

Moving with the times

The *bfi* in the twenty-first century

Since its launch 67 years ago, the British Film Institute has been the UK's leading authority on moving images, with world-renowned collections and active roles in promoting appreciation of film and television and encouraging audiences to sample the widest possible range of programming.



Jon Teckman, Director of the *bfi*

Here, **Jon Teckman**, Director of the *bfi*, outlines why the organisation is looking forward to a similarly bright future.



The *bfi* London IMAX®

Imagine a 'national film centre.' What ideas does this evoke? For me it conjures up a state-of-the-art focal point for students, residents, visitors, children and adults of all ages, and for the film industry itself. Somewhere world-class, in pleasant surroundings, with everything under one roof. A constant celebration of all aspects of the moving image.

What could such a place contain?

A modern multi-screen cinema, certainly, showing the best new releases from around the world, alongside a choice of previews and cool revivals; a library housing thousands of books and magazines, and a filmographic database placing all the movie information you could ever wish for at your fingertips; as well as exhibition galleries, study rooms, private viewing facilities, refreshment areas and an interactive zone tracing the development of film and television over more than 100 years. In short, everything you would need to be able to experience, enjoy and discover more about the world of film and television.

This long-cherished dream is soon to become a reality, through the creation of the *bfi* Film Centre.

With education as our watchword, preparations are already underway for a highly accessible showcase for our activities and collections, located close to the BA London Eye and Hungerford Bridge on London's South Bank.

Stretching along the southern side of the Thames between Lambeth and Blackfriars Bridges, the South Bank is home to the world's largest concentration

of arts facilities. The second largest, New York's Lincoln Center, is barely half the size. Among the South Bank's landmarks are the Royal Festival Hall (headquarters of the SBC, which manages the site), the Hayward Gallery, and the Royal National Theatre.

Back in 1951, the South Bank hosted the Festival of Britain. From this event, a celebration of British arts, science and design, came a legacy of two buildings: the Royal Festival Hall, soon to be refurbished, and the Telekinema, the site of which was taken over in 1952 by the National Film Theatre (NFT) – establishing the *bfi*'s first home by the river.

The *bfi* and SBC have remained committed to the South Bank ever since. In 1988 we added the Museum of the Moving Image (now temporarily closed to the public prior to redevelopment), the riverfront Film Café in 1997, and two years later the *bfi* London IMAX® Cinema, featuring the UK's largest screen, which has successfully regenerated the space within Waterloo's bustling roundabout. Today, we are seeking to make further dramatic improvements to the local environment. After very extensive consultation, an overall masterplan

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The bfi Film centre will be launched in a new South Bank location
Computer image courtesy of Visual Artworks (London)

for the South Bank site has been created by Rick Mather Architects. Published in draft form in February 2000, and still subject to ongoing consultation, the masterplan incorporates the new *bfi* Film Centre. Planning permission will be requested soon and designers appointed in the New Year.

It is a propitious time for us to consider making such a giant leap. UK cinema admissions continue their gentle upward trend: in 1999, the 140 million mark was exceeded for the first time in 27 years. Whilst the technologies by which film is both delivered and consumed develop rapidly, the public's appetite for the moving image in all its forms is more voracious than ever. Some 60% of our population watch at least two hours' television daily. Adults aged 35-plus, rather than teenagers, are now the fastest-growing part of the cinema audience. The *bfi* is seeking to run more and more educational activities for all sectors of our population – yet we have long since run out of space on our current public sites under Waterloo Bridge and in Stephen Street in London's West End. When the Film Centre opens (it is hoped that construction work can start in 2003, with completion a year later) both those premises will close.

In addition to upgrading and extending our facilities, we are determined to offer a greater variety of services UK-wide. Inevitably, perhaps, in the twenty-first century our efforts are concentrating increasingly on digital delivery. We are releasing more films and programmes on DVD, as well as on VHS. Usage of the *bfi* website (www.bfi.org.uk), completely redesigned a year ago, continues to grow substantially and is likely to go on doing so.

Furthermore, from autumn 2000, we will be piloting our multimedia service, *bfi* Online, in selected technology colleges, in addition to Nottingham's Broadway Media Centre and our own NFT and library. Sitting at the easy-to-use *bfi* Online terminal, users may browse a selection of film extracts including works by Hitchcock, Korda, and Powell and Pressburger, and classic television from *Quatermass and the Pit* to *The Professionals*. Alongside more than 30 hours of high-quality digital video (with more to come), *bfi* Online offers scripts, synopses, still photographs and recorded interview clips. It is a unique resource for research and education. A sister project, coordinated by the Northern Ireland Film Commission, was launched at several locations across Ulster in November 2000.

That same month, the Regus London Film Festival, organised by the *bfi*, reached larger audiences in the capital (more than 120,000 people in two weeks), then toured to more UK cities (14), than ever before. In January 2001, we plan to launch a new touring exhibition, 'Movies on the Move', with a

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brand-new format for a selection of our museum displays and information, which will visit venues UK-wide. We also have ambitious plans to make more of our information, materials and resources available on the internet (subject to copyright clearances). The collections which the *bfi* painstakingly preserves – including films dating back to 1894, television programmes, stills, posters, props, books, magazines, cuttings and scripts – are among the most extensive in the world. They give a wonderfully detailed picture of our world, the stories we tell, the dreams we foster, the characters we recall: they constitute the very history of our lives.

Enabling diverse audiences today and in the future to learn about and enjoy this wonderful treasure trove is an essential part of the *bfi*'s work. In tandem with the new *bfi* Film Centre, we are planning to develop our existing J Paul Getty Conservation Centre at Berkhamsted, where much of the *bfi*'s collection is expertly stored, into a world-class facility for moving image preservation and research.

Whatever the future holds – and who knows precisely where, for instance, the convergence of television and the internet will lead – the moving image will play an increasingly vital role in our everyday lives. And whatever the delivery mechanism, it is always the content, the programming, that will move, stimulate, enrich us.

In 2003, the British Film Institute reaches its seventieth birthday. What present would we most like? To have made and retained contact with everyone in the UK who has an interest in the moving image, whether physically via a *bfi* event, activity, programme or publication (about which you can hear more by calling our 24-hour events line 0870 240 40 50); or virtually, via the internet (at www.bfi.org.uk). Now that would really be a cause for celebration.