

‘Helping audiences and exhibitors find each other’: Interview with Catharine Des Forges, Director, Independent Cinema Office

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Abstract:

In this interview, Catharine Des Forges, Director of the Independent Cinema Office (ICO) is asked about her views and experiences of UK film exhibition and audiences. The ICO is a London-based organisation that supports UK independent cinemas via programming, training, consultancy, film distribution, and events for cinema professionals. This interview is an account of Des Forges’ motivations behind the establishment of the ICO, and its current activities relating to audience development. The focus is on independent or cultural cinema and its development in the UK since the 1990s. The interview was undertaken in April 2021, at a stage when the coronavirus pandemic lockdown measures in the UK were relaxing, but cinemas were still closed (and had been for most of the preceding 14 months). As a result, some of the discussion relates to the severely altered cinema exhibition landscape and the challenges it faces in the medium and long-term future.

Keywords: Film audiences, independent cinemas, cinema-going, audience development, UK film exhibition, Brexit, Independent Cinema Office.

Catharine Des Forges started the Independent Cinema Office (ICO) in 2003. Prior to that, in her early career, she worked at organisations such as the BBC, Arts Council England, and the British Film Institute (BFI) in roles relating to film exhibition, funding, and programming. After the advent of the UK Film Council in the early 2000s, the BFI ceased its operations concerning regional exhibition and exhibition development. It was then that Des Forges set up the Independent Cinema Office, at first funded by the UK Film Council, but soon becoming an independent company. Des Forges reports that her original objectives for the ICO was to provide training opportunities and information about jobs in independent cinema exhibition, and to increase exhibitor and audience access to film culture across the

UK. This was achieved by raising awareness of, and access to, different kinds of films that were not mainstream Hollywood – to independent exhibitors. The ICO was also established to aid the setting up and running of regional cinemas as well as film programming, distribution, training, and consultancy. The overall aim was to have a vertically integrated agency that worked across different but interconnected areas.

Catharine Des Forges defines independent cinemas as any venue that is not owned by a multinational company or venture capitalists, is not part of a much bigger circuit, and has a small number of screens. The ICO's current main funder is the British Film Institute but it has also been funded, up to this point, by Creative Europe – although this is coming to an end due to Brexit. It has also been funded on a project-by-project basis by organisations such as Arts Council England. In terms of partnerships, the ICO has one with the BFI for the Film Audience Network to run Film Hub South East, as well as several cinema venues and one festival that it has direct programming relationships with. It also works with a range of international and national film festivals, and other organisations ranging across official archives, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and local authorities.

AB: Can you summarise the position of the ICO today by talking about the changes that you have seen in the last 18 years?

CDF: The biggest change is the advent of digital culture. When the ICO was set up, you could not watch films on the Internet, there was no such thing as streaming, and lots of films were not available on DVD. You must try and imagine a time when the only place you could see certain sorts of films was in a cinema, and for lots of people there were no independent cinemas near them. So there were some films you could not access at all and then there were some films that were more difficult to access depending on where you lived. So the biggest changes are the advent of digital technology and the Internet, the advent of streaming, and increased access to culture. At the same time just having the Internet, or having film culture available to you, does not mean that you know about them, so there are still issues around what people choose. People tend to still choose what they know and that has always been the way. How you become aware of films is still the key question – just because something is there does not mean that people find it – that has not really changed.

In terms of where the ICO is now, I would say it is an establishment. Lots of people externally see us as an institution – which may not always be in a positive way! We are part of an exhibition sector that did not exist then. The way that things are funded has changed and the way that people get jobs has changed enormously. From a personal point of view I would hope that we are here to help audiences and exhibitors find each other and support the exhibition sector – that is why we exist.

AB: Are there more independent cinemas than there were in the early 2000s?

CDF: Yes, there are a lot more independent cinemas. There used to be only about twenty to thirty Regional Film Theatres. Now there are a lot more cinemas, but they come in different forms. These days some are part of arts centres. It is much easier to own your own cinema so lots of people who in the past would have started their own bars and restaurants have now also got cinemas in them. Digital technologies really changed the landscape. Twenty years ago if you had written a business plan for a cinema in certain towns with small populations, a consultant would have said there was no business case for it. In addition you have lots of pop-ups, lots of theatres have put in digital screening spaces particularly with the advent of National Theatre (NT) Live. So there is a bigger range of independent cinemas, but they do not necessarily conform to the same thing – there is not a one-size-that-fits-all approach. They do not all look the same or operate in the same way. I think there is a much wider variety of what we might call cinema spaces and that is a positive change – it is much more adaptable.

