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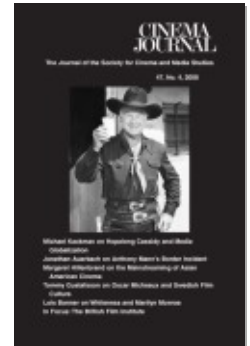
## Who Are These People?

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# In Focus: The British Film Institute

edited by Toby Miller

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## Who Are These People?<sup>1</sup>



by Toby Miller

A letter to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* signed by 48 academics—42 from overseas—cited BFI Publishing’s “unique contribution to the study of film and television around the globe;” a similar letter to the *Guardian* expressed the concern of 58 academics. [BFI Director Amanda] Nevill, however, is unmoved. “Go back and analyse who these people are. It’s a very small number of people ... saying a small number of things”—*Time Out*<sup>2</sup>

The time is the late 1990s, and I am cleaning under my bed—an unusual activity for me. The phone rings. I reach for the cordless device, and a pleasant-sounding, youngish man introduces himself as a consultant who has been asked to look for ways to improve the British Film Institute (the BFI). He was given my name and number. His main thought is that the Institute should become more commercial, following the example of the American Film Institute (the AFI). I laugh and say that the AFI is a joke, a public relations arm of Hollywood with minimal academic, cultural, theoretical, political, or intellectual credibility. The AFI needs to become more like the BFI, I suggest.<sup>3</sup> He laughs, the conversation ends amicably, and the dust accumulates under the futon. Ten years later, someone pins up *Kill Bill* posters around the BFI, with Uma Thurman’s sword-wielding figure airbrushed away and replaced by the face of the organization’s director, Amanda Nevill. The trope symbolizes her stripping the BFI of its assets, to remake it under the spell of the private sector.<sup>4</sup>

I suspect that today the joke is on people like me, not the BFI’s director or the advance-guard consultant of a decade ago. Buttressed by years of neoliberalism, their triumph seems complete. For many of us, however, “the overall mood of the organization” seems “subdued, quite different to the buzzy atmosphere 10 years ago.”<sup>5</sup> What had been “an enviable model” of cultural policy is now widely regarded as “an awful example of political vandalism.”<sup>6</sup> This dossier seeks to explain how that happened, and what it means for us now, in the light of the BFI’s past.

How should we conceptualize the British Film Institute? In struggling for an analogy, anthropological museums come to mind. Ethology, ethnology, and

archaeology were pioneered by such institutions. The study of difference moved from the museum to the classroom in part via their example. Something similar occurred with screen studies, which in its humanities manifestation has drawn massively on the example set by the BFI. The great thing about the Institute for scholars has been that its teaching, archiving, and publishing were run by intellectuals, pioneers of English-language film theory, history, and study. They provided an example of how to “do” screen culture that we cloistered souls now emulate.

The BFI’s origins in the late 1920s and early 1930s lay in concerns about the perils and promises of cinema, its twin capacities to curse and to bless, to intoxicate and to educate. In those days, the screen was regarded by such bodies as the Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, a creature of the adult-education movement, as “a powerful instrument for good and evil.”<sup>7</sup> That discourse animated the formation of the BFI. Activists thought that the best way to use movies as an “instrument” for “good” over “evil” was through the generation of a considered, improving discourse that would elevate viewers.<sup>8</sup>

Such beliefs conceived of culture as “conformity to law without the law,” as articulated by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*. Kant argued that aesthetic contemplation, if properly tutored, could produce “morally practical precepts” that transcended particular interests through “public sense, i.e. a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation ... to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind.”<sup>9</sup>

The BFI initially focused on publishing and education. The heart of its mission from 1933 to 1948 was providing instructions for projectionists, short courses for teachers, film pantheons for pupils, and periodicals for readers.<sup>10</sup> Similar drives animated Britain’s inter- and postwar adult-education movement more broadly, alongside the left Leavisism that took hold in schools and elsewhere. This position was carried forward at the Institute and various British universities in the 1950s and 1960s by the likes of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, and Paddy Whannel. Some later turned to Marxism, of course, partially abjuring this earlier, confident brokerage of taste.

