

## BBC2 and *World Cinema*

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### *Introduction*

Asked in 2011 what initially sparked his obsession with cinema, the critic and director Mark Cousins replied that it was the *World Cinema* strand, broadcast on BBC2 between 1965 and 1974. The interviewer who posed the question - Mark Cosgrove, the curator of Bristol's Watershed cinema - believes that a generation of people working in the film world are connected by this experience of exposure to foreign-language films broadcast on this strand, which planted 'seeds of cinematic curiosity'.<sup>1</sup> This is also reflected in occasional newspaper articles and Internet chat forum conversations about the paucity of opportunities for 'filmic education through television' compared to times past.<sup>2</sup> From my own experience as a film studies lecturer, I have found that Mark Cousins' own 15-part televisual survey of world cinema, *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* (originally broadcast on More4 in 2011), has had a discernible impact on a much younger generation of cinephiles.<sup>3</sup> Such anecdotal evidence suggests that, partly as a result of encountering the series in A-Level Film Studies classes or through their own volition, many young film students and filmmakers have become remarkably knowledgeable about - for example - Japanese or Southeast Asian cinema, helping to counter the Anglocentrism or Eurocentrism of many film histories, which was a key aim of the series.

The historical and continuing role of television in educating viewers about world cinema tends to be overlooked or underappreciated. With this in mind, and drawing on press cuttings, interviews and quantitative analysis of television listings, this article will chiefly focus on BBC2's film policy during its first decade, in particular the aforementioned *World Cinema* strand. The channel's long-standing commitment to world cinema not only represented a key aspect of the Corporation's 'offer' for cinephiles, but also played a role in shaping the channel's identity during this formative period.<sup>4</sup> The film director Alex Cox, who between 1988 and 1994 presented *Moviedrome* on BBC2 – an occasional series of weekly double-bills of cult films and world cinema which achieved a near legendary status amongst a certain breed of film fans – has been vocal and passionate about the influence of *World Cinema* on his film education:<sup>5</sup>

I saw my first Bunuel film, *Exterminating Angel*, on *World Cinema*. I saw Truffaut films and Godard films and Melville films there. One night they screened the complete version of *Seven Samurai*, more than three hours long, and I watched it, mesmerised. I'd thought that Peckinpah, or Arthur Penn, had invented slow-motion violence. They hadn't. Kurosawa had. And, like them, I became a student of Kurosawa films. Growing up in Merseyside in the 1960s, this was the only regular access to foreign-language cinema I had. (Cox 2004)

Cox' article makes clear that, in the era of what we might term 'media scarcity' *World Cinema* exercised a pedagogical role in educating audiences about film. As Andy Medhurst noted in 1995, in the context of a discussion of *Moviedrome*,

Purists tend to forget that Pwlheli and Peterhead are rather more than a taxi journey from the NFT, and that television is our national repertory cinema...Television can secure films a place in the national consciousness they

could never hope to gain through the minority practice of cinema screenings. Themed seasons draw on a public-service, broadcasting didacticism, inviting viewers to develop critical faculties through comparative analysis. (Medhurst 1995)

The broadcasting of foreign-language feature films – especially in seasons or long-running strands - has often been interpreted as being part and parcel of the channel's remit to cater for minority interests. Yet 'minority interests' does not necessarily equate to 'minority audiences', just as 'box-office' does not necessarily equate to 'mass audience' (note Medhurst's reference to the 'minority practice' of theatrical exhibition). Whilst the role of BBC2 in widening access to world cinema for those lacking alternative provision should be recognized, it is equally important to understand the pragmatic reasons why the BBC showed foreign films from very early on indeed in the Corporation's history. Although *World Cinema* undoubtedly served the kind of pedagogical function that Medhurst has identified, it would be very wrong to assume that the Corporation's film policy has been based simply or solely on opposing commercial product in favour of 'cultural uplift'. Indeed, given the paucity of published research and resources relating to this topic, any such broad generalizations are tentative at best.<sup>6</sup> To begin to overcome these obstacles we can begin by sketching out the fraught relationship between cinema and television over the issue of the broadcasting of feature films, which must form at least part of the backdrop of any such discussion.

