

BEYOND THE BOX OFFICE

**PRESENTED BY THE BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE, AND THE IRISH FILM BOARD,
DUBLIN 20 June 2011**

A presentation and debate around 'Stories We Tell Ourselves' the UK Film Council's study of the cultural impact of film was hosted at Cinema 3, the Irish Film Institute, Dublin on 20 June 2011. The event was organised by the British Film Institute and the Irish Film Board.

Over 60 professionals attended from the film industry, education, press, local government and public policy.

The new Chief Executive of the Irish Film Board, James Hickey, welcomed the BFI and the audience. He stressed that the Irish Film Board committed to both the industry and to the culture of film. He said that, interestingly, in Ireland there was no definition of an Irish film. The challenge would be to look at films the IFB funds and consider the impact of those films on Irish culture. He would be very interested in looking at the work of the BFI and he very much saw Beyond the Box Office as the beginning of an on-going debate about the impact of Irish film on Irish culture.

Andrew Meehan, Development Executive at the Irish Film Board and today's Chair introduced the speakers:

- Lenny Abrahamson, Director
- Ian Christie, Professor of Film and Media History, Birkbeck College London
- Carol Comley, Head of Strategic Development, British Film Institute
- Pippa Cross, Producer, CrossDay Productions
- John Kelleher, Producer and Former Film Certification Director, Ireland
- Bertrand Moullier, Senior Consultant, Narval Media

Short biographies are attached as an appendix.

Carol Comley welcomed everyone and thanked all those who had been instrumental in making the event happen. She then explained why the study '*Stories We Tell Ourselves*' had been commissioned in the first place. In 2007 Stewart Till, who was Chair of the UK Film Council at the time, had been mindful that film delivered both cultural as well as economic benefits and, that very little cohesive work around the cultural impact of film existed. Stewart had requested a study into cultural impact. The study was intended to complement the various economic impact studies that the UK Film Council had produced while it was working with the Government to renew the UK tax relief for film production. She explained that the tax break was now worth about €150 million per year for British feature films and had funded many important British films, such as the recent £500,000 low budget film *Monsters*, Gareth Edwards' very successful first feature, or not so low budget independent British films like *The King's Speech*, which had done great business at the UK box office, around 50 million euro to date, and £246 (\$414) million at the world-wide box office and which had won four Oscars and the best actor award for Colin Firth.

The Government was very interested in hearing about the cultural argument because it was not only relevant to public policy around British film, but also around European subsidies.

Carol explained that at the outset, the study had presented three particular challenges:

1. Unlike the economic impact work there had been no 'ready made' formula or template for how to measure cultural impact for the study team to adopt. Nor had there been agreement about whether or not it made any sense to talk about 'measuring or capturing culture' anyway.
2. Worse than the above challenge there had been no agreed definition of what was meant by 'culture'. Curiously, even the sponsoring Government department in the UK, The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, hadn't been able to help! She said she would be interested to hear from the Irish Ministry on this topic.
3. Worse still, assuming answers could be found to the first two questions, and, partly as a result of having to sort out answers to the two questions before the team could get started, a cultural impact study was going to cost rather more than the economic impact studies they had commissioned previously.

A number of pragmatic decisions had to be taken. The brief had been re-designed to look at British film only. This was a big compromise as originally they had intended to look at the impact of all feature film consumed in the UK and not only British film. The timeframe was also narrowed down on a 60 year period only (in truth that was not too much of a compromise). They also had limited themselves to working with pre-existing source materials for example, academic literature, national, regional and trade press, various cultural commentaries, whether in printed form or online.

So what Carol was saying is that the ideas that Ian and Bertrand would talk about that afternoon would just be the start of what they hoped would be a sustained programme of enquiry which built from here and which others could draw upon.

Carol said that this debate had come at a very good time. Over the past 18 months the UK Film Council had discussed the study and its findings with a range of different interest groups which had included:

1. Research specialists from government sponsored cultural bodies in the UK such as Arts Council England, the BBC, the British Council and various sports and heritage organisations.
2. Audio visual analysts from the European public sector.
3. European Film Agencies such as the CNC in France and the Danish Film Institute; with the UK's academics courtesy of University of London.
4. Sessions with the UK's three National screen agencies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
5. Sessions in Europe with Spanish professionals during this year's San Sebastian Film Festival.
6. Sessions in Brussels with representatives of the European Parliament's Culture Committee.
7. Excellent events, with additional focus on the English regions, had been hosted with Screen Yorkshire at the University of York and with South West Screen and Watershed in Bristol.

