

## BEYOND THE BOX OFFICE

A presentation and debate around “ Stories We Tell Ourselves ”, the UK Film Council’s study of the cultural impact of films and its relevance to our lives was held during the Edinburgh International Film Festival from on Sunday 20 June at the FilmHouse. It was hosted by Scottish Screen and attended by UK Film Council representatives.

There were about 90-100 people at the event from the film industry and allied areas including education, research and public policy.

Ken Hay, the Chief Executive Officer of Scottish Screen, welcomed the audience. He made a short introduction, stressing the significance of the study and welcoming it as a timely piece of work in raising the debate around the importance of film culturally as opposed to the well trodden area of its economic importance.

Carol Comley, Head of Strategic Development at the UK Film Council welcomed the audience and explained the background to the commissioning of the study.

In 2007, the UK Film Council Board recognised that most of the analysis around the value of film had been around its economic impact and that work was needed on cultural impact to complement the economic studies. This raised a series of questions which needed to be explored and continue to be explored about how to define “culture” and “cultural impact” and how if at all it can be measured. Given the limited budget it was decided to carry out a piece of work which used pre- existing materials only whether produced in hard copy form or increasingly on-line. The study is the outcome of Phase 1 of that work. The authors also generated the first dedicated and searchable database of all British Feature Films since 1946 .The UK Film Council is hoping to commission Phase 2 of the work on this subject by the end of the summer. It is considering a piece of market research/survey work which would provide an in depth quantitative analysis, identifying and evidencing the most significant points in this area and which could to be used as an important companion piece to work on the economic impact of film.

Carol Comley also explained that this was one of a series of similar events being held across the UK to raise the level of debate around this important area, disseminate the study’s findings, respond to comments and questions and to receive feedback which could feed into the future work. She said she was interested to hear what the audience found persuasive about the study or indeed less persuasive.

Carol Comley introduced Mark Cousins, well known filmmaker and writer, as the moderator. Mark introduced, Ian Christie, Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck College and Bertrand Moullier, Senior Consultant, Narval Media, the authors of the study, who set out the main findings of the study, with a particular emphasis on the contribution of films made in or about Scotland. Their slides accompany these notes.

Mark Cousins introduced Dr Jonathan Murray, Lecturer in Film and Visual Culture at the Centre for Visual and Cultural Studies, Edinburgh College of Art. Jonny Murray commented on the study and drew out themes on what had happened with filmmaking in the “noughties”. [Bullet points on his commentary accompany this note.]

The moderator then introduced Gillian Berrie, Scottish producer and founder of Sigma Films. Gillian welcomed a debate which was not all about the economic impact of film. She talked about her own history as a filmmaker, how people were leaving Scotland in 1999 because they did not want to pursue the narrow national identity topics on the table and they wanted to explore wider issues. It was her own special relationship with the Scandinavians and Zentropa film that persuaded her to stay in Scotland and become involved in a broad range of subjects. The Scandinavians have a shared outlook in many ways with the Scottish. For them, cultural impact is profound, complex and important. They do not understand why there is not more public support for film in Scotland.

Carole Sheridan from Scottish Screen asked how far the research will go into looking at filmmaking communities and how they feed off each other. Ian Christie thought there was an important sense that filmmakers did need to feed off each other if filmmaking is to grow and thrive. There is a sense that there needs to be a community to create confidence.

Bertrand Moullier commented that Scotland is a great showcase for what happens when filmmakers take things into their own hands and create an aspirational node.

Mark Cousins talked about filmmakers and their epiphany moment, which can change their approach.

The next questioners asked whether the contributors were looking into the question of access and whether there had been research into the impact of screens in local communities. They commented that short filmmaking is influenced by the sort of films that people accessed. Filmmakers work with local communities to get their films made. Was the cultural impact on local audiences to be studied.

Carol Comley commented that the cultural impact work including the next stage research to look at the impact of film on citizens/consumers/audiences. If this work can capture a powerful range of positive public benefits this will feed into the development of public policy work e.g. in village and community halls.

The next questioner commented that they felt the study had focused on cultural significance rather than cultural impact. That it was about production rather than exhibition. Ian Christie commented that they were aiming to build a bridge between significance and impact. They are still working on refining impact. It is pervasive and not all good. The question of access is a very important factor. Britain has had issues with broad access. Clearly, limited access diminishes impact. As technology evolves this increases the potential of access as was seen with the advent of VCRs.

