

INFORMAL EDUCATION - REPORT FOR FEWG

BRIEF: My original brief was: 'To survey and report on the amount and quality of informal education about film and cinema available regularly in the UK for children under twelve; and to make recommendations for improvement of the situation if appropriate.' As will be seen, my investigations have taken me outside the strict confines of that brief, since on the ground there is no simple distinction between formal and informal education, and no watershed at the age of twelve. The brief also explicitly excluded the regular work by Regional Film Theatres since this is being researched separately for FEWG by Vanessa Paynton.

A summary of my report and a list of recommendations will be found at the end of this paper.

REPORT

1) Specialised Exhibition

According to the Cinema Exhibitors' Association (CEA) there has been a revival of Saturday shows ('matinees') for children in the late 90s, linked to the establishment of multiplexes. My own visits to screenings (Cineworld, UCI and a range of mixed arts venues and independents), plus the evidence of numerous telephone conversations and programme brochures, bears out this claim of there being a new spirit abroad. All the major commercial chains are doing it, though not in every cinema they own: Film Network, for example, sometimes needs to use up to three of its six screens at Peckham, but finds that in Greenwich people are just not interested, and do not support matinees at all.

These matinees have such names as M4J (Movies for Juniors, Cineworld); the Phoenix Freddie's (Finchley); the 3/2/1Club (old name used by Apollo Leisure Cinemas); The Moviemob (Odeon Cinemas); The Splodge Club (multi-arts club, not just films, at the Barbican); Kids Clubs (UCI); and Kidz World (Guildhall Arts Centre, Gloucester). The new name recently adopted by Apollo Leisure Cinemas accurately reflects the matinees' dominant orientation: children at Apollo matinees are now known as Little Oscars.

Despite these names, very rarely is the audience at a matinee exclusively children. Saturday matinee audiences nowadays consist primarily of family-style groupings which include at least one adult. Seats commonly cost one pound per person, but there are exceptions: Cineworld charges adults nothing, while some of the independents charge adults £3 and children

£2. Popcorn usually costs at least £2. Attendance varies enormously, depending partly on the film being shown, but it never seems to be more than about 250, even in a cinema using more than one screen.

2) Programming at Matinees

With the larger chains, the programming is done centrally, with no local discretion allowed; on 5th December 1998, for example, all Cineworld matinees were presenting Dr Dolittle. When I was there two weeks earlier it was The Magic Sword.

The films chosen for these matinees, in at least 95% of cases, are second-run mainstream titles that are generally only three or four months old. In the first half of 1999 this repertoire includes or will include: Mulan, Small Soldiers, Pig in the City, Prince Valiant, Barney's Great Adventure, Paws, Flubber, Anastasia, Star Kid, Antz, Prince of Egypt, The Rugrats Movie, Madeline, and A Bug's Life. Often there are two films on offer to choose from. In the large chains one of the films will have been retained from the previous week, and the other will be new, but otherwise they are regarded as interchangeable. In an independent, the two films (often a U and a PG) might be programmed and promoted as one of them being 'suitable for children of seven and under', and the other 'for eight and above'.

Almost any film that has a U or PG certificate will be considered by programmers as prospective matinee materia, and may be included even if it has no obvious child orientation. For example, Men in Black, Blues Brothers 2000, Godzilla and Mr Magoo were all shown at matinees in 1998.

In the small handful of cases where the film screened is not a commercial bringback will be found such titles as The Adventures of Robin Hood, Digby - The Biggest Dog in the World, Asterix Conquers America, and Swallows and Amazons. Older films like these are screened by independents or community cinemas only, not by the large circuits. Until recently there was a cinema that still programmed the old Children's Film Foundation packages (cartoon, serial episode, feature) but that has finished. Now, in virtually all cinemas the only items shown at matinees, apart from the feature, are trailers for other features in the cinema's current general full-price programme.

3) Activities Other Than Viewing

As a general rule, nothing goes on at matinees other than the unmediated watching of the film and the uninhibited eating of the popcorn.