In the main, people said they liked what had been done and agreed that a study to capture the cultural impact of film was long overdue. The biggest questions were, why hadn't this been done before and "what did "real people "feel?" This brought Carol on to stage two.

She explained that today's discussion was taking place just as the BFI was concluding stage two. This would enable them to build on the initial findings through the survey work which had not been done in stage one. The stage two research, *Opening our eyes; How film contributes to the culture of the UK*, widened the angle of view from British film only to world cinema, whilst drilling down on issues of cause and effect more precisely. Stage two findings would be quantitative as well as qualitative, the former being particularly important to politicians and civil servants in the UK and, no doubt, also in Ireland. She noted, for example, the work undertaken by PWC on the economic impact of film in Ireland. That said this afternoon's discussion also took place at a very difficult time, at a time when private finance and public funding in the UK and across Europe for arts, culture and film was being squeezed hard. Symptomatic of this, she said, in late July, we had all heard that the new Coalition Government in the UK had decided to abolish the UK Film Council, then after much deliberation and industry protest decided to transfer most of its financial support for film to the British Film Institute who, she explained, was now charged with carrying-out many of the responsibilities which had previously resided with the UK Film Council. She hoped that the BFI would continue with this work which was especially important in the context of the rapidly changing patterns of film financing, production and especially consumption.

She said that they were eager to hear this afternoon what interested the audience about the study, what they agreed with, what they found less persuasive and what evidence of cultural impact those living or working in Ireland would find useful. And, whether or not they would feel an approach had been developed which was persuasive and merited further work.

Ian Christie and Bertrand Moullier then made an interesting presentation of their work, raising a number of issues for consideration by the audience.

The slides of the presentation accompany this note and information on other events in this series can be found at <http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/culturalimpactseminars>

John Kelleher said that he agreed with James Hickey that it would be great to raise the level of discussion around the cultural impact of film. It would be very interesting to do quantitative and qualitative research around the cultural impact of Irish film and to learn from the UK Film Council /BFI work. The question to be debated today was what they would want to achieve, what it should cover and who it would be for. He thought that different sectors of the industry would have different perspectives. The BFI study reflected UK film as a powerful cultural agent – could the same be said for Irish film? He opined that the Irish had unique issues which were different from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For instance, what was an Irish Film? Is *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* Irish? It was strongly adopted by the Irish, it was set in Ireland, but it was written and directed by British people. He asked was *Mona Lisa* Irish? Written and directed by Neil Jordan, but with a British theme. What about *In Bruges?* *The Guard?* *The Departed?* *Waking Ned Devine?*

He thought that the difference between cultural significance and impact per the study was interesting to consider. He had been at the Corona Fastnet shortfilm festival recently. There was no cinema near the village, the nearest being about 45 miles away. Around 130 films had been exhibited- mostly short films. There was an exchange about films and film culture. The films were shown in pubs and cafes.

He went on to say it was interesting to consider the impact of films on how Ireland was perceived overseas. For example, how did *P.S. I Love You* translated Ireland to a foreign audience? Were there themes that had not been dealt with? *The Tiger's Tail* directed by John Boorman dealt with a

number of contemporary issues. There had been no film about Ann Lovett's death in 1984 and the seminal issues that threw up. What were the dominant themes? Were there themes that Irish filmmakers had avoided?

It was interesting to consider the four categories of cultural impact referred to in the study and how they apply to Irish film.

On censorship and notoriety there had not been many films which had attracted the scissors of the Irish censors, except, say, *Ulysses*. *Intermission* got a 15 A- an easier ride than the UK (18). *Song for a Raggy Boy* got a 15A and would not have been made public 15 years ago.

On Zeitgeist moments, *Bend It like Beckham* was responsible for creating an all-girls soccer league in India. John was not sure if there were any Irish films like that. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* led to a change of attitude to the gay community.

He explained that there is a time and a tide in artistic affairs when something happened which lead people into a new era such as the French impressionists and the Bloomsbury set in the UK. The Jim Sheridan/ Neil Jordan and maybe Pat O'Connor axis was unassailable for a long time , but now there were a new wave of, say, a dozen people like Lenny Abrahamson making films that he thought would create a new groundswell in Ireland.

