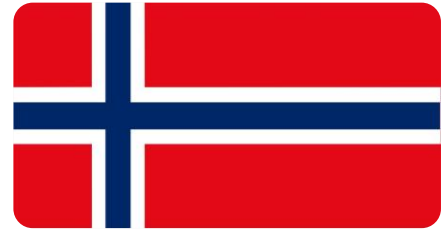


Film for all

Film Societies in Norway

Gunnar Iversen



For more than 60 years, Norway has had a number of vibrant film societies that create an alternative film culture by distributing and exhibiting films. In addition, mostly coordinated through their umbrella organization The Norwegian Federation of Film Societies (NFK), the Norwegian film societies all over the country have offered seminars and talks, published books and a film journal, and created important forums for discussing films as an art form as well as an important cultural and political expression.

In 2019, Norway had 98 film societies. 78 of these film clubs were societies for adults, and in addition there were 20 clubs for children and young adults. These 98 film societies had a total of 8600 members, creating an important grassroots movement and a vibrant non-commercial film culture.

Even though there were attempts to establish film clubs in the early 1930s and throughout the 1950s, the unique municipal cinema system in Norway initially created obstacles for opening non-commercial film societies. In 1913, after a period when debates concerning film came to resemble a "moral panic" and in a convergence of political convenience and constitutional tradition, the Norwegian government passed a Film Theatres Act that shifted the control of film exhibition from the local police to the municipalities. To run a cinema in Norway you still need a license from the local municipality.

Immediately afterwards, for a number of economic and cultural reasons, many municipalities decided to take over ownership of the cinemas within their area, and by 1926 a process of municipalization of movie exhibition was completed. Until recently, most movie theatres in Norway has been owned and run by the local municipalities, and the national organization of municipal cinemas initially regarded film societies as both illegal and an unnecessary competition. However, this changed by the end of the 1950s, and the first film society opened in Oslo in 1960 in collaboration with the local municipal cinema.

From the very beginning, the film societies in Norway have had three goals. Firstly, the many film clubs all over the country should ensure a richer and more diverse offer of films in the town or city. Especially in many small municipalities the repertory has been and still is dominated by American genre films. The local film club offered an important alternative. Not only art films from Europe, Latin America, Asia or Africa, but also more political films or films intended to discuss important issues in culture were screened in the local film societies. Secondly, the film clubs were

meant to be discussion forums where ordinary people could discuss film aesthetics and film culture but also many political and cultural issues raised by films from different cultures. Thirdly, and this point is obviously linked to the first and the second point, film societies should function as a way of raising the level of knowledge about film in the country. In order to achieve this last goal the umbrella organization for all the film clubs, The Norwegian Federation of Film Societies, have published a number of books on film history as well as the ambitious film journal *Z*. Named after the famous film classic by Costa-Gavras, *Z* is now the longest running film journal in Norway, being published since 1983.

What began as a number of film enthusiasts wanting to establish a forum for showing and discussing film classics and films that the municipal cinemas did not want to show, for economic, political or cultural reasons, what is among film enthusiasts often is just called "the movement" has become an important network of film clubs. Results of local initiatives, but linked to all the other societies through their umbrella organization, the clubs represent an important alternative in a more streamlined and homogenous cinema culture in Norway. Today, the film societies in Norway ensures a more diverse offering of feature films and documentaries, and a forum for raising the level of knowledge about film as an art form and a cultural product.

An important early slogan for many film societies was: "Film for all!" Inclusiveness has been a keyword, bringing different people together for screenings, discussions and seminars, but also offering their members films they would not have been able to see in a movie theatre without the film club.

In an age of streaming and Netflix, one could ask, isn't the idea of film clubs old-fashioned and obsolete? All the members in the many Norwegian film societies would answer no. Maybe it is even more important to come together socially and see and talk about films today, and it is an illusion that the new technologies of distributing audio-visual material offer more diversity. The Norwegian film societies are thriving, and for 60 years they have been an important alternative and non-commercial film culture in Norway.

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