This is partly because the CEA specifically warns its members against using the word 'club' in connection with matinees, and against organising anything that might be construed as a club activity. The CEA is apprehensive that a cinema offering such activities might be judged by a local authority to be acting in loco parentis, in which case, under the 1989 Children Act, it would need to employ fully-trained nurses to look after the unaccompanied children, which would make the whole operation commercially non-viable. There is a standard form of words which some matinee leaflets print regularly, warning parents that: 'In leaving a child at a cinema alone in a screening you are taking a decision about your child's safety.'

Where cinemas do offer something in addition to the screening it is usually 'fun, games and prizes' for five or ten minutes before the film starts. This can involve playing chart music, then encouraging the children to be vocal - so that they 'get it out of their system' before seeing the film - by, for example, answering a few simple questions (eg about film stars). Correct answers are rewarded with a bag of sweets (eg Starburst Joosters); alternatively bags of sweets may simply be thrown at random into the audience to be caught. Some cinemas and chains claim to offer more sophisticated professional pre-screening entertainment (clowns, conjurors) but this obviously costs money and can occur only relatively rarely. On special occasions (such as Hallowe'en at Cineworld) the prize can be something as substantial as a mountain bike. In one cinema parents have objected to such fun and games, and asked the management to cut to the chase. Virtually all commercial managers and chains would explicitly reject the idea of education as a desirable component of their Saturday matinee offer. Apart from making money (or at least not losing it) they are content that matinees should make children aware that cinema exists and is different from television and is fun. In this way, they would say, matinees are helping to nurture the habit of cinema-going, and are thereby fostering the audience of the future. That is the only kind of film education they are concerned with. Anything else is best left to those working through the school system.

A few independent and small-circuit cinemas would disagree. Some of these invite the children to come early and take part in a 'project' before the screening. Most commonly, this involves colouring-in a drawing related to the matinee film, or to a film in the cinema's current general programme. There will probably be a prize of free tickets for the next matinee screening, or a distributor's freebie, or some promotional merchandise for a newly-released film (in November it was Mulan, even though Mulan was not a cut-price matinee that month). At one cinema a boy or

girl who has a birthday is rewarded with free tickets and the chance to go to the projection box, look at the equipment, and press the button that starts the show. In very rare cases, for the children who come 45 minutes early, a cinema will run a practical workshop of some kind (eg handling and looking through and then being filmed by a 16mm camera).

4) Good Practice in Presentation

In the provision of informal film education, Saturday

Moreover, this kind of 'club' activity is positively discouraged by the CEA. Quite apart from fearing excessive vigilance on the part of a local authority, the CEA believes that by supporting Film Education and their work with schools ('143,000 children went through cinema doors during Schools Film Week last October') it is doing all that needs to be done.

5) Cultural Programming and Audience Development

There is a little more 'informal education' in respect of the choice of films shown, but only outside the major chains. In mixed arts venues, community cinemas (eg those run by City Screen) and BFI-supported venues, a few films from outside the current commercial mainstream are occasionally programmed. Among recent examples are a Finnish version of The Snow Queen, and a dubbed Russian version of Treasure Island (Barbican); the 1938 Adventures of Robin Hood (Finchley Phoenix); the Creature from the Black Lagoon, in 3D (Phoenix Picture House, Oxford); the 1946 Great Expectations and Animal Farm (The Showroom, Sheffield); Laurel and Hardy in Way Out West (Clapham Picture House); and a month of eleven East German fairytales (Junior NFT, London).

Within the past year a limited amount of more adventurous programming has been made possible by two initiatives - the Chewits Movies For Kids tour, and the Cinemagic in Britain tour - and, for ten UK cinemas, by continuing membership of the Euro Kids Network.

5(a) Chewits

In the summer and autumn of 1998 sponsorship of 35,000 from Chewits made possible a British tour of a package put together by the BFI.

The most ambitious project resulting from the Chewits money was the acquisition for UK distribution of a Berlin-prizewinning subtitled Dutch film called The Boy Who Stopped Talking, which is about the alienation felt by a Kurdish boy uprooted from his village in Turkey and taken by his father to live in Holland. It

toured 15 of the film theatres. However, attendances were in the main very low, despite good local press coverage in some places, and hard work on the ground by education officers or programmers in probably all places. Two venues had four people in the audience; one had six; one had seven; several had a figure in the teens.

