

Oscar Film Unit

Suggestions for Improvements to the Service Offered by the Film Society to Students, Staff and Guests of the University

Introduction

Oscar Film Unit, along with the University Arts Cinema, has a long and proud tradition of entertaining members of the University of Surrey and the general public through the medium of motion pictures for more than thirty years. OFU provides a vital service at excellent value for money and one is generally appreciated and well supported by the University and Union.

However, it has become increasingly clear over the past few years, particularly since the Odeon multiplex was constructed, that the support for a Campus Cinema would dwindle unless improvements were made to the technical quality of film presentation.

Three excellent committees in a row have fought hard to halt the decline in attendance by making the whole experience more interesting or attractive in other ways. Nonetheless, from 1998, the Union has been forced to start subsidising OFU to make ends meet.

The reasons for this are simple. People do not see OFU as a "night out" on a par with even a minor local cinema. OFU uses outdated equipment that can not hope to ever match a multiplex in terms of sound or picture quality, and is tied down by contractual obligations that prevent it from showing advertisements and trailers to generate extra income.

This report documents some of the ways that the service that OFU provides could be improved, to entice more people to come to films. Some of the solutions are expensive, some are completely free, and although not necessarily all of them need to be implemented to improve OFU's fortunes, they would work well as a complete package - a re-launch on the scale of the new GU2 radio station.

Like GU2, the improvements would not all be funded by USSU, as the University currently owns a 50% stake in OFU's projection equipment.

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Personal Note From The Treasurer

I have been a very active member of Oscar Film Unit since the week I joined the University in September 1997. I have seen many, many people put a lot of hard work into the society with little or no reward for themselves. The service that the society offers has consistently improved, year on year, throughout the time I have been on the committee, and I would like to think that I have had at least some small part in the improvements so far. We probably offer the best value for money entertainment anywhere in the University or town. Despite this, attendance is still disappointing.

There are a hard-core few who do turn up to every film, but the most usual response is typified by the student who, a couple of years ago, e-mailed the society to complain about the quality of the presentation. "At least," he said, "get stereo sound and a bigger picture, and by the way, can I have my money back?" Sadly, he was ignoring the basic limitations of our equipment. A member of the public at a University Arts Cinema screening also made a strong complaint about the overall quality of the film he was watching. Being fairly elderly, he found it almost impossible to distinguish the dialogue in the film.

In a nutshell, OFU and UAC have a very low rate of repeat attendance, because people are put off by the quality of presentation.

I am intending to graduate and leave the University in May 2001, and whilst I know that any improvements to the service that OFU offers will take time to implement, particularly since careful liaison between USSU and UniS will be required, I would like to leave in the knowledge that this important Union society is not being allowed to die slowly.

David Abbott
Treasurer, Oscar Film Unit.
21/10/2000

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Personal Note From The Secretary

In the time that I have been actively involved with Oscar Film Unit, it has become evident that it has benefited enormously from the input of many enthusiastic and dedicated personnel. However, these benefits - an excellent website, well co-ordinated publicity, and consistently good standards of operation - have not compensated adequately for the greatest problem that the society faces today: the low quality of film presentation dictated by our current resources.

In the last semester, I have been regularly selling passes at OFU and UAC screenings. In this time, I have formed the opinion that OFU arguably does not have a faithful audience. It is my opinion that, in the current situation, the majority of OFU's audiences turn up to see specific films that they have seen before and expect to enjoy - a casual decision, akin to renting a video for a night. OFU attendances are chiefly informed by the perceived merits of or familiarity with an individual film, as opposed to any loyalty (however fleeting) to the society itself.

Considering that this situation exists in spite of the excellent and highly professional OFU website, regular campus-wide publicity campaigns, and the weekly column / advertisement in Barefacts, it is hard to escape the conclusion that *the current quality of OFU's presentations is considered unsatisfactory by the majority of the University community.*

Entirely aside from the technical limitations of the medium, the decreasing distribution of new releases on 16mm film stock is also significantly threatening OFU's ability to meet its obligations as a film society. We are limited to exhibiting frequently decrepit prints sourced from a restricted library that is comprised of ageing films and a dwindling number of new releases, as distributors continue to phase-out the 16mm gauge altogether. In this way, our continued dependency on 16mm projection equipment remains the greatest barrier to OFU reversing the fiscal and popular decline of recent years.

Clearly, the effort and the scale of the investment involved in bringing about this change will be considerable. However, not only will it immediately resolve many of the difficulties that OFU currently faces in providing a relevant and adequate service to the University community, but I predict that there will in fact be a significant upturn in OFU attendances. It is my personal belief that OFU seasons comprising screenings on 35mm (with all the associated benefits in terms of presentation quality and variety) would rapidly return OFU to a state where it can function independent of USSU subsidies once more - and can once again yield profits for the University and for the USSU.

James Dibley
Secretary, Oscar Film Unit
16/01/2000

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Personal Note From The Film Booking Officer

Arriving as a Fresher this academic year, I was pleased to discover there was a film society at the University of Surrey, as I am a great film enthusiast. As it turned out OFU was the only society which I joined at the Freshers' Fair. After seeing a few films at the Oscar Film Unit, it soon became apparent that it was a society that I wished to become more involved with. This was not only due to my passion for cinema, but also because I saw the hard work that was put into the society for benefit of other students with little reward for those involved.

As of late November of last year, I became Film Booking Officer, which gave me insight into the situation OFU is currently facing - the poor availability of 16mm prints. When booking this semester's films it became clear that the number of 16mm prints for recent films has drastically decreased and the gauge is nearly reaching the point of becoming obsolete. I was even told that 16mm is a dead format by our distributors whilst booking this semester's films.