AB: As you well know, we are at a vital moment for film exhibition where digital advancement and the measures around COVID-19 have become disruptive catalysts for changes in the spaces of film consumption, distribution windows, and viewing patterns. What are your reflections on these issues that have emerged in the last year or so?

CDF: I think in some cases it has become very democratic. In the past who was able to make films, and who could show films, was limited because of the costs. Whereas now it is much more straightforward. Quite a lot of people can make films who would never have been able to make them before. You can make a film on your phone at home which means that different sorts of people are able to make films. It is easier to distribute films – it has become more democratic, more open. That is a positive thing.

If you love cinema, you believe that the best place to watch a film is on a cinema screen with other people in the space. Ultimately the ICO believes that is the way that cinema should be experienced. But I think that what people did not necessarily foresee before the pandemic - or had not necessarily thought through – was the fact that lots of people are excluded from those spaces. This may be because of caring responsibilities, mobility issues, costs, or geographic location. Everything being online meant that there were lots of different sorts of people within audiences who were then able to consume culture in a way that they had not been before. That is the thing that has been a welcome change and I think that a lot of organisations – cinemas, festivals – in this space are trying to think about how you can retain that. They are trying to ensure that those communities are not excluded again, or that they are all part of the conversation. How does one continue to do that and be properly inclusive from the start? Venues must think about what makes a space inclusive rather than them automatically becoming exclusive due to their mode of operation.

AB: How have independent cinemas fared since the lockdowns began? Is it true that, due to mainstream films having very limited releases in cinemas, more independent films have had greater exposure? Would you say that independent cinemas have shown a bit more resilience than multiplexes (some of which have had a blanket closure)?

CDF: Independent cinemas have always found the environment challenging. If you examine Comscore industry data¹ you will see that there are about ten films in a year that take 90% of the box office. So what we had was an over reliance on certain titles that generated the majority of box office. Even before the pandemic, five to ten years ago, that was a challenge for independent cinema. They had to change to maximise their operations within the sector. I think quite a lot of them were resilient because they had to be previously. A lot of them spent a long time developing audiences in their communities and being seen very much as a community resource in a way that maybe some commercial cinemas had not done.

When the pandemic hit, some independent cinemas were very innovative and adaptable. Some of them became community resources: they housed food banks on their premises, they kept their food and drink offer going so people were able to buy takeaways, and they sold memberships. Some venues started their own online players, so people were able to engage with them by paying to watch specialised films virtually. There was quite a lot of innovation and experimentation. There were dedicated audiences – people loved them and wanted them to stay open. In the same way that in different communities you might not want your local bar to close down or disappear. What you find is that people who live in a particular community are really invested in their buildings and organisations in a way that they are not in a cinema they perceive to be more mainstream. Many venues were able to access support from either the Cultural Recovery Fund or via the Government's furlough schemes. I think that is one of the things that made a difference but at the same time I think it has been tough. There were some organisations or cinema businesses that have fallen through the cracks because they were ineligible for some of the funds, or it was a more challenging environment. It depends hugely on how many people you employ and the sort of building you have got. If you do not have food and beverage – if you do not have a café bar – you have not been able to maximise your spaces in a different way.

I think it has been really challenging and it is like everything else – the more you are able to innovate and think about doing things differently and adapt and react – it has given you the best chance of success. But I still think we are in a stage where no one really knows what will happen with cinemas. It will depend on a lot of things as to whether audiences return and how quickly they return. It will depend on how long we have social distancing and what that social distancing looks like. There is a whole set of things that will affect what happens in UK film exhibition from here on in.

AB: How can independent venues survive and be sustainable in the medium and long-term future?

CDF: I think you must be prepared to do things differently. You have to innovate and look at what you do and question it, interrogate it. You must look at other industries, other art forms, you must be responsive, you have to do some research, get intelligence, look at data, and think about what is happening elsewhere. I think what you can't do is just what you have always done and hope that it will work. You must have conversations with your audiences – you have to make sure that you are not responding just to your own instincts and your own assumptions. I think a lot of people in any sort of profession have an innate sense that they are very familiar with how things work, that our audiences do this, that these are the people that come to these films. But it is not necessarily based on facts, and you have to really understand what your assumptions are based on, why you are doing things in that way.