According to Ed Buscombe, from their earliest, pre-WW2 days, film companies were loath to sell their wares to television (Buscombe 1991, 198). Evidence shows (Hall 2016) that – discounting an abundant volume of Disney cartoons - there were seventeen films broadcast between 2 November 1936, when the BBC launched its television service and the outbreak of war, when it ceased transmission for defence reasons (1 September 1939). Three of these were short films – a British comedy short directed by Richard Massingham entitled *Tell Me if It Hurts* (1934), and two US New Deal documentary films, *The River* (1938) and *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), directed by Pare Lorentz. It is worth noting that *The River* received its premiere on BBC Television, apparently due to Lorentz' own initiative (Hopkinson 2007, 130). Of the remaining feature films, five were (American) Westerns, three were British (two musical comedies and Michael Powell's *The Edge of the World*) and six were foreign-language films (four French, two German). The first foreign-language film (broadcast on 14 August 1938) was *The Student of Prague*, the 1935 sound remake of the German silent classic. The first feature shown after the war was *Marie Louise* (Switzerland, 1944), broadcast on 28 October 1946.

As Hall has recently (2016) noted, it should be remembered that the scarcity of feature films on television during this initial period was partly due to the limited broadcast time available (two daily sessions of around an hour each, from 3pm to 4pm and 9pm to 10pm, Monday to Saturday). The fact that the majority of the films that the BBC could acquire in the pre-war and immediate post-war period were foreign-language titles can be attributed towards the hostility of both the British and American film industries towards the new medium, which only increased after the war (Buscombe 1991, 198). The film industry was, of course, apprehensive about the threat

which television posed to its audience, and scholars have emphasized how the industry 'closed ranks' to prevent television using its own product to compete against it. Yet, given the considerable length of time it took for the UK to initiate the regular television funding of feature films (with Channel 4/Film on Four in 1982) compared to countries like France, Germany and Italy, there was some validity to the argument that in Britain television paid nothing directly to the film industry yet reaped its rewards. In 1958 an all-industry body was set up specifically to prevent the use on television of UK feature films originally made for the cinema: the Film Industry Defence Organization (FIDO), which over the next six years acquired 'negative covenants' on the TV rights of nearly 1,000 films at a cost of over £2 million, thereby preventing them from being shown on television for up to 21 years.

Television achieved a major retaliatory blow in this battle in 1964 when Samuel Goldwyn and the Music Corporation of America sold packages of films to ITV and the BBC respectively. This was timely for BBC2, whose ratings were initially dire; the first major ratings success for BBC2 was a season called *The Vintage Years of Hollywood* which began in November 1964 and ran for three years, mainly comprising films from the Paramount full pre-1949 catalogue that it acquired from the package deal (Hall 2012), which cost £550,000. The Paramount films were shown on Tuesday evening, which until then had been 'Education Night', and were part of a wider shake-up of what had previously been a rigid nightly programme pattern since the Channel's launch in April 1964 (Marlborough 1964).

It is notable that these were 'vintage' films. The Cinema Exhibitors Association (CEA) had introduced a rule in September 1964 which stipulated that the BBC could not transmit feature films until five years had passed since their theatrical exhibition, in

order that a window of theatrical distribution was preserved before any TV screening. BBC2 was in desperate need of cheap colour programming, and feature films - which the BBC was not allowed to use for more than fifteen percent of their output - represented an attractive and plentiful source of inexpensive material. Foreign-language films were particularly cheap, costing on average £1,000 pounds for three transmissions over three to seven years, during the early years of BBC2's transmission of *World Cinema*.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted, however, that this purchase price was typically only a fraction of the overall cost of presentation (roughly £5,000), due to the care taken (by those responsible for the *World Cinema* strand) to present the best and most complete viewing experience possible. For *World Cinema* this invariably included striking a new 35mm print from the original negative - often with material that had been cut for the theatrical release reinstated - and creating new subtitles.<sup>8</sup> This brought the cost closer to the average cost of the television transmission of *any* film, which, according to the journalist Sean-Day Lewis (1971) was about £4,000 an hour in 1971 - compared with £25,000 for original drama. In 1974 it was calculated that feature film showings on an annual basis, across BBC1 and BBC2, covered 12 percent of total air-time, which, as the BBC were keen to emphasise, was 'less than the percentage of home-produced Drama and Light Entertainment programmes' (quoted in Thomas 1974).