Pippa Cross spoke next. Commenting that filmmaking is all about the stories. Amongst others, she had been involved in *My Left Foot*, *the Field* and *Bloody Sunday*

My Left Foot landed on her desk at Granada in the late 1980s and she loved the script. The money was not so hard to raise. The script worked because it was a great and universal story about a man realising his potential. Its potential to travel was immediately apparent. Jim Sheridan had a particular gift for understanding the complexity of emotional relationships. He had made a very Irish film with a universal theme. For various reasons to do with the financing, the Certificate of Origin was British. This created some concerns for the filmmakers and Jim Sheridan would only agree to make *The Field* next time if it was classified as Irish.

Pippa showed a clip of *My Left Foot*. She then explained that Harvey Weinstein and Miramax got involved in post production looking at it from the marketing perspective and had strong views on changing certain parts of the film to translate to an international audience e.g. suggested you could not say "give the man a jar" for "give a man a drink".

Over 10 years later Paul Greengrass came to Granada and pitched six stories, one of which was *Bloody Sunday*. It struck her at the time that she knew less about these important events that were so close to home than she did about what was happening in Cambodia and she was sure if she did not know about it the younger generation would not either. Paul had previously worked for World in Action and had been to a *The Maze* with a Granada crew during the hunger strikes. He realised that if it had not been for the dynamic of the times the guys he was talking to inside could have easily been the sort of people he would have enjoyed socialising with. Paul wanted to tell the truth about what had happened. Some of it was shot in Derry and most in Dublin. Ex British soldiers and the guys from Derry were brought together.

Pippa then showed a clip of *Bloody Sunday*. Had it made an impact in the UK because it was shown on the television? There was no real appetite for political cinema in the UK – even though, in this case, it had already been very successful at Sundance and Berlin. Stories are not given the chance to resonate unless they actually get distribution. Pippa said she worried about the squeeze from the Hollywood studio fare on the sort of films we cared about. Hollywood continues to try to address the problems in the market place by throwing more and more money at budgets. While the market for independent filmmakers in the US had dropped by 66%. There was a social imperative on young

people to see the big budget releases so they could talk to their mates about them. As filmmakers we needed to go on lobbying and convincing people how important it was that people had the opportunity to see these independent films with challenging themes and messages and get used to seeing them as part of a mixed diet.

Lenny Abrahamson spoke next and commented about the fact that national identity had been a recurring theme. He questioned what an Irish film was. There would always be grey areas – was it related to the people, the themes, or the locations? Only since Irish filmmakers stopped being obsessed with being Irish had the themes opened up. At a certain point there seemed to be a narrow set of allowable themes such as the Depression and the Big House, but more recently it had been more liberating. Both in *Adam and Paul* and in *Garage* there was a sense of rescuing the cliché of “rural isolation” but in a modernised way. Until he saw the Steve McQueen film *Hunger* he had thought it was impossible to rescue the hunger strike debate. *Bloody Sunday* had a germ of reality – it was very good –, but this was not adequately reflected in its box office. *The Full Monty* and *Trainspotting* had a huge cultural impact – they did well at the box office. Movies like Alan Clarke’s were culturally significant, but perhaps did not make the impact, whereas *The Full Monty* and *Trainspotting* were not nearly as culturally significant.

Lenny explained that he wanted to make films for a bigger audience, but there was a tension between making those films and reflecting his own views. His current slate was very broad in the themes it was addressing. On the current slate only one film had anything to do with Ireland- it was about Irish middleclass teenagers. Irish films had not really touched the middleclass. It would be a small film with a modest budget, which would hopefully have a festival life. He was also making a book adaptation, *Into That Darkness*. The challenge would be to refract the themes so they could reach an audience. It was a biopic about a man who became the Commandant of Treblinka. His third film was a film called *Frank* at the opposite end of the spectrum. It was a strange comedy about an avant garde band. Another on the slate was a book set in the US.

All a filmmaker could do was follow his or her instinct towards context and style. He said that it was not just about story, it was also about texture. Through his own career he would hope to make Irish films. His film *Adam and Paul*, which cost under half a million US dollars, had entered the national consciousness. There was a thawing of relations. He would like his films to have a humanising impact.