I think people do change their behaviour. There have been several sentiment surveys that have been running in the last year by different organisations, both in film and in other art forms. What you see when you look at the results of the reports is that people change their view depending on what is happening at the time. So, it is very hard to second-guess, or you could look at the figures or the data from September and say, 'This is how audiences are feeling at the moment, so this is what we think is going to happen, and this is how I would predict things will change'. But by January maybe there is a different view, and then it will change again. The thing you can be sure of is that audiences keep changing all the time and you must be aware of quite a lot of different variables to have sound judgement.

AB: Are there measures that the ICO have taken to assist independent cinemas at this time through to the next stage?

CDF: We have developed quite a lot of online resources this year. We have got one that we published last autumn on audience development, one on marketing, and one on programming that is due to come out soon. We are going to do some work around organisational structures this year, so we will have a guide to venue governance and some seminars on that. We have done some core skills training which is very low cost or free. So that is all on the advice and information front. In terms of Film Hub South East, we talk to people about the Cultural Recovery Fund. We looked at some people's applications, advising them about those. We do some consultancy – which is either low cost or free - where we talk to people about their business operations. We continue to lobby and advocate. Some of the surveys we did in the last year were about providing the evidence to lobby for support for the sector, to gather the evidence that demonstrates the stories. Again, there is often a set of assumptions about the sector, and it is important that they are not just assumptions, that they are based on what is actually happening. It varies massively depending on where your venue is located, how you are constructed as an organisation, and what other support you have. So what you do not want is national policies that serve one part of the sector. You need to consistently say 'Actually, over here this is what is happening, and this is what is required, and it needs to happen now'. The thing about these venues is that – particularly in

the pandemic – if they go, they will not come back. Everybody in the arts knows that it is a constant conversation - concerning theatres and music venues too. You might be a music venue and you build up your audiences and your reputation over decades, but, if you shut down, you will not just be able to come back tomorrow, because that is not the way it works. So, it is a tough business.

AB: How do you think audiences will respond to the reopening of cinemas and what different practices and behaviours do you think will be in evidence?

CDF: Research suggests that it depends on who you are and how you feel. Last year when cinemas reopened, the first people that were very enthusiastic about coming back were younger audiences. Obviously, they were less likely to end up in hospital with COVID-19. Family audiences were also keen because they wanted to get out and socialise after being locked-down. But older audiences were cautious. I think this time, if you have been vaccinated, you might be less cautious than you were before. But we do not know for sure.

What you see in the data that comes back from surveys is that there are big differences between different sections of society. There are some people – across every sector, including pubs and restaurants - who are desperate to get out and socialise and reconnect. You see that with some cinemas where they have opened booking and they have sold out some of their screenings already. But then there are other sectors with audiences who are cautious, those who, when you do surveys, will ask a lot of questions about safety measures. It is very important to them that they understand what safety measures are in place, what the venue has done, and how it is communicated to them. There were some people who just did not want to be inside, in an air-conditioned auditorium, regardless of any vaccinations – they just wanted to wait. We have run sessions for cinemas about reopening and we have looked at the data that has come back from audiences already. The things to emphasise have been communicating with the audience what safety measures are in place, and what it will be like when they come in. There are people though that just cannot wait for the cinemas to reopen and are desperate to get back in and watch new films.

There are several streaming platforms now, including those owned by major studios. The big question is: will those people, who have been used to streaming films and watching them at home, want to come back to the cinema, and what for? That is a question that has not been answered yet. Some of the answers will be around price, and the kind of film it is, and the experience of being in the cinema. What you might see is that there are certain films that feel more like an event. You want to watch them on a big screen, with other people. Or there might be films that are a different kind of film – that are more thoughtful, that you want to have discussions with other people about, that you want to hear someone talk about. The thing that is the disruptor has been streaming, and the costs, and people being in the habit of watching things at home. So, arguably, it may make audiences very discerning. There may be a moment where there are certain things that audiences are

happy to watch on their screens at home and there are other films that they would like to see in a collective experience. People will be more specific about when they go to the cinema and what they go to see.

It is like the advent of television or talking pictures. There are always people that predict the downfall of cinema. I remember being on panels at conferences twenty years ago and people saying that 'Everybody will be watching films on their mobile phones. Why do you think there will still be cinemas? There are not going to be cinemas. Cinemas are all going to go out of business'. But this has not happened. It involves change but it is very hard to predict audience behaviour and how it will evolve. The thing is that you must be ready for changes and be able to adapt.

AB: What is your understanding of the concept of engagement in relation to film audiences?