Only one venue - Northampton Forum - filled a respectable number of seats for *The Boy Who Stopped Talking*. There, on the morning of Monday 23rd November, all 150 seats were taken. This capacity crowd was achieved by coming to an understanding with a secondary school located within the same building complex. The deal was that, since only a handful of students were prepared to pay the £2 that the cinema was proposing to charge, the school would be allowed to bring 150 year-8 students free; in return, the school would in future look upon the cinema as an educational resource, and definitely bring paying children to it for some future screenings. The teachers were told the film's themes (displacement, immigration, Europe etc) to discuss with the students beforehand; and the director of the cinema (Alan Smith) gave a little talk before the screening, introducing the students to the idea of subtitling, since virtually none had ever seen a subtitled film before. There was some initial muttering of resentment at having to see this foreign film but soon (according to Alan Smith) all 150 settled down, found the subtitles not too troublesome, and allowed themselves to enjoy it. Afterwards, some averred that in future they would not dismiss the idea of going to see a subtitled film. Teachers later told Alan Smith that in their judgement the screening had been a positive learning experience for virtually all the students.

On the cinema's side, this giving away of seats was justified as an exercise in audience development. They had committed themselves to taking the film and paying the BFI £90 whether it was screened or not; in those circumstances, and especially given the positive response the film met, subsidising each student to the tune of about 60p was deemed to be money well spent.

Despite that instance of a type of local success, the overall number of viewers of *The Boy Who Stopped Talking*, across the whole of Great Britain, was only around 400 (definitive figures from two of the venues are not yet in). As a result this film has not been retained in UK theatrical distribution (though it remains available on video). Another beneficiary of the Chewits sponsorship was the dubbed French animated feature *Tintin and the Mystery of Shark Island*, which fared much better than the Dutch film. In many places the audience numbered more than 100; in Edinburgh it was as high as 184. More Chewits venues chose to show

this film than chose to show *The Boy Who Stopped Talking*; and some non-Chewits cinemas have also picked it up. As a result it remains in distribution even though the Chewits tour has ended, and it will eventually have been seen by several thousand customers, primarily at weekend matinees.

There were also three packages of short films available as part of the Chewits tour; these were not specially acquired, but consisted of films that the BFI already had, or planned to have, in distribution anyway. One of the packages consisted of four films about black people in the UK encountering cultural collision; these were grouped under the title *Windrush Kids*. A second package was animation only, and combined familiar faces (*Wallace, Gromit, Famous Fred*) with unfamiliar faces (*Blackie the Cat, a Russian poodle, and The Cat Who Came Back*). The third package, *It's Tough To Be a Kid*, contained three short films about children who did not fit in (*Dance, Lexie, Dance; 35 Aside; Bill's New Frock*). In these three cases the Chewits money was used to pay for promotion and publicity within each town the tour went to, and for activities such as the family percussion workshop in which a new soundtrack was created for one of the cartoons, and the autobiography workshop, devised and conducted by MOMI actors, which preceded a screening of the *Windrush* package.

There are no precise attendance figures available for these shorts packages, but the data that does exist shows clearly that despite the best efforts of venue education officers and managers, only the animation package attracted audiences of any significant size outside school hours. At Dartington, for example, on 10th October 1998, £242 was taken at the box office for a Saturday matinee screening of *Fred, Gromit and Friends*; and during the half-term (October 26th) Sheffield Showroom took £196.

The other two packages got no more than a scattering in the audience except when contact with schools bore fruit. The *Windrush* package took only £12 at Bradford on a Saturday (19th September) but £176 in Northampton on a Friday (24th November). The *It's Tough To Be a Kid* package (which was shown by fewer venues because of concern felt by some education officers about an attempted suicide scene in one of the films) did well only at Stirling on Monday 7th September (£198 taken) and at Dundee on Friday 16th October (£86). On a Saturday, in Nottingham, it took only £18.