The next comment came from a Professor of Film Studies at St Andrews. It was her observation that the broader cultural impact of Scottish film is not viewed as significant by academics generally. Colleagues in other disciplines such as the history of art, literature etc did not appear to understand or be interested in the importance of films in this area.

The question was posed on whether the study dealt with all films or just films in distribution. Ian Christie said they had dealt with all films.

Peter Brougham, Scottish filmmaker welcomes the discourse as fascinating. The study should be more precise about what constitutes a Scottish film. He commented that *Braveheart* was not Scottish. Scotland has the lowest level of production in Scotland. It is harder to produce films of a cultural Scottish nature without interested investors. The broadcasters drive what is happening and there is an imbalance between other sources of finance and the broadcasters.

Bertrand Moullier commented that *Braveheart* shows up in polls as Scottish. Scotland has moved to a situation of greater hybridity. How do you reconcile a tighter definition with what's actually going on. A comment was made that outside of Scotland, they were known as promoters of Scottish realism.

Eddie Dick commented that the report was provocative and interesting. He was concerned about the dynamics of what's happening politically on the economics of film production. There is a forgetfulness of the struggle which gave rise to the structure they have enjoyed and which has enabled them to make films. How will the industry have a production future which can reflect culture? How do we make more films? There needs to be a unity of politics, culture and economics.

Bertrand Moullier commented that the report can be used in a number of ways. It can provide a new set of arguments for providing support structures. Ian Christie commented that it's important that there is an image of a UK on screen nationally and internationally and that argument needs to be made.

Another audience member commented that the big issue is what the Government defines as a British/Scottish film.

A further comment was made that it is important not to lose sight of what drives filmmakers. The precursor to the UK Film Council was set up during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War to contrast how we as a democracy interacted with citizens in comparison to a fascist regime. In determining cultural impact there is a need to be very careful. Culture is an area of massive disagreement. There are various implicit dangers with the whole notion of cultural impact and measuring it. What you choose to measure to a degree defines the answers you are going to get.

Ian Christie commented that it is important to get something on the agenda which is not just an economic argument. The argument needs to be more subtle and sophisticated to reflect the nature of film and its importance.

A further audience member commented that digital delivery could be revolutionary for film education.

Bertrand Moullier commented that the involvement of State apparatus in what is culture is an interesting area. In France there is an intuitive sense of what is culturally important. What happens in a society where this is not so clearly defined?

A further contributor raised the question of what is special about film or whether the debate should be about the cultural impact of creative activity generally. Why is film being differentiated from TV?

Ian Christie commented that film has a long shelf life and also it travels internationally. Film is something that can be seen a long way away in distance and time.

An audience member from community cinema turned back to the question of whether there are any studies which show the correlation between the impact a film has and the width of its distribution. Also whether cultural impact measurements change and perhaps become less relevant as technology advances, we see things on a small screen and audiences fragment.

On the question of analysing production vs distribution Jonny Murray commented that distribution is important because it is a public acknowledgement that an artwork is there to be publicly celebrated.

Ian Christie commented that it's important that we consider the cultural impact of viewing on different size screens and the film's visibility outside its point of origin is relevant. Access to large screens and the opportunity for slower burn release schedules allowing the build up of word of mouth are all relevant to impact.

An audience member who is an audience researcher commented that the ways technology is now helping to navigate and find cinema is interesting. She felt the random selection of case studies was important. A random list will not be as possible in an era where choice becomes broader. She pointed out that care needs to be taken on how we use tools like IMDb to feed into policy.

Ian Christie said that he had done work into what websites people consult and what brings people to the cinema. IMDb is interesting because it opens up a discourse around cinema including areas and topics which film critics are not even looking at. This quality and breadth of reactive public discourse is new.

Mark Cousins brought the proceedings to a close and thanked everyone for their contribution to this important debate.

Carol Comley also thanked everyone for coming and participating so actively she said that the slides would shortly be available on the UK Film Council website. She felt that the discussion had been of a great value in a variety of ways. Again, she pointed out that we have clear economic arguments about the value of film, but the evidence on cultural impact was also very important. She very much hoped that this debate will be useful to Scotland.