

Cultural Impact of Film Presentation in Belfast, 9 June, 2010

A presentation of 'Stories we Tell Ourselves', the UK Film Council's study of the cultural impact of film, was held at Queens University Belfast, hosted jointly by QUB and Northern Ireland Screen.

Richard Williams of the Northern Ireland Film Commission and John Newbiggin, representing the UK Film Council, introduced the session and explained its purpose as one of a series of similar events being held across the UK to disseminate the study's findings, respond to comments and questions and to establish what demand there might be for further work in this important and relatively unexplored area of cultural study.

David Steele, the UK Film Council's Head of Research and Statistics, presented the context of the study and some of its methodology and was followed by Prof Ian Christie of Birkbeck College and Bertrand Moullier of Narval Media who set out the main findings of the study, with a particular emphasis on the contribution of films made in or about Northern Ireland.

Mike Catto, the lecturer and broadcaster, talked about the need to acknowledge the convergence of platforms, pointing out that TV drama was crucial to any proper assessment of contemporary UK cinema.

He also argued that the growth in popularity and screening opportunities for short films meant that as well as a multi-platform reality, there was now a plurality of film styles, with short films gaining in popularity and significance. As evidence, he cited the fact that 31 short films had been screened as part of the most recent Irish Film Festival.

He also thought there was a plausible argument that the research base for the cultural impact study should have been the whole British Isles, not just the UK, so that films made in the Republic and, more widely, by the Irish diaspora, could have been included.

The presentations were followed by a lively question and answer session, with the speakers forming a panel. The session was introduced by media consultant Jill Tandy and moderated by Brian Martin, Director of Doubleband Films and Chairman of the Belfast Film Festival. Discussion touched on many aspects of the study but also raised some more general questions about the functions and priorities of the UK Film Council itself.

The first questioner wanted to know on what basis 30 of the films included in the study had been chosen for more detailed analysis. David Steele explained that the 30 case study films had been selected in discussion between the consultants and the commissioning group and were chosen to cover the whole range of effects and influences that were the subject of the study. There was no suggestion that they were the only such films or the best such films.

The second question concerned distribution. When distribution costs are a crucial barrier to the wider promotion and availability of UK films, what is the UK Film Council doing to improve and extend the circulation and availability of UK films? David Steele explained the scale and function of the UK Film Council's distribution

and exhibition fund. John Newbiggin explained the history and intentions of the Digital Screen Network and commented that, along with the rapid growth of film societies, actively encouraged by the UK Film Council, the emergence of parallel initiatives such as the English Dept of Education's schools-based Film Club and the wider roll-out of digital distribution technologies, the DSN was contributing to greater awareness of UK film as well as specialist films.

The panel were asked if in their view the impact of a film was heightened by its being shot in the actual locations it purported to show. Ian Christie answered emphatically 'no'. He noted that Mel Gibson's film *Braveheart* had a huge political impact in Scotland and the fact that its exteriors were shot in Ireland was of no significance to audiences – they "took what they wanted" from it. Audiences "respond to authenticity" rather than to literal accuracy - and, in any case, films deal in illusion.

A questioner from Amber films in Newcastle expressed disappointment that the study "fails to reflect the film and video workshop movement adequately – it wasn't just about black and Asian films". Did the panel agree that film culture generally needed more support? Ian Christie agreed on the wider significance of the film and video workshop movement and about the need to support film culture. He spoke about the work of Screen Heritage UK and its investment in making the many film archives in the UK more accessible and more sustainable.

As a supplement to the question, another member of the audience asked what the UK Film Council was doing to encourage new filmmakers from the British Asian community. John Newbiggin spoke briefly about the UK Film Council's commitment to cultural diversity and offered, as a practical example, the creation of *Second Light*, an offshoot of the UK Film Council's *First Light* project. *Second Light* already had some 30 young filmmakers from black and ethnic minority communities across the UK gaining experience as interns and junior staff with film companies.

Another questioner felt that the cultural impact study should have made a bolder and more confident claim as to its significance. It was a remarkable study and forcefully demonstrated the great impact UK films had made on our society and our culture. He wanted to know why the study did not include a headline summary – perhaps 'five key findings' to highlight its value? Members of the panel agreed as to the significance of the study and thanked him for his comment.

Given the focus of the session on films made in or about Northern Ireland, a questioner asked if the panel felt there was a danger of over-simplifying the representation of people and situations in film? He wondered, in particular, if there had not sometimes been a patronising attitude towards films made in and about Northern Ireland? In response, Mike Catto argued that in the course of a 90-minute narrative film it was to be expected that sometimes filmmakers would use stereotypes as a short-hand way of communicating with their audience but if this was set in a broader and more nuanced context of the film as a whole, then the occasional 'short-cut' was probably justified and acceptable.

The next questioner pointed out that there are only two specialist screens in the whole of Northern Ireland. How can audiences and, more importantly, budding filmmakers, increase the breadth and depth of their understanding of cinema if they don't see more of it, she asked? Several members of the panel responded, drawing attention to the UK-wide roll-out of the Digital Screen network (that

includes the two screens in Northern Ireland) and about changing patterns of consumption, greater flexibility and variety made possible by digital technology and online access.

Another question focused on the continuing lack of emphasis on cinema and cinema culture in the UK's education system. The panel agreed that despite public debate, and despite a number of initiatives, including the Media Literacy Task Force, in which the UK Film Council had been a prime mover, the establishment of First Light and the development of a more integrated strategy for film education, in which the UK Film Council had also played a leading role, there was still a long way to go in embedding film and film studies at any level in the curriculum

Given the wide range of films referenced in the cultural impact study, the next questioner wanted to know why the film 'Acceptable Levels', (made in Northern Ireland), had not featured in the work at all. Ian Christie noted that many films during the Troubles had only reached very limited audiences, however interesting their treatment of the conflict.

A final question to the panel asked whether they thought the cultural impact of film on UK society was as great in 2006 as it had been in 1946? Mike Catto and Ian Christie responded to this question, both of them talking about the way in which the underlying mood of popular cinema had changed from immediately after the Second World War, when the emphasis had often been on a rather sentimental view of the world and relationships – a quality that was as evident in films about Ireland as any other - to the harsher and more robust views offered by a contemporary film such as Hunger.

John Newbigin
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