No comparable tour is envisaged for 1999.

5(b) Cinemagic

For the first time in its nine-year history Cinemagic

- the Belfast children's film festival - gathered together a selection of titles from previous festivals, and organised a Cinemagic tour (October-November 98) of parts of Britain. This initiative began in response to a request from one regional venue (Tyneside Film Theatre) and grew into a more or less economically viable size when six other venues (Bristol, Dundee, Sheffield, Inverness, Nottingham and Leicester) expressed support.

With a Cinemagic officer present to help with all events and screenings, the seven RFTs showed selected elements from the following:

- a collection consisting of one Norwegian live-action no-dialogue short, and three UK made-for-tv animated shorts, aimed at younger children;
- the subtitled Icelandic prize-winner Benjamin Dove;
- the Canadian animated musical Pippi Longstocking;
- the UK-US made-for-tv Dragonworld;
- the New Zealand drama Bonjour Timothy, about a teenage romance;
- the sub-titled true German wartime story The Homesickness of Walerjan Wrobel;
- the Irish-American gender-identity story My Friend Joe;
- My Knees Were Jumping, a documentary about the kindertransports of 1938-40;
- The subtitled French film Cross My Heart, about a boy whose school friends collude in hiding from the authorities the fact that his mother has died;
- Two Northern Ireland shorts (one of which, Dance Lexie Dance, was also part of the It's Tough To Be a Kid package in the Chewits tour) which could accompany any appropriate feature.

No venue took exactly the same parts of the package as another. Broadway concentrated on the German film and the French film because their local schools' language departments could be relied on to support them, and only them (ie not the Icelandic film). Newcastle took nearly everything, added to it from local resources, and put on a big five-day event. Dundee took only three films (Pippi, Dragonworld, My Friend Joe) all of which had English dialogue.

In addition to the films, Cinemagic was able to offer a free Sony workshop, staffed by Sony personnel, which guided up to twelve young people through the production of a short news programme, using up-to-date digital technology. The downside of it being free was that in one venue a workshop was scheduled but did not take place because Sony staff shortages meant that the technician-tutor involved could not be released that day. Other workshops, that had to be paid for, dealt with animation, multimedia (run by the Derry-based Nerve Centre) and scripting (run by the writer of

Dance Lexie Dance). These were taken up by only a few venues, and could each accommodate only a small number of students.

The experience of one venue - The Showroom, Sheffield - may serve as indicative evidence of the context such initiatives have to try to work in. The education officer there got audiences for two of the films by organising workshops to accompany schools screenings of Benjamin Dove, and My Knees Were Jumping. Benjamin Dove is partly about kids victimising one of their number, so the Showroom ran a bullying awareness workshop which was attended by 15 children who were at that time excluded from school for bullying. These 15 then formed the audience for the screening of that film. The other workshop followed rather than preceded the screening: 70 GCSE students were brought to see My Knees Were Jumping, and then took part in discussion and exercises about anti-semitism, and about the status of the different components of the documentary. Of the other two Cinemagic items taken by Sheffield the Norwegian-and-British shorts programme, shown twice over the weekend, attracted an audience of 70; but Bonjour Timothy, though in English, had no workshop attached to it, and no obvious curricular relevance or media profile, so brought in no significant audience either in its schooltime screening or at the weekend.

Another supporting activity at Sheffield was made possible by the enthusiastic co-operation of one particular teacher, who helped the education officer get together a group of ten Barnsley youngsters aged between 9 and 16 so serve as a 'jury' for the Cinemagic programme. They were not required to choose a winner; instead they attended a brief session on how to write about film, then wrote reviews which were displayed in the foyer and later published in the Showroom newsletter. Their reward for this participation was free tickets, a supply of popcorn and, in some cases -according to their teachers - a marked raising of self-esteem.

Overall, for the 11 Cinemagic screenings, the total audience at Sheffield was around 200, resulting in a box-office take (at £1.50 for a schools screening, £2.00 at weekends) of around £300. This income provided only one sixth of the cost of the event, which for Sheffield was £1800. For each bum that sat on a seat, the Showroom therefore had to pay a subsidy of between £7 and £8. Another subsidy came in the shape of the numerous hours worked by the education officer at the Showroom, and by the tour organiser both in Belfast and in Sheffield.

