

ACOFS - The Australian Council of Film Societies

Film Society Handbook

Chapter 1: WHAT IS A FILM SOCIETY?

[October 2009]

A. Film Societies Screen the Films the Members Want.

Do you want to see quality films of your choice on the big screen? Are you miles away from the nearest cinema or does your local cinema never show anything you want to see? Do you want to form a group to bring the community together on a regular basis? Your solution could be to form your own film society

A film society is an organisation formed by a group of enthusiastic film viewers who prefer to have a say in the selection of films screened. Their aim may be to learn more about the art, the history and the technique of the cinema, to view good films under good conditions or simply to enjoy viewing good films or to bring the community together on a regular basis.

A film society is a community organisation screening quality films that are often not widely screened, or not shown at all in commercial cinemas or on television.

It is a volunteer run, non-profitmaking organisation, consisting of members who pay a membership fee, usually annually.

It usually has a committee of management elected by and from the members to manage the affairs of the society and to arrange screening of the selected films.

A film society usually meets in a public hall or other meeting room or in private homes, on regular occasions and provides its members with fine films from many countries and sources, covering a wide range of genres. A typical year's program may include some of the great classics as well as modern films ranging from fantasy, drama and comedy to avant-garde experiments, and usually with a message. Members are usually advised of the merits of the films to be screened through program notes, discussions and newsletters depending on the needs of the members and resources of the society.

It is not expected that every society member will enjoy every film screened but it is assumed that members will view the film intelligently and be open to the views of other members about the film.

Film society programs are designed to open the mind to the wider horizons of the cinema and to bring to its members experiences of living in other parts of the world.

What makes film societies special?

- They are run by members for the members.
- They provide a warm friendly atmosphere for viewing films.
- They bring quality cinema to communities at an affordable price.
- They organise special screenings and discussion groups.

- They provide unlimited programming opportunities including shorts, independent films and films of local interest.
- They bring members of the community together regularly in a comfortable environment.
- Their structure and program can vary to suit the community and members.

B. Film Society modes of operation.

Most film societies run in a “members only” mode with no individual charged admission to single screenings, and thus they pay the cheaper “non-theatrical” rates for their films and DVD rights. This is not the only way a society can operate however.

There are alternative operating modes for film societies.

In all cases the film society must run as a not-for-profit organisation under its own rules and aims, have a list of registered members and usually be run by a committee which is usually elected by members at an AGM.

1. FILM SOCIETIES WITH MEMBERS ONLY

- (1) The screenings are run by the film society for the film society members.
It is acceptable that a cinema runs the screening for the society and bills them for theatre hire, projectionist etc. and the society pays for the film hire. It may be 35mm, 16mm or DVD projection.
- (2) Admission to the screening is by membership ticket and should involve no additional payment. If visitors are admitted to “come and try it” it should be at no charge and kept to a minimum. A 3-monthly membership will often cater for the visitor wanting to come to only one or two films.
- (3) If individual films are promoted it may imply that single admission is allowed. Promotion should emphasise membership of the society although film titles may be quoted as a means of attracting membership of the society.
- (4) The society where admission is by membership only, pays cheaper hire rates for the films and DVD rights charges from commercial distributors, and has access to the NTLC library (Non-Theatrical Lending Collection at the National Film and Sound Archive) of 16mm films and DVDs.
- (5) Should a film society operate by charging admission they may be required by the distributor to pay higher rates for their films and DVD screening rights.
- (6) Films and DVDs borrowed from the NTLC have the tighter restriction that no paid admission is permitted.
- (7) A film society operating in a private home should operate in the same manner as above but they are not subject to the copyright requirement that screenings require approval by the rights owners.

2. A FILM SOCIETY WHICH SELLS SINGLE TICKETS

A film society could sell tickets at the door as well as allowing members free or reduced charge access. In this case however, they would pay a “commercial” rate for the film - a flat rate minimum guarantee or percentage of the take depending on the arrangement with the distributor. Public would be allowed access at a rate chosen by the society and all proceeds would go to the society. Conditions specified in paragraph 1 would apply except that the film society would not have access to the NTLC library of films and DVDs nor the non-theatrical rate of film hire or DVD rights.

3. FILM SOCIETY WITH ACCESS TO A NORMAL CINEMA

In this model, the film society members would be offered a reduced price admission to a regular cinema screening while the public would be admitted at normal cinema rates, all payable to the cinema. All screening costs, hall hire, projectionist fee and film cost would be borne by the cinema operator who would pay the “commercial” rate for hiring the film. The film society in turn might be asked to guarantee a minimum attendance of film society members at each film. The film society would be given the opportunity to select which films are screened and when, as part of the film society “annual program”. The film society and cinema are free to promote any film widely but they would not have access to the NTLC films and DVDs which are available to “non-theatrical” borrowers only.

4. DEPENDENT COMMUNITY FILM FESTIVALS OR COMMUNITY CINEMAS

The dependent organisation would normally be run by a committee which is nominated by a parent member film society. The community organisation must have approved rules and aims and run as a non-profit organisation. Admission to screenings would normally be by single tickets or multi session tickets (a festival may also sell season tickets), but may offer preferential admission charges to members of the parent film society. There would normally not be “members” of the organisation except for promotional reasons. Film hire rates and DVD rights charges would be based on flat rate or commercial rate depending on the agreement with the distributor. The organisation would not have access to the NTLC except by special arrangement.

An organisation run under the auspices of a local council or arts council would qualify as a non-profit organisation even though not registered with the ATO for an ABN. Other requirements for membership would apply.

C. Modes of operation of other, Independent film organisations.

1. INDEPENDENT COMMUNITY FILM FESTIVALS OR COMMUNITY CINEMAS

The organisation would normally be run by a committee which is self-appointed or nominated by another organisation which is not a member of a state Federation. In either case the community organisation must have approved rules and aims and run as a non-profit organisation. Admission to screenings would normally be by single session tickets or multi-session tickets (although a film festival may sell season tickets as well). There would normally not be “members” of the organisation except for promotional reasons. Film hire rates and DVD rights charges would be based on flat rate or commercial rate depending on the agreement with the distributor. The organisation would not have access to the NTLC except by special arrangement.

2. COMMERCIAL CINEMAS

Cinemas operating as part of a chain or as independent commercial cinemas are not eligible to join state federations or ACOFS as they do not comply with the essential non-profit conditions of membership.

(See Paragraph)	B1	B2	B3	B4	B4	C1	C2
Type of Organisation	Film society – members only. May be run by cinema or members.	Film society – some door sales. May be run by cinema or members.	Film Society with cheaper access to normal cinema program.	Dependent community FF or CC (Run by member film soc)	Dependent Community cinema run by council or arts council	Independent community FF or CC	Commercial cinema (Independent or chain)
Non-profit	Y	Y	Y	FS is	Y?	Y	No
Has ABN	Y	Y	Y	FS has	No	Y	Y
Acceptable aims	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	No
Acceptable rules	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	No
Members	Y	Y	Y	No	No	No	No
Single tickets	No	Y	No (Cinema does)	Y	Y	Y	Y
Non-theatrical	Y	No	No	No	No	No	No
NTLC access	Y	No	No	No	No	No	No
Flat rate or percent	No	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Committee of management	Usually	Usually	Usually	Usually	Usually	Usually	No
Democratic /AGM	Usually	Usually	Usually	No	No	No	No

FF – Film Festival

CC – Community Cinema

NTLC – Non-Theatrical Lending Collection at the NFSA (National Film and Sound Archives) in Canberra.