. Introductions and Q&As in particular are a significant means for audiences to connect with your programme and the creative team behind an individual film, giving them the chance to be a part of the conversation, gain context and engage with the film in a more meaningful way. Q&As can work with any part of the film's creative team and can also be a way of differentiating your output from that of more mainstream/multiplex cinemas, which do not tend to offer live elements.

Panels can also be a really interesting and valuable way to engage with a film's subject matter. Framing the film around a conversation can be crucial in helping the film to find an audience as well as highlighting discussions and issues you want to explore or champion in your venue. Putting a panel together is also a great opportunity to engage with speakers and experts in your local area who may bring their own local following. Ensure your panel comprises a broad range of speakers who will deliver a dynamic and thought-provoking discussion for your audience.

Furthermore, offering live elements in your programme is also an opportunity to establish your own presence as a programmer and that of your venue. Introducing yourself to your audience at the start of an event will give both that screening and your wider programme a considered, personal element that really appeals to audiences.

When adding a live element to your programme, it is important that you try to create an inclusive environment. This can be down to your chosen host directing discussions well, but you should also consider practical ways you can support greater accessibility, such as hiring a BSL interpreter to ensure that all audience members can be part of the conversation.



Before and especially during COVID-19, venues have held introductions and Q&As via Skype, Zoom and other online platforms. Before holding any such event live, always ensure that your cinema has a strong Wi-Fi connection as well as scheduling a practice run for your host and on-screen talent to iron out any potential teething problems. When holding Q&As online, to try and recreate the experience of attending in person, involve your audience by encouraging them to send questions in advance on social media or during the event in any available text chat function.

Another way to hold events and encourage engagement around specific films is to consider how you can utilise other spaces and facilities in your building. For example, you could put food and drink offers in place associated with films in your programme. This is a fun way to ensure the film programme is part of the rest of the building, thereby appealing to audiences who may not have previously engaged with the films, and an innovative way to create continuity throughout your venue, as well a communal experience for your audience.

There is also an opportunity to engage with the musical aspects that your chosen films may offer. This can vary from having music in your food & beverage areas to organising sing-along screenings and films accompanied by live music. Screenings accompanied by music are mostly associated with silent film, offering the potential to recreate scores and engage new audiences with dramatic, atmospheric live events. If you have the budget, hiring musicians can be a really effective way of appealing to a broader audience, as well as attracting each musician's existing fan base.





As the world of media content has moved towards full convergence with widespread access to digital platforms, there has been an erosion of the traditional 'windows' which in the past spaced out access to content, with films first released in cinemas, then into home entertainment markets and finally into broadcast.

From the mid 2010s, we have seen an increasing amount of film content made simultaneously available across these different traditional media; so, from the get-go, a film consumer can access a particular title through the media of their choosing – in a cinema, online, through streaming services, or in the form of packaged media.

This underlying trend towards reduced windows of release has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many cinemas internationally closed their doors, thereby removing the possibility of the traditional 'theatrical' leg of a film's release. However, some cinemas managed to remain 'open' to a degree by offering limited original programming to their audiences online.

Furthermore, many cinema operators and programmers recognise these emerging online programming possibilities as opportunities that they need to develop for the future, even when cinemas have reopened their doors. It is envisaged that many cinemas will choose to expand their programming by using both their bricks-and-mortar cinemas and online platforms, as audiences continue to become more promiscuous in the way they choose to access film. It's worth adding that, as of early 2021, it is the independent film exhibition sector, rather than commercial cinemas, that have developed opportunities for online programming.

Marketing partnerships with existing on-demand services

In spring 2020, there emerged a number of marketing partnerships between cinemas and existing VoD platforms such as Curzon Home Cinema and MUBI, through which cinemas were able to offer their subscribers and members access to these services at discounted rates. These partnerships represented a method by which cinemas could maintain engagement with audiences during a period of closure and by which programmers could continue to recommend and bring films to their audiences.



It's worth noting that these partnerships operated at the level of shared marketing – there are no direct income generation benefits for participating cinemas.

Cinemas supporting online distribution

There also emerged during the first period of cinema closures in 2020 a small number of direct partnerships through which cinemas received a small commission in return for promoting the online release of selected independently released titles through their websites and membership communications. Distributors such as Modern Films and Second Run offered forms of this partnership to selected cinemas.