The CEA, as an exhibitor's association, could only pass a resolution about films that had received a release in the UK, and so the 'ban' did not apply to titles that had not been distributed in the UK previously. Many titles screened on *World Cinema*, as we will see, were either UK or World premieres, and so the CEA had no jurisdiction over these. In 1978 the CEA declared that subtitled films were exempt from what was by then a three-year embargo before television transmission. In general terms the embargo was

becoming increasingly untenable by that time, due to Government actions on restrictive practices. In the specific case of foreign-language films it was also increasingly illogical, because, as a rule, TV sales in the UK came to generate more revenue for foreign producers than theatrical release. For foreign-language films, a potential audience in the low millions via television was felt to be more desirable than the effort and uncertainty of trying for theatrical release beforehand (see Anon. 1978).

### The Arrival of BBC2

Although foreign-language films had often been regarded as an attractive option by BBC film buyers struggling to book Hollywood or British films for the reasons sketched out above, historically they have been popular with only a minority of television viewers. In 1939 the BBC conducted a survey of viewers' preferences in regards to the new television service, and 4,207 questionnaires were returned, from an estimated 20,000 set-owners. According to a *Radio Times* column published on 14 July of that year, this survey showed that 77% of viewers disapproved of the broadcasting of Continental feature films (Hall 2016). The main reason for the unpopularity can largely be attributed to the fact that subtitles were then extremely hard to read on the small television screens then available (ibid.). Further research is needed, but it appears that it took 25 years of technological development and the arrival of a second 'alternative' or 'minority' television service for world cinema to truly gain a foothold in British television.

It is safe to say that the arrival of BBC2 marked the beginning of what can be seen as a 'golden age' of film programming; a considerable broadening of the range of

films broadcast, which were often corralled into long-running seasons or strands. The Corporation had learnt that it could develop considerable viewer loyalty with specially-curated strands, or simply by screening old, 'rare' films that had not been shown in cinemas for many years. In doing so it could also gain kudos in some quarters for treating cinema seriously. Yet the British press typically tended to take a very dim view of television's reliance on films, often taking the side of film distributors and exhibitors by arguing that the BBC and ITV were not paying a fair price for the films, or that it was the licence-fee paying public who were being short-changed by being offered 'old' films rather than new television drama. The latter argument tended to degenerate into subjective judgements about what constituted quality, age or vintage, and ignored the fact that the production values of feature films were then far beyond anything that television directors could dream of. This was pointed out by a column in *The Daily Sketch* on 3 September 1964, as part of a broader discussion of BBC2's changing identity, which also contains some interesting assumptions about class and taste:

The poor old kangaroo symbol of BBC 2 has lost most of its bounce these days, and Michael Peacock's feathers are ruffled. The wretched fellow can't win, of course. When he ran BBC 2 as a true alternative, minority service he was hooted and booed from the pit. After this week's announcement that the second service intends to lean heavily on a new crutch – vintage movies – eggheads in the stalls and circle are joining the attack. Why "films" should be such a dirty word when applied to television has always mystified me. They take months to make and staggering sums are lavished on stars and production. TV directors count themselves lucky if they can rehearse their actors for a few weeks. (Anon. 1964)

This essential point was to hold true for many years to come. Just as the cost of screening a film is far less than that of staging a modest television drama, the original cost of making the film for the cinema will have been far in excess of most television productions, meaning that the viewer is, in effect, getting something for practically nothing. However, we should not forget that this sort of argument assumes that bigger budgets equals better 'product', and that it was sometimes used to pillory British television drama. It also ignored the arguments of commentators like Milton Schulman, who saw the value of public service broadcasting as 'building up an industry which could one day make a really significant contribution to our export drive', as well as a bulwark against a commercialized American-style system of broadcasting where TV was threatening to 'dwindle into a minor distribution service for the cinema industry' (1967).

The vast majority of commentators focused on aesthetic rather than economic factors, highlighting the medium's inability to reproduce the visual scale and qualities of a film shown in the cinema. This was the subject of much heated discussion in the press; the differences were marked in this era, especially before BBC2 began broadcasting in colour in 1967 (the first colour broadcasting anywhere in Europe). One of the few journalists to give consistent and detailed attention to the broadcasting of films on television was Allen Eyles, whose articles 'presented televised films as an alternative to the straitjacket imposed by cinema distribution practices' (Harper and Smith 2011, 220). Despite the variance and limitations of television 'picture quality', cinema audiences dwindled annually at this time, whilst the number of armchair movie-watchers was on the increase. By 1966 an average of nine films were being shown per week on the three channels. A journalist from *The Times* noted that 'anyone who finds

the prospect of Wimbledon on both BBC1 and ITV too much can this afternoon turn to BBC2 where he [sic] will find a comparatively recent and highly interesting Czech film, *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness*' (Anon. 1966).