CDF: Film is like all great art forms. It can change the way that you feel about yourself and it can change your life. So real engagement is when it changes your life and the way you see yourself, and the way you see yourself in the world in a way that can be transformational. So, for me, that would be one end of the engagement spectrum. On the other end – I think it is about community. It comes back to seeing your own story reflected on screen or seeing stories that reflect your own experiences. It is about being able to come together with other people. You can go to the cinema by yourself, but it can become a communal experience. It can bring communities together and can bring people together, and enable them to talk to people that they do not know. You see this working with young people – once they have seen a film, other activities can be undertaken together. It can build people-skills and confidence in the way young people feel about themselves.

AB: What is your stance on topical issues of racism within the film industry, a lack of representation, and wider issues of diversity within film production, exhibition, and audiences?

CDF: It is a huge problem. The film sector is like any other industry – it reflects wider society. The film industry itself has always been very protectionist. This relates to accessibility and who gets to know about opportunities. There are people that are privileged and that has always been the case. It has never been a very open or transparent industry on any level. The industry itself has always been inherently exclusive and not inclusive. So, it is an enormous challenge. Just the fact that conversations are happening now, and that people are waking up to the issues is encouraging. It is true that the greater the range of people making films, working in film, watching films – the more beneficial it is. You know that you are going to see better things by doing that, by being more open. But it has got to be about systemic change from the top to the bottom. Audience diversity is absolutely key. Exhibitors thinking about who their audience is, they want to know what people want to experience. It is also not just about what people see, it is about who works in the venues, it is about how

you speak to people, about what your spaces are like, and where people feel comfortable. When you talk about communities it is important to understand that there is a huge complexity around them. They will not all be homogeneous or wanting to see the same things. It is about understanding and addressing that and again thinking about how we make sure that we are not exclusive.

AB: How is Brexit affecting film exhibition and audiences in the UK?

CDF: We do not really know yet. The BFI has a Global Screen Fund for the next year, and possibly longer. At the ICO, we have previously funded training courses with money from Creative Europe and we will no longer be able to access that money. Within the Global Screen Fund there is no scope for training – it sits around production and distribution initiatives. There are bigger questions around a lot of film distribution and film production of films not in English. Those kinds of films that we saw in cinemas were often supported with money from Creative Europe schemes and Brexit means that will no longer be accessed. Worst case scenarios will see fewer interesting films on our screens and fewer interesting films will get made. In terms of how it will really affect the industry, we are yet to see how that will play out. We need to review it in five years, to see what happened. In the future, maybe there will be another kind of disruption, but now I do not feel optimistic about it.

AB: If we are looking from a more macro level, how would you characterise the UK film exhibition industry in comparison to other European and Anglophone countries?

CDF: That is a big question, so it is hard to answer. Obviously, we speak the same language as America, so then it is hard to have our own national cinema in the way that perhaps other countries might have their own national cinemas. State subsidy operates differently here compared to the way it does in France for example. The notion of cinemas having screens devoted to domestically produced films is not the case in the UK. In some ways we are more fortunate, and in other ways we are less fortunate – depending on what you are talking about. We run an International Film Festivals course and when you talk to colleagues from across the world and from across Europe, you are often struck that there are quite a lot of shared issues. So, in some sense, there are a lot of similarities in the work itself: organisations creating economically sustainable businesses, making sure that people get paid properly, making sure that they can develop careers, making sure that people get to access films and develop audiences. A lot of those issues are the same, but there are some quite specific differences depending on where you are.

AB: Do you perceive a gap between academia and industry, and do you ever work with academic partners on any aspects of the ICO?

CDF: We have worked with academic partners in the past but not often. We get asked by universities to speak on their courses. We work with them on some of the bigger projects where we are looking at evaluating projects. We have been involved with the Beyond the Multiplex Project (Universities of Glasgow, Sheffield, Liverpool, and York) – that is an interesting initiative between universities and the industry. It is something we would want to do more but we are a relatively small organisation – so we do sometimes, but not often. I think there are lots of benefits of working with academia – there is the whole question around evaluation and qualitative methods. There are initiatives and there are lots of advantages, but the opportunities to do it are limited now.

Biographical note:

Dr Anna Blagrove is a Lecturer in Animation (Visual Effects) at Norwich University of the Arts. She is also Director of Reel Connections, a company that uses film to engage with community groups. She gained her PhD from the University of East Anglia; her thesis being research into teenage film consumption and cinema-going. Anna's ongoing research interests are film and media audience studies, animation, and national cinemas (especially British, Japanese, and Australian). Email: a.blagrove@nua.ac.uk.

Note:

¹ See: <https://www.comscore.com/>.