Virtual cinema partnerships with independent distributors

In the UK, it is now possible for cinemas to offer online access to some titles from independent distributors during the initial release period of a film. This takes the form of a link providing access to the film 'embedded' in the cinema website, so that the cinema's audience can view the film as part of its programme.

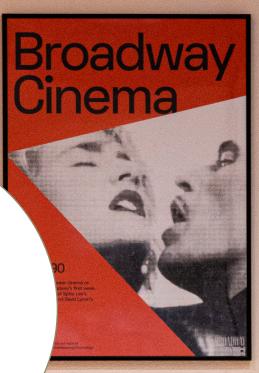
As with a theatrical booking, the transaction between distributor and cinema takes the form of a box office split. This sort of partnership arrangement begins to replicate the cinema offer in the online space and as such, offers a new degree of versatility: it's a useful way for cinemas to continue new programming during a period of closure, to feature new films that they don't have the capacity to accommodate in their cinema programme, or to extend the availability of a title they have already screened in their cinema but have not been able to hold over for an extended run.

It is envisaged that new forms of virtual cinema will emerge as programmers increasingly look to augment their in-venue programming with an online offer which both broadens the scope of their programming and audience access to it. These blended, or 'hybrid' programming models are already being seen in international film festivals, many of which have rented space on content platforms for their events. The future of virtual cinema is likely to involve both the use of this type of generic platform, partnerships between distributors and exhibitors which use the distributor's platform (as above); and eventually, dedicated virtual cinema platforms which are developed by single or consortia of cinemas with shared programming interests.



Glossary

PROGRAMMING





All shows

'All shows' refers to an agreement between the cinema and the distributor to allocate all the screenings in a particular screen to a single film across a seven-day Friday to Thursday cinema week. 'All shows' is usually a demand made by the distributors or a required commitment from the cinema to secure a film for showing from the first day of its release.

Comp titles

In film distribution and exhibition, every release is unique, as no two films are the same. However, when distributors are planning a new release, they will often identify 'comp titles' from recent years which provide ideas for the best release strategy for their new film and context for its expected box office targets. Comparisons with previous releases are usually based on similar target audiences and marketing opportunities as well as film features such as genre, director, lead actors and subject matter.

Counterprogramming

Counterprogramming refers to when a cinema presents film(s) which provide a distinctive alternative and/or a stark contrast to the dominant trend in cinemagoing at any given time, giving audiences greater choice and breadth in programming when many cinemas are concentrated on a narrow range of films. For example, where a cinema presents a programme of experimental films from the European Avant Garde to coincide with the UK release of the new James Bond film, they are adopting a counterprogramming strategy.

Crossover

A crossover film is one that has appeal to audiences in commercial and independent/arthouse cinemas alike.

Day and date

Where a film is released in cinemas and on other platforms on the same date, or close to the same date. For example, The Velvet Underground (2021) is a day and date release in cinemas and Video on Demand



DCI

Stands for Digital Cinema Initiatives, a joint venture by the major US film studios which was set up in 2002 "to establish and document voluntary specifications for an open architecture for digital cinema that ensures a uniform and high level of technical performance, reliability and quality control". All current professional cinemas use projection and sound technology which is at or above this minimum standard and is therefore described as DCI-compliant.

DCP

An abbreviation of Digital Cinema Package – the collection of digital files which hold all the content needed for a cinema presentation of the film. In 2021, all professional cinemas in the UK show films in DCP format. DCPs are either supplied by distributors on portable hard drives or sent electronically via systems such as LANsat.

Holdovers

When a distributor and cinema agree to keep a film showing in the cinema based on its recent box office performance. In the UK film industry, holdovers of films are typically decided on Monday mornings, using the weekend's box office results to determine the scale of the holdover.

KDM

Stands for Key Delivery Message, a specific coded file sent to cinemas which enables the cinema to play an encrypted DCP. Each KDM enables one version of the film to play on a target playback device for a limited duration, which could be hours, weeks, or months.

Limited release

A smaller scale release for a film, usually for films deemed to appeal to particular 'niche' audiences and where the distributor tries to select the cinemas where the film will have a strong appeal. In the UK a limited release could refer to the theatrical opening of a film in a range from one to 120 cinemas. The term is also sometimes used to describe a shorter than usual theatrical window (the period in which a particular film appears in cinemas before it is made available on other platforms).