From those modest beginnings, the BFI came to offer an extraordinary array of objects and services. The National Film and Television Archive has been collecting, cataloguing, and preserving for over seven decades. It has 675,000 TV shows and 180,000 movies. The National Library is the largest source of materials about the screen in the world, with over two million newspaper cuttings; 47,000 books, CD-ROMs, annuals, and pamphlets; 110,000 periodicals; 20,000 scripts; and 25,000 press books. The production, exhibition, and distribution apparatus includes annual sales of 100,000 books, DVDs, and associated texts and 300,000 copies of *Sight & Sound*, an IMAX® theatre, and the National Film Theatre. The superb West End offices, a gift from John Paul Getty II, are worth millions, while the Institute draws its basic operating budget from the UK Film Council, a peak body of the film industry established by the Government that re-grants state moneys.

Despite these successes, as a public body that receives a tiny proportion of state outlays but operates in a fissiparous and prominent sector, the BFI has routinely endured crises of finance, governance, morale, and direction, not unlike those experienced by public broadcasters. It is variously said to be too populist, not populist enough, too scholarly, not scholarly enough, too independent, not independent enough, too British, not British enough. The first moment of critique occurred during the Second World War, when the Darlington Hall Trust accused the Institute of failing to change the shape of education and hence fulfill its principal mission. A few years later, the Radcliffe Committee of Enquiry into the Future Constitution and Work of the BFI called for greater funding, expanded screenings, and regional devolution. Subsequent developments saw these other activities blossom.<sup>11</sup> So criticism can generate expansion.

The Institute's budget has stagnated for years in absolute, let alone real terms, at around £16 million; many functions are being sold or diminished. Tony Blair's lasting legacy to profligacy (the bid to stage the summer Olympics in London) is expected to starve cultural subvention for the foreseeable future.<sup>12</sup> This might, in *Variety's* words, induce a "cynical shrug." After all, does the Institute not "lurch permanently from one crisis to another"?<sup>13</sup> Some even welcome these developments. "GBR" offered the *Guardian* this blog comment on August 3, 2007: "The BFI are a valuable source for archive material but their publishing wing produced a hideous lot of pseudo-psychoanalytical twaddle" that "reduced film theory to the level of Scientology."

But the *Observer* suggests that this time things are different.<sup>14</sup> The current regime has spent a third of the budget creating and promoting BFI Southbank (a gallery, mediatheque, and studio cinema). In the process it has transferred buckets of public money to consultants and produced a possible white elephant that already sucks money from other activities.<sup>15</sup> BFI Publishing has been sold off, archiving is restricted, the Library is effectively out to tender, and rumors spread that Getty's bequest may be sold to pay for neoliberalism's extravagant reallocation of resources to West End glitz. Meanwhile, the parental Film Council pours money into industry training via the new Film Business Academy so that bright young things know the ins and outs of tax avoidance.<sup>16</sup>

And BFI management is increasingly prone to puerile warlockcraft superstitions about "excellence," "access," and "evaluation." Basically, the organization seeks to resemble the entity it now serves—business. This mimetic managerial fallacy increases surveillance and ties budgets to "outcomes," in keeping with the prevailing beliefs of public-policy mandarins and their restless quest to conduct themselves like corporate elves *manqués*. Many of us who have worked for corporations know what laughably inefficient institutions they can be—but then, those who watch intellectuals from the perch of administration frequently have *ressentiment* in their eyes and underachievement on their résumés.