At the moment, it is not clear whether there will be another Cinemagic tour in 1999. Broadway say the cost

makes it prohibitive, so it is unlikely that they will be taking it again. Sheffield Showroom is prepared to give it another go, but would like to get better information, earlier, in order to plan and promote more effectively. Tyneside is wholly in favour of repeating and expanding it.

For their part, Cinemagic doubt they will have the will to do it again unless they get sponsorship or a grant to cover the cost of the months of work which somebody in the Belfast office has to put in in order to get it all together. They have subsidised the tour once from their own hard-won resources, to show what can be done, and cannot justify going it alone a second time.

(c) Euro Kids Network

The Euro Kids Network is a Media Salles scheme administered from an office in Italy. Its object is to promote the widest possible exhibition of European films suitable for younger viewers. In Italy 29 cinemas belong, and in France 22. At the other end of the scale come Portugal with one member, and Finland with two. The UK comes somewhere near the middle, currently having ten members: the Duke of York's, Brighton; Theatre Mwdan, Cardigan; Curzon, Clevedon; David Lean Cinema, Croydon; Metro Cinema, Derby; Guildhall Arts Centre, Gloucester; Phoenix Arts Centre, Leicester; Forum Cinema, Northampton; MacRobert Arts Centre, Stirling; and Wellesley Theatre, Wellington.

The carrot offered to members of the Network is that at the end of each six-monthly period they can, as apart of the detailed report which they have to submit, claim back up to 50% of the rental, organisational and promotional costs involved in showing European films to young audiences. The definition of 'young audiences' has developed over the last few years; it now seems to include higher education students in their twenties.

At the moment the exhibition of a UK film (the definition of which includes co-productions in which the UK was one of the partners) carries just as much weight for expenditure reclaim purposes as the exhibition of a French or German or Spanish film. Under this regime members are able to claim money back in respect of a 'European' menu mainly consisting of such UK films as: Regeneration, Spiceworld, The Borrowers, Fairy Tale A True Story, Mrs Brown, Wilde, Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Photographing Fairies, Ring of Bright Water, Lawn Dogs, Twenty-Four Seven, Paws, The Boxer, Love is the Devil, Howards End, Emily's Ghost, Il Postino, Loch Ness, Danny the Champion of the World, From Russia With Love, Sense

and Sensibility, Richard III and The Bride of War. Even The Full Monty, the most commercially successful film the UK has ever produced, is eligible for the EKN subsidy if its box office income has not covered half the cost of the screening.

This situation seems to be about to change. In the past year the EKN office has introduced a distinction which some UK members are not happy about. In their six-monthly reports members now have to classify each film they are claiming for as either 'domestic' or 'non-domestic'. The implication is taken as being that the EKN office is working towards treating the exhibition of non-domestic product more favourably than the exhibition of domestic product. Some UK members argue that the European playing-field would not then be level, because countries where audiences accept dubbed films (France, Germany, Italy) would have an advantage over those countries (such as the UK) where dubbing is unthinkable (except for animation such as Asterix and Tintin). This grumble, added to the fact that it always takes at least a year for the EKN bureaucracy to process a claim and send the money that is due, means that some UK members are not sure whether they are going to stick with the scheme: 'It's difficult enough meeting the quota as it is. If we have to show more non-domestic product in order to qualify, then it will be impossible. There are simply not enough continental films in distribution in the UK.'

This objection is not fully shared by all UK members of the Network. These agree that there is not much continental product in UK distribution, but accept that as members their mission is to seek to show as much non-domestic European product as domestic, whether or not the EKN office requires it. One UK member says: 'It gives you a goal; it keeps your mind in focus'. Diligence and a touch of ingenuity resulted, in 1998, in the following films being shown to 'young audiences' by UK members of the Euro Kids Network: Das Boot, Asterix Conquers America, Tintin and the Mystery of Shark Island, Lucie Aubrac, Marius et Jeannette, Hercules, The Gambler, The Singing Ringing Tree, Le Bossu, Nosferatu, Ma Vie en Rose, Pandora's Box, The End of Violence, and The Blue Angel. Even Saving Private Ryan and, more remarkably, Ugetsu Monogatari, have been put down on claim forms as continental.