MG

MG stands for Minimum Guarantee. This is the baseline amount that a cinema will pay to a distributor for the hire of a film. The MG is usually one part of the 'terms' (see above), a rental agreement which usually consists of a percentage of the box office promised 'against' the Minimum Guarantee, with the exhibitor paying whichever is the bigger sum.

On-date

When a programmer books a film to show at a cinema from the first day of its UK national theatrical release. Usually, distributors require a minimum commitment of seven or 14 days and with a minimum number of screenings from cinemas looking to screen 'on-date'.

Off-date

When a programmer books a film from the eighth day (or later) of the film's release, it is usually referred to as off-date.

P&A spend

P & A stands for 'Prints and Advertising' and describes the key areas of expenditure made by a distributor when releasing a film. The P&A spend determines the number of cinemas the film will open in and the amount of advertising needed to support the film in cinemas, and so is often used as shorthand for the scale of the release.

Platform release

A distributor's release strategy which involves opening a film in selected cinemas in the first week before further cinemas are added in following weeks. The first week's cinemas are selected on the basis that they will generate high levels of box office and have the right audience profile to generate word of mouth for the film. The box office – in the form of a high per-screen average box office – and the word-of-mouth are the main factors that provide a 'platform' from which the film's performance can escalate in subsequent weeks.



Saturation release

This describes a strategy used by distributors to release a film into cinemas. A saturation release is where the distributor aims to have the film showing in every commercial cinema in the UK. In 2021, there are approximately 650 commercial cinemas in the UK, and any film which screens on its first day of release in 500 or more of these sites is generally considered a 'saturation release'. A saturation release schedule is used by distributors where a film is deemed to have broad appeal, where the marketing effort can be concentrated on the point of release (when the film is showing in the highest number of cinemas during its release) and where the aim of the release is to accumulate the highest possible box office gross over the first weekend.

Screen average

Describes the mean average box office gross per screen of any current release. For example, a film which achieves an opening three-day gross of £500,000 from 500 cinemas has a screen average of £1,000. For the distributor, the screen average is a quick and easy way of measuring the performance of a release, and for cinemas, a useful point of comparison for their box office performance of the same film.

Split shows

This refers to a pattern of programming a single cinema screen with more than one film across a seven-day cinema week. In its simplest form, where a cinema screen is scheduled with four daily shows, two of these shows will be used to present one film, whilst the other two will be used to present a second film in a 'split shows' pattern.

Terms

This usually refers simply to the rental agreement reached between the distributor and exhibitor to cover the booking of a film. The 'terms' are usually expressed as a percentage of the film's potential box office takings at the cinema, weighted 'against' a minimum guarantee (MG). After its screenings of the film, the cinema will pay the distributor either the box office percentage or the minimum guarantee, whichever is higher.



Theatrical window

The theatrical window is the period in which a film is only available to audiences in cinemas. The theatrical window ends on a film when it becomes available through other platforms or media, even if it is still showing in cinemas. Historically, features films were made for screening on big screens in purpose-built cinemas; therefore, the film industry established a practice of making films exclusively available in cinemas for a number of weeks before being made available on secondary channels such as video, DVD or Blu-Ray or on television.

VOD/SVOD/PVOD

Video on Demand is the term used for any online service by which a viewer can pay to watch a film on a device at a time of their choice.

Subscription Video on Demand describes a Video on Demand service for which the viewer has paid a monthly or annual subscription to access a catalogue of films, rather than paying to view an individual title.

Premium Video on Demand is the name given to a Video on Demand service for which the viewer pays a higher than usual amount to access a particular film online at a time of their choice. Premium Video on Demand is used frequently when a popular film is first made available through VOD.

Weekend/Three-day gross

The total box office generated by a film across the three days of a weekend, Friday to Sunday, which is also the start of the cinema week in the UK. The weekend gross is the critical benchmark figure for a film's performance as it will generally be used by cinemas to determine whether the film will be held over the following week.

Wide release

A mid-scale release for a film – neither in every available cinema, nor especially limited to just a few cinemas. In the UK in 2021, a wide release would typically be a film opening in the range of 200 to 300 cinemas.