### *World Cinema*

The new channel was quick to make its mark as a showcase for what were somewhat quaintly known as 'Continental'. In May 1964, one month after its inauguration, BBC2 launched its *Cinema 625* strand of (mainly) foreign-language feature films, many of them from Eastern European countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. This was programmed by Dora Nirva, a screenwriter and producer. The *World Cinema* strand began the following year (on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1965), programmed by David Francis, who had moved from his post as Deputy Curator of the National Film Archive to join the BBC. This important strand ran almost continuously until 1974, when Francis left the Corporation.

For those who urged broadcasters to adopt and maintain an enlightened film policy, *World Cinema* was to become exemplary, as a rare exception to the general rules in television of cutting (editing for content or length), block buying (the practice of buying the rights to a mixed package of films in order to acquire certain gems) and haphazard scheduling. The fact that the strand never cut a film meant it was constantly pushing the boundaries of acceptability, as the new foreign films were becoming more explicit every year. The painstaking work of the BBC Acquisitions Department in sourcing, subtitling and even restoring films did a great deal to assuage those who would otherwise have argued that the Corporation did not treat cinema as an art form.

For example, on 14 September 1972 *World Cinema* transmitted a full-length version of *Seven Samurai* (1954) (with an added 45 minutes) that had never previously been seen in the West (as previously referred to by Alex Cox). The emphasis in the film as originally prepared for distribution was entirely on the action, and the full-length version broadcast by *World Cinema* gave a great deal more emphasis on character motivation and atmosphere. New subtitles had to be prepared for the whole film, which was no mean feat, given that it featured classical Japanese from the sixteenth century (Anon. 1972).

As we have seen from the reminiscences of Cox and Cousins, it is generally the 1970s era of *World Cinema* that is recalled by a certain generation. It was only during this decade that *World Cinema* began the practice of seasons, tributes and triple bills to showcase work by particular directors and actors.<sup>9</sup> However it should be noted that these were actually methods of using the purchased rights to transmit titles three times - BBC2 became hard pressed for funds as time went on and this was a way of filling air time cheaply.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the eclecticism of the strand meant that, from its inception in 1965, the regular viewer could quickly develop an appreciation of a variety of national cinemas and movements. Using the BBC's Genome database, which is populated by information from a digitized complete run of the *Radio Times* magazine, I have looked at the films shown during the first five years of the *World Cinema* strand, and their 'country of origin' (as specified in the *Radio Times* entries).