One thing that was needed in Ireland was the support of the national broadcaster. He said that there was a major problem with RTE’s policy and attitude towards film

Andrew Meehan then commented that Lenny was indeed representing the Irish industry. There were various themes which drew him to his subjects. He felt it was healthier to cover a variety of films than to force an idea of the “community” on filmmakers. It was too difficult to make a national audit and to shoehorn movies into a particular definition of an Irish film. Andrew then asked Pippa whether there were certain allowable themes when she was at Granada – were they encouraged towards a particular style.

Pippa explained that they were following the talent and also they tried to make films that would sit right on a national TV channel. By way of example on the scope, they went straight from *The Field* to *Jack and Sarah*. She admired Film Four, who knew their audience and managed to get the films in their space. If we have a varied TV culture in the UK then we ought to get a fantastic range of films.

Andrew said that it was important to support diversity. It’s how we tell the stories as well as the stories we tell. Andrew then turned to the question of the long tail effect and also the importance of marketing. *When My Left Foot* got an Oscar the box office surged. Pippa said that when Harvey tried to get Daniel to pose without the disabled face he would not, but it was all about the marketing. *The*

Crying Game was only recognised at home once it was released in the UK. In the US it was marketed as a thriller with a twist rather than a tale of sexual ambiguity. It was difficult to ask an audience what sort of film they liked as they very often did not know until they saw it. *In Bruges* overturned all expectations of what the audience liked.

Bertrand commented that he liked to observe the audience. He saw *The Kings Speech* in the Clapham Picture House and he had a sense that it was a hit driven by a different demographic. As an industry we were like a super tanker that set the product in a direction we thought the audience would like and it takes time to turn.

Lenny made the point that all the larger projects he was developing were with Film Four. There were very few places that filmmakers could go to make an intelligent film with a broader audience.

Pippa said that it was the kids that worried her. The older audience had grown up with a mixed diet of films, whereas the choices for the younger audience were ever narrower. For example, *Submarine* was a brilliant little film, but it would have played to an older audience. Film education was crucial.

How the film was marketed was very important, a small film should not be chasing a big opening weekend. In the UK we now have the digital network - but the bulk of audiences go to multiplexes. There were twice as many cinemas in France as in the UK. Ireland was currently under screened.

Irish citizens were seeking for films which speak to them. *King's Speech* was a history lesson. There must be new ways of taking on history. Ken Loach had made *Land and Freedom*. Lenny also referred to *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, where he felt that in his desire to give back the War of Independence, Ken Loach had painted the Black and Tans in a monochronistic way. There were other films that could be made about that.

Turning next to the role of the broadcasters, Bertrand commented that there were really only one and a half broadcasters left as players in the UK. The BBC was shifting shape. He was on a working group to consider the new Communications Act and there would be questions about whether there was really a rationale for keeping a publicly funded multi platform behemoth.

A member of the audience then commented that 20 percent of foreign tourists came to Ireland because they were attracted by Irish film. What culture were they responding to? Very often they talked about the land, the family and the humour when they talked about culture- should we be looking more closely at what the foreigners were attracted to?

Ian Christie commented that tourism had also been greatly driven by literary classics in the UK – but that is changing. It was beginning to be recognised that many UK walks were driven by film subjects rather than literature. An audience member said that there was a whole internet debate going on about *Leap Year*. There was a very active group of Americans who wished to spend money coming to Ireland and it seemed a shame not to take advantage of that money. We needed to think ahead about what would attract the next generation of tourists.

Another member of the audience said that film in Ireland had changed considerably since 2000. *Adam and Paul* had had a powerful legacy, but the proliferation of film courses had meant that people have had to watch films that have not had a wider impact. It would be great to get a more representative sample of modern day Irish films on the agenda.

A comment was made about Kevin Rockett's book, which had created a legacy and since then Irish American cinema had developed as a field. No research had been done in the last five years. He wondered why that was. Students did not tend to go to the cinema and very little had been written about recent movies. Lenny commented that younger people had a different attitude to film and

that he was always amazed when they openly talked about having “knock off” copies with no sense of guilt. It was difficult to get students interested in film festivals. What constituted cinema was narrowing to a small spectrum and that was a great shame.