SUMMARY

With a few isolated exceptions, the contextualisation and presentation of films to UK children under 12, in the informal sector, contain little that could be perceived as 'education'. Virtually all Saturday

matinees offer something approaching a child-minding service (with a parent present in many cases) rather than an active viewing experience. This approach is urged upon exhibitors by their own professional body, the CEA.

In a few venues the choice of films shown to children offers some scope for encouragement. In addition, the Chewits tour, the Cinemagic tour and membership of the Euro Kids Network have produced interesting initiatives. However, neither tour will necessarily happen again, and the EKN is in some disarray. Such tours need sponsorship or subsidy, plus a well-planned long-term strategy, if they are to make a difference; and the UK branch of EKN needs to become bigger, and better-coordinated, if it is to offer distributors an incentive to be bolder.

In any case, as will be apparent from the foregoing, few of the examples of cultural programming cited above are strictly relevant to the brief I started with (informal education, under-twelves), because these films have predominantly been shown within a formal education context, and mainly to students older than 12.

This close connection to formal education means that the curriculum is the dominant force in determining which films teachers will choose to support. A major factor behind the attendance of classes at some of the Cinemagic films, and at some of the films shown within the EKN scheme, was not that the teachers were interested in the films as such, but that they were interested in the dialogue. Thus French and German films can attract a large secondary school audience simply by virtue of featuring languages which are taught in UK schools; but *The Boy Who Stopped Talking*, being in Dutch and Kurdish, has no such curricular pull.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(i) In view of the success which some venues have had with the strategy of attaching a low-profile short to a higher-profile feature, urgent consideration should be given to the compiling of a directory of short films, suitable for showing to children and available in the UK now.

(ii) FEWG should recognise that subtitles are not all identical in style of translation or presentation. Some are more idiomatic to read, and clearer to see than others. *The Boy Who Stopped Talking* seems to have succeeded at Northampton partly because its sub-titles are intelligently presented - no white on white, for example. Expanding the provision of foreign-language

material for young audiences therefore has to include ensuring a higher and more consistent quality of subtitling.

(iii) Following from (ii) above, laser-projected subtitles should be investigated, to see whether they offer the chance of improving children's perception of subtitling, and whether they make it more nearly financially viable to import and show a foreign-dialogue film which has not got sub-titles burned in.

(iv) A portable headphone/PA or audio description system should be available to tour with foreign-language films that are to be shown for children, enabling subtitles to be read for children who can't keep up, or a headphone translation of non-subtitled films. For example, Tyneside cinema would have been interested in showing some of the East German films imported by the NFT in January, but could not because the prints were neither subtitled nor dubbed; use of headphones was essential.

(v) A form of regular communication (newsletter or electronic, plus if possible periodic face-to-face meetings) should be set up to facilitate communication between exhibitors working to broaden and deepen children's cinematic experience.

(vi) Cinemagic's just-started experiment in appointing an outreach officer, whose mission is to take cultural programming to after-school clubs etc the whole year round, by means of discussions, workshops and video projection, should be watched and encouraged. It has funding for only the first six months yet may turn out to be a project which FEWG would wish to see extended, and possibly replicated.

(vii) Initiatives such as Chewits and Cinemagic should be organised in relation to an overall national strategy in order to maximise effectiveness and minimise wasted labour. For some venues there was perceived to be an element of overkill, with both tours being offered for much the same time (autumn). In addition there was duplication of effort and offer: one film (Dance, Lexie, Dance) anomalously figured in both the Chewits tour and the Cinemagic tour. On top of these factors, there was some loss of potential audience occasioned by the fact that Film Education's Schools Film Week, which offers cinema visits free of charge, also takes place in the autumn.

Terry Staples

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