This tendency is exemplified in the fate of Danny Birchall, who wrote a regular 2007 column for *Sight & Sound* about online movies. In early November of

that year, he received an email from the editor that read, in part, "Since your call for Amanda to resign—something I'm sure you know she took very personally—your column, fine as it is, has become more trouble to me than it's worth." He was purged. The crime? Birchall—a freelancer, not an employee—had posted a jokey New Year's 2007 message on his blog calling for Nevill to go. At the point that he was fired, the posting had been up for ten months. It had been seen by, ahem, twenty-four people. Would that not be the kind of customer research favored by auditors? Would not the topic exemplify the open criticism that public institutions and cultural leaders should welcome? Apparently not, until the fuss became public and the editor relented.<sup>17</sup>

The thinking that now makes policy for and at the BFI is evident in the British Comptroller and Auditor General's National Audit Office 2003 report, *Improving Access to, and Education About, the Moving Image Through the British Film Institute*. Page one's "Executive Summary" (do you ever feel as though you are not qualified to read these crib sheets for the important-but-distracted?) says that the BFI must "broaden access by attracting new customers" (1). The Audit Office proceeds to pummel its object of desire because there has been "insufficient evaluation by the BFI of the BFI's activities" (3). We are witnesses here to a creeping, creepy governmentality blended with commodification, where the only arguments with any play are to do with stimulating business and incorporating the populace into corporate multiculturalism.

The Institute is increasingly conceived, it seems, as a hand servant to the movie industry. This is wrongheaded. The BFI should not be "a commercial organization," but "a public body dedicated to a whole series of integrated functions designed to foster film culture at large."<sup>18</sup> Subordinating it to industry's concerns is "a bit like having the British Library run by the Publisher's Association."<sup>19</sup> As *Time Out* said, it puts screen culture "at the mercy of market forces."<sup>20</sup>

What is to be done? The British have a venerable notion of "the great and the good." It has counterparts in the UN's Eminent Persons Groups, Royal Commissions, and joint bodies convened by otherwise rivalrous think tanks, for example, the American Enterprise Institute–Brookings Joint Center for Regulatory Studies. The idea is to deal with controversial topics in ways that blend popular visibility, political bipartisanship, professional expertise, and public interest, deliberating without the burden of party loyalty or corporate responsibility. No such group has been convened to ponder this tragic fire sale. As per Billy Bragg's lament in "Tear Down the Union Jack," "the great and the good" have been displaced by "the greedy and the mean" in "England.co.uk." Ms Nevill asked "who these people are" that signed petitions opposing the sale of publishing. The answer is that we are professors of media studies from the United States, Sweden, India, Hong Kong, Canada, Australia, and Britain. We may not be "the great and the good." And we are stuck thinking like Clement Atlee and Immanuel Kant instead of Tony Blair and Milton Friedman. Woops, wrong object choices.<sup>21</sup> But at least we know who

we are, as per the BFI director's command. And we should agitate for the "great and the good" to roar back into town and review the BFI.<sup>22</sup>

Britain's Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association produced a 2007 paper expressing concern at the Institute's idea that universities take over the functions of the Library.<sup>23</sup> This critique is in keeping with a desire for decentralization rather than locking up treasures in cloisters, and an understanding that the work of the Institute is international, not merely national. SCMS should follow that lead and start a ginger group in the United States to push for the AFI to get real and perform a serious function for U.S. and world screen culture. We have made periodic attempts to do this since 1969<sup>24</sup>—let us forge a broad-based coalition with other professional bodies and try again.

And the BFI? Its infrastructure unraveling, its intellectuals gone, and its leadership compromised, the Institute is a residual sign of public culture, a sign now thoroughly disarticulated from its referent. That legacy deserves better than to be sloughed off to capital by a bunch of bottom-feeding neoliberals. I hope this dossier goes some way to put on record a sense of what has been, what has been lost, and the significance of its influence on screen studies.

## Notes

1. Thanks to Edward Buscombe and Rick Maxwell for comments, to Heather Hendershot for proposing this dossier, and to the authors for producing in double-quick time. It is no surprise that they are not fussy career academics.
2. Dave Calhoun and Ben Walters, "Inside the BFI," *Time Out*, October 18, 2007.
3. Like the BFI, ideas for an AFI were around from at least the 1930s (Lorraine Noble, "Modernization, By Way of the Educational Film," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 10, no. 3 [1936]: 152). The BFI became an inspirational model for what activists hoped the AFI might become (Colin Young, "An American Film Institute: A Proposal," *Film Quarterly* 14, no. 4 [1961]: 40). Once created, the Institute essentially excluded intellectuals from management, and cutbacks squashed screen studies (Ernest Callenbach, "The Unloved One: Crisis at the American Film Institute," *Film Quarterly* 24, no. 4 [1971]: 54).
4. Keith Dovkants, "The Kill Bill Prank and the BFI Boss Accused of Asset-Stripping," *Evening Standard*, October 12, 2007, A18.
5. Sarita Malik, "Now You See Me . . ." *Guardian*, August 3, 2007.
6. Colin MacCabe, "Save Our Film Heritage from the Political Vandals," *Observer*, July 8, 2007.
7. *The Film in National Life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932).
8. Christophe Dupin, "The Postwar Transformation of the British Film Institute and its Impact on the Development of a National Film Culture in Britain," *Screen* 47, no. 4 (2006): 443–44.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (New York: Hackett Publishing, 1987).
10. Dupin, "The Postwar Transformation," 444.
11. Dupin, "The Postwar Transformation," 445, 447.
12. Dovkants, "The Kill Bill Prank."
13. Adam Dawtre, "BFI Shakeup Raises Alarm," *Variety*, June 18–24, 2007, 12.

14. MacCabe, "Save Our Film Heritage."
15. Dovkants, "The Kill Bill Prank"; Dawtrey, "BFI Shakeup"; Cy Young, "The Heart is Being Ripped Out of the British Film Institute," *Guardian*, June 13, 2007.
16. Geoffrey Macnab, "Times Look Bleak for the BFI," *Guardian*, June 14, 2007. Fortunately, the government directly allocated £25 million for archiving in 2007 (Simon Crear, "Government's £25m Boost to Save British Film Institute's Archive," *Times*, October 17, 2007).
17. See Danny Birchall's blog at squaresofwheat.wordpress.com.
18. Michael Chanan et al., "BFI Realignment Threat to Book Publishing Imprint," *Guardian*, June 9, 2007, 37.
19. Cary Bazalgette, "The Heart is Being Ripped Out of the British Film Institute," *Guardian*, June 13, 2007.
20. Calhoun and Walters, "Inside the BFI."
21. Peter Monaghan, "British Film Institute Will Outsource Production Role of its Publishing Arm," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 15, 2007, A16. The University of California Press, which dutifully distributed BFI titles for years, was never consulted about the changes to publishing. I told the Press about the proposal, staggered that the Institute's incompetence stretched to this failure to communicate. Business efficiency, anyone? Anyone?
22. For those seeking to participate, a good source for information is Pam Cook's www.bfiwatch.blogspot.com.
23. Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association, *The Issues Facing the British Film Institute National Library*, January 2007.
24. Gerald Mast, "The AFI and Film Education I: Gerald Mast Responds to E. Ann Kaplan's Editorial Statement on the Closing of the AFI Education Services Program (*Cinema Journal*, Summer 1983)," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 1 (1983): 57–59.

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## The British Film Institute

by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith



Founded in 1933, the British Film Institute (BFI) celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2008, making it the most long-standing government-sponsored arts organization in Britain. It is also the oldest film-related institution of its type in the world. It is not only the oldest but also unique, since nowhere else does one find so many functions synthesized and indeed synergized into a single organization.

The BFI started small. In its first year its government grant was £4,500—equivalent perhaps to £100,000 (\$200,000) today, but still not very much. But it grew. It took over an educational magazine called *Sight & Sound*. It began to collect books and other printed materials, film stills, and actual films. In 1935 it created the National Film Library, consisting on the one hand of films to be preserved for posterity and on the other hand of a lending collection of must-see films for colleges and film societies. During the war its premises were bombed but the