Another member of the audience explained that he collected box office figures. He said that films were becoming monocultural and squeezing out films from other cultures. The Irish did not have the protection of another language and they were more susceptible to US films than to UK films. He was concerned about the longer term effect of the closing of windows between theatrical exhibition and home entertainment. The model was deteriorating. It would be difficult for films to be “discovered” in 10 years time. The issue of rights needed to be considered as the distribution systems became more complex. How would the future generations re-discover films? He knew from a piece of work he did 10 years ago that rights were a major issue.

Pippa explained that in the UK there was a phrase called “Orphan Works “. She said that on the “Find Any Film Website” because of the rights situation, it was difficult to find many British films. Films should be available to watch when the consumer wanted them. This situation would diminish the cultural impact of National films.

Pippa finished with the thought that we were in a dangerous place as an industry, but that filmmakers are agile and she was optimistic that great stories would continue to find their place in film.

Andrew Meehan closed the event by thanking the speakers and the audience for their contribution to what had been a fascinating discussion.

A video recording was made of the presentations and debate which can be found at www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/culturalimpactseminars Photographs of the event can also be found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/52223508@N05/sets/72157626958714107/>

Biographies

Lenny Abrahamson Lenny Abrahamson was born in Dublin in 1966. While at university he directed short videos with the Trinity Video Society which he co-founded with Ed Guiney. He graduated in 1991 with first class honours (gold medal). After graduating, he directed the 16mm short film *3 Joes* (1991), which won the Best European Short Film award amongst others. After a period of post-graduate study in philosophy at Stanford University in California he returned home. Since then, he has directed commercials for television in Ireland and worldwide. Several of his commercials have won international awards. His first feature film, *Adam & Paul* (2004), won the Best First Feature award at the 2004 Galway Film Fleadh and the Best Director award at the recent Irish Film and Television Awards. He since went on to direct the acclaimed *Garage* (2007) and has a slate of feature films in active development.

Ian Christie is a film critic, broadcaster and historian, with a special interest in British and European cinema, and the impact of new technologies. He is Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck, University of London and vice-president of the MEDIA-supported Europa Cinemas network, for which he directs the annual Bologna Workshop. www.ianchristie.org

Carol Comley is head of strategic development at the British Film Institute and previously undertook this role at the UK Film Council. Her post is wide ranging including European audio-visual policy, relations with public service broadcasters and is currently working with the DCMS on its recently announced film policy review and preparing the new BFIs Forward Plan 2012-2017. Prior to joining the UK Film Council she was Head of Funding at the British Film Institute.

Pippa Cross: After spending some years in live entertainment and in television drama and documentaries, she joined Granada Media in 1988 on the launch of Granada Film. Pippa, as production executive, and Director of Programmes Steve Morrison had a free rein to start making financing films and the project that first caught their eye was Jim Sheridan's script of *My Left Foot*. A very successful collaboration on that was followed by another on *The Field*. In 1993 she became Head of Granada Film and oversaw in the following years a wide range of films produced for cinema and TV including *Jack and Sarah*, *Ghostworld*, *Longitude*, *House of Mirth* and *The Hole*. In 1999 she introduced Jim Sheridan to Paul Greengrass and Jim agreed that Hell's Kitchen would co-produce *Bloody Sunday* with Granada. After leaving Granada Pippa and her business partner set up CrossDay Productions which has produced features *Shooting Dogs*, *Heartless* and – in a lighter vein – this year's *Chalet Girl*. She is an ex Board member of the UK Film Council and a current Board member of regional screen agency Screen South.

John Kelleher was appointed Film Censor in April 2003 following a publicly advertised competition process.

Born in Dublin, he graduated with a BCL degree from UCD and a Masters Degree in Drama from the University of Kentucky. He was called to the Bar in 1971. As a producer/director in RTE, he produced many award winning programmes, including 'Strumpet City' and 'Even the Olives Were Bleeding'. He was appointed Controller of Television Programmes in 1980 and established the 'Today Tonight' programme in the same year. He left RTE in 1983 to become Managing Director of The Sunday Tribune. For over twenty years, he was one of Ireland's leading independent film and television producers. He has produced six cinema films, including 'Eat the Peach', which he co-wrote, as well as six television drama series, numerous documentaries and four series of TV3's current affairs flagship.

Bertrand Moullier is a senior consultant for Narval Media. Bertrand has over 20 years experience working broadly across the media industries and in areas of public policy. He represents the interests of the international film sales companies' organisation Independent Film & Television Alliance (IFTA) in Europe. He also covers global advocacy issues on behalf of the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF).