

UK FILM COUNCIL/ICCA

BEYOND THE BOX OFFICE

San Sebastian Film Festival

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A presentation and debate around “ Stories We Tell Ourselves “, the UK Film Council’s study of the cultural impact of film and its relevance to our lives, was held during the San Sebastian Film Festival at the Kursaal in the Industry Club. It was hosted by the UK Film Council and the Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts.

About 40 professionals attended the event from the European film industry and allied areas including press, education, research and public policy.

Ignasi Guardans, ICCA Director General, chaired the event. Mr Guardans, welcomed the audience and gave an introduction, stressing the significance of the study from a public policy perspective. The importance of films transcend their value to the economy and the jobs they create. To justify the investment of tax payers’ money films also need to be an investment in our cultural identity. Films live in our collective memory they help us communicate to each and between the generations. Spain is known around the world by the images and stories of its films. Mr Guardans could see the value of an independent study into the cultural impact of Spanish films to parallel the UK study.

Introducing Carol Comley, Head of Strategic Development at the UK Film Council , the chair expressed his dismay about recent news that the UK Government would be closing the UK Film Council. He respected the UK Government’s right to make decisions on public policy but very much hoped that the industry and its professionals would be treated with due respect. He went on to introduce the panel, consisting of the authors of the report , Ian Christie, Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck College, London, Bertrand Moullier, Senior Consultant , Narval Media and Silvia Angrisani , Media Consulting Group, together with Enrique Gonzalez Kuhn, Managing Director, Alta Films and Santos Zunzunegui, Film Critic and Historian .

Carol Comley said that in 2007, the Board of the UK Film Council requested a study into the cultural impact of film to complement the economic impact studies that had been produced when it had been working with Government to reform the UK tax relief for film production now worth £100 million per year for British feature film. It had a number of challenges:

- Unlike the economic impact work, there was no agreed “off the shelf” formula about how to measure cultural impact or agreement about whether or not it made any sense to talk about “measuring culture”?
- There was no agreed definition of what was meant by Culture
- Any cultural impact study would need a sizeable budget, arguably more than economic impact studies

So a number of pragmatic decisions had to be taken to get started. First, we rescoped the brief to look at UK or British film only; second, we focused on a 60 year period only, third, we drew wholly on pre-existing materials e.g. academic literature, national and trade press' cultural commentaries whether in printed form or online.

Over the last year, we have discussed the study with both film and research professionals in the UK and, its findings and its methodology have been extremely well received. For example, presentations and debates have already been held in the Nations and Regions across the UK, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and Scotland. Today we would like to discuss whether the study and its methodology only have relevance for the UK or whether it may have resonance in Spain and across Europe.

Carol Comley concluded by saying that the UK Film Council was also considering commissioning phase two of the UK work which would include substantial market research and survey work talking to "real people" about the cultural impact film had made on their lives.

Ian Christie, Bertrand Moullier and Silvia Angrasani then gave a presentation about the key findings of the study and posed questions on the relevance of its approach in determining the cultural impact of Spanish film or European film. The presentation slides are presented with these notes.

Enrique Gonzalez Kuhn opined that the potential cultural impact of European films could be threatened as their availability to audiences through the traditional media was diminishing. Throughout the year, Alta Films would normally bring around 20 films into Spain for distribution of which 19 were European. European stories from countries other than our own can have particular resonance for us as Europeans. The European press attend European festivals and there was a willingness and desire to watch European films as a counter to the typical US fare. A number of non-Spanish European films have had great success in Spain such as *The Life of Others*, the German film. That film had a particular resonance because at the time of the movie the Stasi archives were opened and the actor discovered that his wife in real life had been a member of the secret police. Mr Gonzalez Kuhn and his fellow distributors were very concerned about the state of independent European film. They used to find fifteen good movies at a time to bring into the Spain and now there were no more than five or six. This was due to a variety of reasons: DVD sales were down, aggravated by film theft and infringement or piracy; the public broadcasters across Europe were buying fewer European films because of reduced financial resources; it was also very difficult to get European movies into the cinemas and compete with the US marketing budgets. High quality European films were still being made, but they do not have the distribution support they need.