I believe that the gradual death of 16mm as a theatrical format is the main reason for the recent decline in OFU attendance. Not only can we not compete with Odeon in terms of presentation facilities, but we now cannot compete with them in terms of recent titles. Thus it is clear to me that there is only one solution to this problem - 35mm projectors. They provide not only greatly improved presentation facilities but access to much newer film titles.

OFU is one of the oldest societies within the University (it actually predates it) and a society this intricately linked with the history of the University should not be allowed to die. **But the fact is that this semester has to be the last season of films presented on 16mm.** Please read and carefully consider the recommendations made in this document, they are vital to the continuing success of the Oscar Film Unit.

Matthew Sheppard
Film Booking Officer, Oscar Film Unit
17/01/2001

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Projection Equipment

Current Problem

16mm film, as OFU currently uses, has many drawbacks. The sound is monaural and has a low frequency bandwidth (up to about 8kHz - the human hearing range being up to about 20kHz). The result of this is that dialogue sounds muffled, as though transmitted over an AM radio signal, and music is distorted.

Pictures are of low quality, although better than video, and are often in "open" format, in which microphone booms and members of technical crew are visible on screen.

Being a non-professional gauge, prints of films are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain and are frequently damaged or dirty.

16mm is rapidly becoming obsolete. It is now used almost exclusively in primary schools with poor quality equipment, increasing the problems of dirt and damage. This tiny market means that most studios now avoid striking 16mm prints altogether.

Suggestion

OFU urgently needs to move to 35mm, the professional gauge. Most Student Cinemas already use this format.

Strengths

Better and larger image, vastly improved sound (including analogue surround sound), better quality prints, easier access to larger collection of recent and archived films. "Future-proof" as 35mm likely to be around more or less forever.

Weaknesses

Very expensive to set up; new projectors cost upwards of £10,000, and OFU would need two of them, for technical reasons. Films also more expensive, as it will be necessary to use a booking agent, and are harder to handle.

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Theatre

Current Problem

Lecture Theatre G is uncomfortable, and has exceptionally bad acoustics for film presentations. Many of the seats at the front and sides of the theatre do not have good sight-lines to the screen. On occasion, films have been known to sell out due to lack of space.

Suggestion

OFU should move to Lecture Theatre D (The Griffiths Theatre).

Strengths

More "cinema-like"; more comfortable; better acoustics; screen and projection booth already in place; larger auditorium. Used to be the home of OFU many years ago.

Weaknesses

Already used for special events on certain nights of the week; many entrances to cover; AVS not happy about allowing access to their equipment in D-box.

Suggestion

OFU should consider installing 35mm projectors in LT-D but leaving the 16mm projector, rewind table, and other equipment in G-box, so that G-box remains OFU's "home".

Strengths

D-box and its associated equipment do not get taken over by OFU; the amount of equipment installed in D-box is minimised; LT-D then has facilities for film presentations, which it currently does not; OFU has facilities for both 16mm and 35mm presentation in different theatres; there is an alternative venue for film presentation if LT-D is in use on a particular night (as long as this is known well in advance).

Weaknesses

OFU needs access to both theatres, for a single given presentation, and would either need to move its sound equipment between the two, or have two sets.

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Cinematograph Licence

Current Problem

OFU is members-only, restricting access to the facilities available, and imposing various restrictions on performances, such as no on-screen advertising, and no ticket sales on the door.

Suggestion

OFU should *consider* applying for a Cinematograph Licence.

Strengths

Ticket sales on door would be legal, so students could just drop in and see a film without having to become a member in advance; OFU could supplement its income with on-screen advertising.

Weaknesses

Expensive (around £600 a year); may be unnecessary if other measures successfully attract larger audiences.

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Film Presentation Days and Collaboration With Odeon

Current Problem

Showing UAC films on Wednesday nights clashes with the Odeon's BFI season, and also, with other events in LT-D.

Suggestion

UAC should move to Thursday nights, when there is typically not much entertainment on campus anyway.

Strengths

No clashes with other events. University likely to be happier about allowing OFU regular use of LT-D on a Thursday than on a Wednesday.

Weaknesses

Involves persuading regular patrons to change their routine.

Suggestion

The Odeon is keen to participate in co-operative publicity with OFU and USSU. Quite where this could lead remains to be seen, but it is reasonable to assume that there would be mutual benefits in sharing publicity and promotions between the two.

There is no point in trying to compete on equal terms with the Odeon. OFU will never have the resources to do that. According to its constitution, OFU exists to further interest in film, so it would be much better to work with the Odeon than fight them.

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Conclusions

OFU has already implemented many measures “in-house” to improve the service it offers. Now, though, it has reached the limit of what can be achieved without a significant one-off investment from the University and Union.

It truly is an investment for the future, as the equipment will not need replacing for many years, and there is no reason to assume that OFU cannot start to make a profit for the Union and University.

OFU will initiate this process by requesting finance from USSU for 35mm projectors, but it should be reiterated that the effect of the improvements will be significantly greater if all the measures suggested in this document are implemented at once.

This document will be circulated to the relevant parties. OFU would like to invite each department to send a representative to a meeting to discuss the issues in this report.

The date and location of this meeting will be decided in a couple of weeks, once everyone has had a chance to read this document and come up with comments and suggestions for discussion.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, then please e-mail OFU at oscarfilmunit@hotmail.com

cc:

Arts Committee

Arts Office

AVS Head

AVS Prep Room

Conferences Office

Estates & Buildings

Timetabling Office

USSU Events Manager

USSU President

USSU VP Finance & Development

USSU VP Societies & Culture