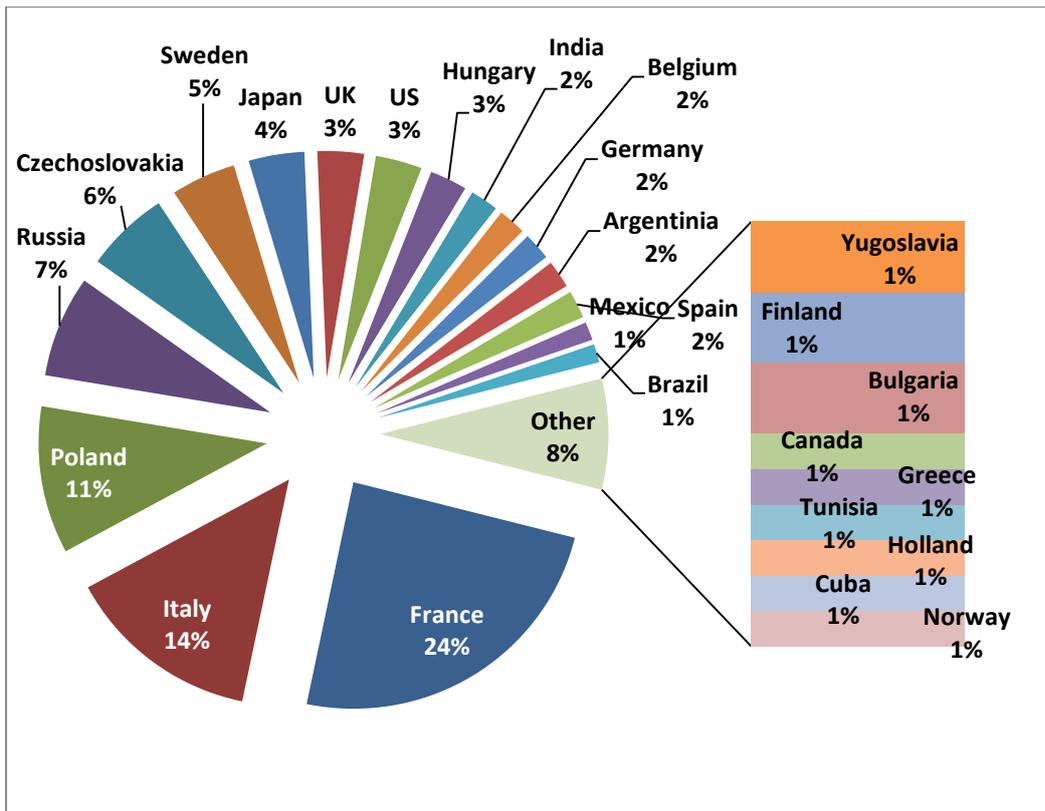


Fig. 1: Breakdown of films shown in *World Cinema* during first 5 years, by country of origin

Before I discuss this data it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of the basic economic imperative that determined film buying. David Francis recently noted that:

Although I attempted to purchase the titles I wanted to show, I did have to keep prices for transmission rights as constant and as low as possible. If I [had] agreed to pay more for a title, then that would have become the price for all future titles. Consequently I did not buy films that were more expensive, however much I wanted them.<sup>11</sup>

According to my calculations, if we include nineteen repeats, *World Cinema*, which occasionally disappeared from the schedules for several months (e.g. October and November 1966) showed 156 films during the period under study (6 October 1965 to 1 October 1970), from 26 countries. The dominance of French films can instantly be noted

– almost a quarter of films (24% or 37 films) shown were of French origin. In fact between 7 February and 5 December 1969 the *World Cinema* ‘banner’ disappeared, and the strand was retitled *The French Cinema*, for the showing of a further 40 French films. As these films appeared under a different ‘umbrella’ title I chose not to include them in my data – if I had included them the percentage of French films transmitted in this time-slot during this period would have risen to 40%.

The predominance of Italian films is not surprising given the huge importance and influence of neo-realism during the 1940s and 1950s, and the esteem assigned to the work of directors like Antonioni, Fellini, De Sica and Visconti. As Peter Cowie has observed, ‘[A]lthough a vanquished nation in the aftermath of Mussolini, Italy recovered its passion for cinema almost immediately’ (Cowie 2006, 1). Only three Spanish films were broadcast during this period, by comparison. In a *Radio Times* notice about *World Cinema*’s transmission of Luis García Berlanga’s *ersperpento* (grotesque drama) *El Verdugo* (*The Executioner* aka *Not on Your Life*, 1963, tx. 19 March 1968), it is noted that ‘Spanish films are a comparative rarity, though Spain has acted as a host to a number of other nation’s filmmakers...’ (Anon. 1968a). Italian-born Marco Ferreri’s *El Cochecito* (*The Wheelchair*, 1960, tx. 22 January 1967) shared Berlanga’s approach to black humour as a vehicle for subversive messages or allegories about Franco’s regime (in Berlanga’s film there is direct criticism of capital punishment, for example). The comparative lack of German films during this period of *World Cinema* is also remarkable – only two German films were transmitted, the light West German comedy *The Captain from Köpenick* (1956) and the East German drama *The Adventures of Werner Holt* (1965).<sup>12</sup> In retrospect, one key factor here was the late flowering of the New German Cinema.

The high profile of Polish films in *World Cinema* is perhaps not surprising, given the excellence of the Łódź Film School. Films from Czechoslovakia and (to a lesser extent) Hungary also featured quite strongly, with the inclusion of politically incisive films like Miklós Jancsó's *The Round-Up* (1965) and István Szabó *The Age of Daydreaming* (1965, aka *Age of Illusions*) from the latter country (see below). It is worth noting, of course, that other factors – beyond the quantity or frequency of films – are important. Only two Brazilian films were shown during this period, but they are both keynote films which exemplify the preoccupations of the Cinema Novo movement – *Barren Lives* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1963), an incredibly powerful depiction of migrant workers and their families trying to survive the drought in the Brazilian north-east; and *The Big City* (*A Grande Cidade*, Carlos Diegues, 1966), which marked the movement's shifting perspective to urban life by tracing the experiences of four different *nordeste* characters who have moved to Rio (Rist 2014, 209). The Cinema Novo movement was arguably at its height when these recent films were transmitted - the former on 14 September 1967, the latter on 12 March 1968. It is also worth mentioning that the *World Cinema* strand gave some viewers their first exposure to some key works by Japanese masters like Ozu (*Autumn Afternoon*, 1962, transmission 9 April 1968), Kurosawa (*Rashomon*, 1950, transmission 28 April 1966) and Hani (the British premiere of the 1966 film *Bride of the Andes*, transmission 10 January 1969; and *She and He*, 1962, transmitted 4 June 1967).

As a brief *Radio Times* entry about *She and He* observed, 'for most filmgoers Japanese cinema means stern and warlike Samurai, dark bloody deeds in the distant feudal past' (Anon. 1967a), but the films of Ozu and Hani instead choose to depict how the achievement of 'Western living standards' had brought with it the modern pressures

and divisions of the social rat-race. This reminds us of the wider cultural importance of the transmission of *World Cinema* on television – it gave audiences vivid glimpses of other cultures and societies of which they may have hitherto had little experience or understanding. Many of the countries which lay behind the ‘Iron Curtain’ and whose regimes were only gradually opening up lines of communication with Western countries were developing a new film aesthetic by the mid-60s; a new film language that ‘could satisfy government apparatchiks while presenting intelligent audiences with a transparent critique of contemporary society’ (Cowie 2006, 139).

The ability of filmmakers like István Szabó and Milos Forman to perceptively portray the process by which young people gain an increasingly sceptical understanding of the ambiguities, compromises and difficulties of life in society (Petley 1978, 153) may have aided British viewers in navigating complex geopolitical histories and realities through a sensitive or humanist ‘personal cinema’. In Hungarian cinema of the period, for example, there is a prevailing interest in historical analysis, and Forman’s early work (*World Cinema* showed *Peter and Pavla* on 21 September 1967) contains profound social analysis of the generation gap. On 15 January 1967, viewers of *World Cinema* were treated to the British premiere of Szabó’s *The Age of Daydreaming*, which had received its theatrical release as recently as 1965; a film about four young engineers who question the world in which they live, which showed the influence of François Truffaut. In a particularly interesting scene within Szabo’s debut two of the characters watch a film about the 1956 (Hungarian) uprising and reflect on what it means to them. *World Cinema* was also able to surprise viewers by showing them glimpses of the vibrant youth cultures that existed beyond the Iron Curtain. The premiere of the Czech

musical *The Hop-Pickers* on 19 December 1967 was introduced as follows in the *Radio Times*:

This Czech film bounces along in a modern style – which is all the more remarkable for the fact that it originated in an area noted (until recently anyway) for adherence to the communist doctrines of social realism, functionalism in art, and contempt for teenage tastes in music and fashion. Made in colour, it's a musical with electric guitars, scooters, groovy dancers, and young lovers. (Anon. 1967b)

In offering up British premieres of notable foreign films and inviting film critic Philip Jenkinson to present brief introductory profiles of them either on screen or in the pages of the *Radio Times*, BBC2 only enlarged the appetite of cineastes, who then wanted even more information about, and contextualization, of these films. Georges Franju's French-Italian crime thriller *Judex*, which had its British premiere on *World Cinema* on 7 April 1966, presents us with a useful example. The original *Judex* was an avenging adventure hero of the silent screen and Franju's film recreated the world of the pre-1914 serial thriller. Whilst the *Times* Special Correspondent enjoyed the post-screening studio discussion, which featured Dilys Powell, John Cassavetes and Mike Sarne, he pointed out the missed opportunity to show the type of film Franju was imitating beforehand (Anon. 1966). It can safely be assumed that the idea of such a post-transmission TV studio discussion would be completely alien to the younger television viewer, however attractive to the 'armchair cineaste'. Of course, the latter is well-served by websites and streaming services such as IMDb, YouTube, MUBI and the BFI Player. However, the lack of serious discussion or analysis of cinema on television has arguably contributed to the fragmentation and atomization of film culture.

The range of films shown during this period offers an interesting contrast with the situation that pertains today, where the appetite for watching films at home tends to be satiated by on-demand streaming services rather than television. As a *Times* article of 1968 noted, the BBC's film coverage covered a wide range of taste, for 'the viewer determined to watch *World Cinema* is not likely to spend a great deal of time with the average offering of [BBC-1's] *British Film Comedy* or...*Saturday Thriller*' (Anon. 1968b). As I have suggested previously, having two networks that were complementary, the BBC was able to show some films of minority or specialist appeal on BBC2. However, it is worth noting that the same article bemoaned the 'banishing' of all foreign films to BBC2's *World Cinema*, which suggests that it was commonly thought to be something of a late-night ghetto. Of course, the term 'late-night' is relative - *World Cinema* was initially shown at 9pm on Friday nights, and was often pushed back to (or towards) 10pm. This is not what the contemporary viewer would necessarily regard as late-night programming, but of course then the broadcasting hours were far more limited and restricted. Much press and magazine coverage of these films strands referred to what might be termed their 'repertory function' of giving exposure or renewed attention to forgotten classics. As Allen Eyles noted,

[O]ften television is indispensable for reviving films that have been totally unavailable. It pays enough money to get new prints, which an individual cinema would be hard put to arrange...There have been many revivals of well-known critical successes and formidable old Eisenstein reached an audience of millions with *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*. (1965)

I would not like to suggest, however, that there was unanimous praise of the BBC's film policy as a whole. In 1971 Ed Buscombe prepared a report for UNESCO on the treatment

of cinema by television in Britain. This was for more critical of both BBC and ITV's film policies, and stated,

Both ITV and the BBC lack a spirit of adventure in their buying policy. The BBC are especially faint-hearted. *World Cinema* is tucked away on BBC2, late at night where it can do no harm. They can put on every month, at peak viewing time on a Sunday night, a classic play by Shakespeare or Ibsen, yet invariably the same strand on the other three weeks of the month is filled by a safe film with a big Hollywood star. If the great names of drama are not too much for the popular audience, then why not Renoir or Bergman? (quoted in Allan 1971)

David Pirie, writing in *Time Out*, found Buscombe a 'little harsh' on the BBC. He praised *World Cinema* for its UK premieres of foreign-language – 'in this respect it can claim to have been more courageous than many film distributors' - and called for an extension of broadcasting hours so that more minority-type films (whether underground, foreign or silent) could be shown (1971).

In 1974 David Francis departed the BBC, and the *World Cinema* strand – which was perhaps the last of the original BBC2 minority initiatives - was cancelled. In September 1976 a new strand was launched, which can be seen as a belated replacement for *World Cinema*, but with a 'twist'. Entitled Film International, its *Radio Times* billing significantly promised 'some of the *latest* and best feature films from around the world' (emphasis added). The screening of a number of recent critically acclaimed European films in Film International, such as Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: Wrath of God* (1972) and Victor Erice's *Spirit of the Beehive* (1973), shortly before or in parallel with their theatrical releases was interpreted by the press, in the light of the long-running battle between the BBC and CEA, as a new assault on the five-year rule. An

unnamed BBC executive, quoted in an article in the *Daily Mail* on 17 June 1976, struck a conciliatory tone:

More cinema-owners are realising that TV is not a competitor but can be a useful ally. We can help extend the audience for a film – a television screening actually increases the box-office. The old feud is over. Cinema and TV ought to help each other. (quoted in Anon. 1976)

Until its cancellation in February 1986, Film International showed no fewer than 72 UK premieres across its ten year run. Sometimes the Corporation actively encouraged cinemas to show its acquisitions, in order to generate favourable pre-publicity for the TV screening. The Corporation could therefore be seen to support films which, in the words of the Alan Howden, the BBC's Head of Programme Acquisition, 'deserved the wide critical attention they can command only when shown on the big screen' (quoted in Allan 1980).

### Conclusion

After the demise of Film International the BBC2 maintained no regular specific commitment to world cinema, partly as this was an area which had been given extensive coverage from Channel 4 since the mid-1980s, with which it was difficult to compete. Instead the channel experimented with weekly double bill 'matinees' introduced by a film critic or director. This began with *Film Club* (1986 to 1991), which showed, in a late-night slot, not just foreign-language films but also cult and art-house films, or films 'that needed a little support' (for example, not having well-known actors) (Thompson 2015). *Film Club* was, like *World Cinema*, a 'protected area' in that it always

showed films entirely uncut, including films that would otherwise have been edited for bad language (ibid.). *Film Club* was initially introduced by film critic Derek Malcolm, and then by a variety of directors, including Louis Malle and Bertrand Tavernier. This idea was later to develop into the aforementioned *Moviedrome*, presented firstly by Alex Cox (between 1988 and 1994) and later Mark Cousins (1997-2000). I do not have the scope within this article to discuss these strands here, but it is telling that Cox has commented that he left *Moviedrome* due to his frustration at foreign language choices being increasingly excluded from the strand (2004), and undoubtedly it was the increasing emphasis on ratings that was the main cause of BBC2's lessening commitment to world cinema during this period. The trend towards 'playing safe' was attributed to ratings as early as 1979, when Lynda Myles commented,

*World Cinema* on BBC2 used to be quite different, showing fantastic movies such as Bellochio's *China is Near* but now the ratings battle means we just don't see films like that. (quoted in Taylor 1979)

But we must also remember that Channel 4 can be said to have captured territory from the BBC when it came to the transmission of world cinema in the '80s and '90s, through the expertise and enthusiasm of the channel's first film buyer Derek Hill, and the channel's commitment to a broad film culture, instilled under its first Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs. When considering the reasons for the decline of world cinema on TV in the contemporary era, the proliferation of world cinema via streaming services and DVD labels must represent at least part of the answer. Whereas BBC4 used to be known for a regular weekly commitment to world cinema, it is now instead associated with *The Killing* (originally broadcast on BBC4 in 2011 and 2012) and a string of other Scandinavian and European dramas, which have attracted considerable audiences for a

'minority' channel. These dramas have proved that subtitles are not a barrier to enjoyment. But ratings are still a major determining factor as regards programming and scheduling, of course, as these dramas have not just achieved sizeable audiences, but have also retained them with consistency across the length of series runs. I would like to finish by raising some key questions. Can we hope that the popularity of foreign-language dramas shown on BBC4 and Channel 4's *Walter Presents* (the latter a video on-demand service) will translate into a renewed confidence to program world cinema in more prominent time-slots? Does serendipity (the accidental discovery of films) still play a role in terms of self-education in film history? More generally, with so many channels available, why is there still a paucity of choice when it comes to films? Do more channels have to mean more of the same?

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to David Francis for providing information about *World Cinema*, and for commenting on a draft of this article. Thanks also to David Thompson and Steve Jenkins, for giving up their time to be interviewed about their involvement in film buying for the BBC. Because of limitations of space I was not able to make use of these interviews here, but in due course I hope to write further articles which focus on the later periods of BBC2's film policy, in which they were involved.

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Cosgrove, Watershed Podcast September 2011. See [http://www.watershed.co.uk/podcast/audio/2011\\_09/watershed\\_2011\\_09.pdf](http://www.watershed.co.uk/podcast/audio/2011_09/watershed_2011_09.pdf) (accessed 31 October 2016).

<sup>2</sup> As well as Alex Cox' article (cited below), see Matthew Sweet, 'Where Did All the Great Movies Go?', *The Guardian*, 9 February 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/feb/09/1> (accessed 31 August 2016). For chat forum discussion see, for example, 'Movies on terrestrial TV – are we owed an education in cinema?', *Digital Spy*, <http://forums.digitalspy.co.uk/showthread.php?t=536180> (accessed 31 August 2016).

<sup>3</sup> *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* was first broadcast on More4, between 3 September and 10 December 2011.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect it foreshadowed Channel 4's adventurous film policy during the eighties and early nineties, which was a key component of its own statutory obligation to cater for minority interests.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Cox presented 141 films for *Moviedrome* between 8 May 1988 (the first edition) and 12 September 1994, and Mark Cousins presented 66 films between 8 June 1997 and 9 July 2000 (the last edition). See <http://Moviedromer.tumblr.com/filmspagetest> (accessed 24 October 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Researching the history of the BBC's use of purchased programming in general can be difficult, not least because the BBC Written Archives have tended to retain and preserve documentation relating only to the BBC's own output, for essentially pragmatic reasons.

<sup>7</sup> David Francis, personal communication with the author, 7 April 2014.

<sup>8</sup> John Michinton always re-translated the original dialogue script and re-spotted the new text. These subtitles which were put onto separate 35mm print stock, which was then synchronised with the film print. David Francis, personal communication with the author, 31 August 2016.

<sup>9</sup> It can be noted, however, that in the month of September 1966 *World Cinema* screened no fewer than five films (including the two-part *Eroica*) in tribute to the influential Polish director Andrzej Munk, who had been killed in an accident 5 years earlier.

<sup>10</sup> David Francis, personal communication with the author, 31 August 2016.

<sup>11</sup> David Francis, personal communication with the author, 28 June 2016.

<sup>12</sup> When *The Adventures of Werner Holt* was first shown in London in July 1967, audiences saw a dubbed version in which British 'public school accents' were grafted on to the subtly characterized young German actors. For *World Cinema* the original version was shown.

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