Santos Zunzunegui thanked the UK Film Council and ICAA for hosting the event and welcomed this important presentation and discussion. Film was too often seen as purely commercial. However, cinema can be either an industry with a cultural dimension or

cultural with an industrial dimension. The two facets are intertwined. The cultural impact of film has not been effectively studied in Europe and we do need a mechanism to study this. Films can have a long term impact on people's minds and attitudes and this is not always related to the commercial success of films. A series of films find their way through time which means it is particularly difficult to assess their impact. Works of art are not always a crystal clear reflection of society, they are the artist's creation or interpretation. The relationship between national and global filmmaking needs to be more closely examined. Spanish, French, Chinese, Argentinean styles all need to find their place. This is difficult at an industrial level, but easier if the cultural argument was accepted. There are a few exceptions to this such as Almodovar who is unique. He succeeds at international festivals and finds a place for Spanish culture on the world stage. Almodovar keeps Spanish traditions live in film by updating traditions and modifying them, he reflects the changes in modern society. He is a good example to be used in examining cultural cinema.

Picking up on the international theme, Mr Guardans commented that ICAA has a responsibility to lend Spanish films. There is definitely a piece of work to be done on which Spanish films are being requested. The requests come from around the world for specific films and for many different reasons such as education, international festivals, studies in immigration and so on. Image of Spain are transmitted across the world, but what is that image and what is its impact? People always ask him about Spanish film and different nations admire different filmmakers as quintessentially Spanish, for example, amongst the young Scandinavian cinemagoers Julio Medem is very popular. He is the reference for Spanish film there, not Almodovar. Certain obligations are imposed by law on those in the public arena who are making decision on subsidies etc. The films must fulfil certain criteria in terms of being experimental or being of social or cultural significance. If a film is not by a young filmmaker then there must be additional special circumstances. All of this will also have an impact on the sort of films that are being made and viewed in Spain and underlines the importance of understanding the cultural decisions we make.

John Hopewell of Variety was invited to open with a question from the floor. Pointing to page 6 of the study, he said that it suggested that the depiction of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in film has evolved from being reflected only through popular entertainment films made under the control of London based producers, to achieving a degree of autonomy of self-representation. He asked whether the same process had happened in any region in Spain and had the image of Spain being portrayed in the cinema changed? Santos Zunzunegui said that there had generally been centralised production in Spain and filmmaking at the regional level has been complemented by particular assistance in different ways. He was sceptical about whether there was particular regional cinema arising although films can acquire the name Basque, Catalan, Madrid cinema etc. and can be influenced by regional style. Mr Guardans said that there had been a particular cycle of Madrid films in Buenos Aires. Do Madrid films exist? Do European films exist? In the early 1980s and 1990s everything was fashionable in Madrid and Madrid cinema emerged. He did not agree that certain cinema cannot be defined by its regional derivation. In his view, there are Basque, Catalan and Galician cinema- like all cultures, there is a healthy cross fertilisation of outside influences. People would generally

agree that Impressionism exists, but there are grey areas. Language is clearly an important factor in determining a film's identity.

A question was raised from the floor about the impact of new digital formats and particularly about distribution on the internet and also, what was being done to combat piracy. Enrique Gonzalez Kuhn explained that their company had set up a portal to distribute films at a very low price but there was virtually no take up. They then introduced a low subscription for as many movies as the customer wanted to see – and again there was hardly any take up. There probably needed to be a worldwide database, but the right models still needed to be worked out. The future was moving that way; it's just a question of when. Ignasi Guardans supported the Spanish Minister's tough stance on piracy; films must be protected from theft like any other goods. He took issue with the attitude of some of the press and others who had criticised the Government's approach without properly checking their facts.

Another audience member underlined the global reach of European film and its cultural impact. She was from Argentina and ran a video club business. She said that schools use films to teach children about different cultures and many other organisations in Argentina use films to celebrate and learn about different national cultures. *The Full Monty* was a popular choice.

Ignasi Guardans summed up thanking everyone for participating. He, again, stressed the importance of this work and the importance of considering the cultural impact of films at a regional, national and European level. He thanked the UK Film Council for carrying out such an important piece of work, which he hoped would be carried forward.

Notes by Jill Tandy Draft 29.09.10