

## BEYOND THE BOX OFFICE

**PRESENTED BY THE UK FILM COUNCIL, SCREEN YORKSHIRE AND UNIVERSITY OF YORK**

**7<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 2011**

A presentation and debate around *Stories we tell ourselves*, the UK Film Council's study of the cultural impact of film, was held at the Department of Theatre Film and Television, University of York, Heslington, York. The event was organised by the UKFilm Council, Screen Yorkshire and the University of York.

Over 60 professionals attended the event including those from the film industry, education, press, public policy and postgraduate students. The event was followed by a reception and an optional tour of the Department's new £24 million facilities, which include 2 theatres, two television studios, a large sound stage, production laboratories and extensive post-production facilities as well as a digital cinema

Sally Joynson, Chief Executive, Screen Yorkshire, welcomed everyone. She acknowledged that 2011 would be a challenging year for the British film industry. She observed that film was not only about the box office, inward investment or jobs, it was also highly valued because of the stories it tells, stories that affected us in so many ways. She acknowledged that it was great to bring this debate to the North of England and thanked the UK Film Council and the University of York for all they had done to make this happen. Yorkshire had a very long track record of making high quality films that were appreciated worldwide, such as *Billy Liar*, *the Railway Children*, and *Brassed Off* to name but a few. Screen Yorkshire itself had played a significant role in supporting and nurturing the new wave of filmmaking such as *Red Riding* and *Damned United*. Yorkshire was home to a vibrant cultural sector. Many cultural events such as the Bradford International Film Festival and the Sheffield Doc/Fest took place in Yorkshire and the area was seriously committed to film. Screen Yorkshire partnered with the BFI and the UKFilm Council on the Yorkshire Film Archive, managing investment into all regional archives. These images captured our culture, our history, our identity, our industry and our locations. The archive was a significant resource for the country and we would need to work hard to develop it for the future.

Sally Joynson then introduced Andrew Higson as the Chair of the event, explaining that Andrew was the Greg Dyke Professor of Film and Television at the University of York and Head of the Department of Theatre Film and Television. Andrew joined York in 2009 after working at the University of East Anglia for 22 years. He was instrumental in establishing the School of Film and Television as one of the strongest in the country. He had dedicated his life to researching and writing about British cinema and was the author of three books on British cinema history.

Andrew Higson welcomed the audience and said how fabulous it was to host the event in this superb new building. He thanked all those, including the UKFilm Council and Screen Yorkshire for making the event possible. He opined that the region had a special relationship with film which went back to

the silent period. *The Life of Charles Peace*, one of the golden oldies, was shot in Sheffield in the early 1900s. The 2000s would be remembered as the decade of the UK Film Council. They had played an important two way role acting as an interface between Government and Industry. They had always made an excellent economic case for film and encouraged the economists to take on board the cultural value. This study put culture at the centre of the debate and demonstrated its cultural benefits. As Sally Joynson had said, film was highly valued as important to our lives, but what did this mean and what evidence was there? Today, we had a panel and audience of academics, producers, politicians, industry and the UK Film Council to debate this issue.

Andrew Higson then introduced Carol Comley, Head of Strategic Development at the UK Film Council to speak about why and how the study was commissioned. Carol welcomed the audience and thanked all those who were instrumental in making the event happen. She said the study, *Stories we tell ourselves* would be one of the last she would commission through the UK Film Council and in her opinion was one of the best. In 2007, mindful that film delivered both cultural as well as economic benefits, Stewart Till, who was then the Chair of the UK Film Council had requested a study into the cultural impact of film to complement the various economic impact studies that they had produced while they were working with the Government to renew the UK tax relief for film production, a relief which was now worth around £120 million a year for British feature film and which attracted films such as the Harry Potter franchise to shoot in the UK as much as it helped independent producers finance 'small' British films such as the low budget film *Monsters*, Gareth Edward's first feature (albeit set in Mexico) which was at cinemas at the moment or *Yasmin* which was set in Yorkshire, a personal favourite of Miss Comley's, or, not so low budget, British Films such as *The King's Speech* which opened today. She explained that at the outset, the study had presented three particular challenges:

First, 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 utilize, nor had there been agreement about whether or not it made any sense to talk about "measuring or capturing culture" anyway.

Second, worse than that, there had been no agreed definition of what was meant by Culture and curiously even the sponsoring Government department, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport wasn't able to help!

Third, and worse still, even if they could sort out answers to the first two questions, and partly as a result of having to sort out answers to the two questions before they could get started, a cultural impact study was going to cost rather more than the economic impact studies they had commissioned previously.

So, a number of pragmatic decisions had to be taken, they had rescored the brief to look at British film only - this was a big compromise as they had intended to look at the impact of all feature film consumed in the UK and not only British film; they had agreed to focus down on a 60 year period only (in truth that was not too much of a compromise); And, they 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.

Miss Comley explained that the ideas Ian Christie and Bertrand Moullier, would be talking about were just the start of what they hoped would be a sustained programme of work.

She opined that this debate had come at a very good time. Over the past 15 months they had discussed the study and its findings with a range of different interest groups which had included: research specialists from government sponsored cultural bodies in the UK such as the UKFilm Council, Arts Council England, the BBC, the British Council and various sports and heritage organisations; Audio-visual analysts from the European public sector; Film Agencies such as the CNC in France and the Danish Film Institute; with the UK's academics courtesy of University of London. They had also had excellent sessions with the UK's three national screen agencies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, sessions in Europe with Spanish professionals during this year's San Sebastian film festival and more recently in Brussels with representatives of the European Parliament's Culture Committee. In the main, people said they liked what they had done and agreed overwhelmingly that a study to capture the impact of film was long overdue. The biggest question was, why hadn't this been done before?

Miss Comley further explained that, today's discussion took place as they were kicking off stage two. Stage two would enable them to build on their initial findings and to deepen and test them by undertaking the survey work which they were not able to afford in phase one. They would also widen their angle of view from British film only to world cinema and they would drill down on issues of cause and effect more precisely. Phase two findings would be quantitative as well as qualitative, the former being particularly important to politicians and civil servants.

That said, this afternoon's discussion also took place at a very difficult time, at a time when public funding in the UK for arts, culture and film was being squeezed hard. Symptomatic of this, in late July, she explained that they had all heard that the new Coalition Government had decided to abolish the UK Film Council. They now know that the British Film Institute, who partnered with the UK Film Council on this study, would be remodelled and charged by Government to take on responsibility for many of the functions that the UK Film Council now undertakes. She hoped that the BFI continued with this work especially important in the context of the rapidly changing patterns of film financing, production and especially consumption.

Miss Comley explained that they were eager to hear this afternoon what interested the audience about the study? What they agreed with? What they found less persuasive? What questions stage two should address? What evidence of Cultural Impact University of York and other professionals here today would find useful? And, whether or not the audience felt that they had developed an approach which was persuasive and merits further work.

Andrew Higson thanked Miss Comley, introducing Ian Christie and Bertrand Moullet. He said that he particularly appreciated the study, because they had taken academic insights and debates and made them into a coherent approach which is more accessible to a broader audience.

Ian Christie, Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck College and Bertrand Moullet, Senior Consultant, Narval Media, co – authors of the study gave a presentation about the key findings of the study, *Stories we tell ourselves*, reflecting upon their ideas in context of Northern English film (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>

And the study can be found at

[http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/media/pdf/f/i/CIReport\\_010709.pdf](http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/media/pdf/f/i/CIReport_010709.pdf))

After the presentation, the Chair introduced Andy Harries, CEO, Left Bank Pictures and Film and Television Producer. Mr Harries showed trailers of two of his movies, *The Queen and Damned United*. He explained that the ideas had come from a multitude of sources. To take on a subject as big as *The Queen* was very ambitious. Mr Harries had seen Helen Mirren at a read-through for *Prime Suspect* and he had thought that she looked like the Queen. There had already been a drama about the Prime Minister and that had worked. There was no history of the Royal Family taking legal action. They had thought that it would be good to make a series of films which reflected the times we live in. The question of how truthful films were was part of a bigger debate. For example, *The Queen* contained a scene where the Prime Minister went to visit her and she made a speech about him being her 10<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister etc, Peter Morgan, who wrote the screenplay, claimed that he had made up that conversation as the meeting was a private one, but it was now reflected in Blair's memoirs as actually having happened. The whole scenario around the death of Diana was extraordinary, like nothing we had seen in our times and a very interesting area to examine. Why did we all go mad? Why such huge national anxiety? What did she mean to people? The Royal family were hit with a unique situation and had no experience of how to deal with it. There were a number of interesting issues to explore.

The driving objective for greenlighting a film is that it should be financially successful, but Mr Harries always tried to set out with a film that had a meaningful message, because it was more likely to become a great story. He explained that he was now shooting a film with Luc Besson. The zeitgeist is important and *The Queen* caught the zeitgeist. Very often, it is a punt, because there is a long lead time on movies from the first idea to the release and things can change quickly. Ideas can take time to percolate through society.

Turning to *Damned United*, Mr Harries explained that Brian Clough had been around in his youth. He enjoyed watching football. He felt that it was important when telling tales that they were shot in the real locations as much as possible. They had reached an agreement that they would shoot *Damned United* at Eland Road. A few weeks away from shooting Don Revie, one of the great players of his day, had contacted them and said that the "boys" had been talking and that they could not shoot the film there, because they did not like the spin they had heard about the film on the way the players had treated Brian Clough. Mr Harries insisted for the film that they had to shoot there and he asked to go and see them to put his case. They were eventually permitted to do so.

Mr Harries explained that they always attempted to maintain accuracy and reflect the emotional truth, which made it important to use the real location. He said that he had a theory that films which are dislocated from their location often will not work. In the UK filmmaking is often hampered by available budgets, and it is often necessary to make a film for around £4 million to know that it would work financially. This made the integrity of the story itself crucially important. Often it was cheaper to shoot in London than in Yorkshire because the crew they needed were often based in London. Screen Yorkshire helped a great deal to ease this process. Mr Harries explained that 100s of films had been shot in the Isle of Man and other location other than their real ones for financial reasons

Andrew Higson then introduced Baroness Estelle Morris, former Secretary of State for the Department of Education and Skills and former Minister in the Department of Culture Media and Sport. Elected as an MP for Birmingham Yardley in 1997, Estelle Morris, amongst other things, was currently Chair of the Strategy Board of the Institute of Effective Education at the University. She explained that she had started her career as a teacher and had taught for 18 years in Coventry. She had worked alongside the industry for a while in her role as Minister in the Department of Culture Media and Sport when the film tax break was being negotiated.

Picking up on what Andy Harries had said, Baroness Morris explained that filmmakers could have an important part to play in education. When teachers were trying to teach children about the Blair era and the public reaction when Diana died they would be competing against the two films we had just seen. Filmmakers could bring so much to the table. Teachers could talk to the children, but filmmakers could bring so many more communication tools and skills to the table. She recalled showing *Cry Freedom* to a group of 6<sup>th</sup> Formers who wanted to learn about apartheid. They showed the film and when the bell went they asked her not to stop it. It was the first time for her that a lesson had gone on beyond the bell at the students' insistence. It was not just entertainment, it was education.

One thing she had learnt as Arts Minister was that there was a significant amount of public money that came film's way – the music industry did not get it, education wanted more of it. What was film bringing to the table? One thing was that the film industry had people in the public eye who politicians wanted to be associated with. Celebrity can be seductive. When Estelle Morris was Minister she had received a call from Dickie Attenborough who had said that there was an issue on the tax break and he was going to take a walk down Downing Street to see Gordon Brown if that was OK. It was less a question and more a statement. Gordon Brown took his meeting. She opined that film was in a position where it could get access to politicians. It could be about education, about our culture as well as entertainment. As a nation, we cared about the culture we transferred to our children, the stories we told them about our past. Pictures tell stories whether you liked them or not e.g. there was a picture of the Civil War hanging in the House of Commons which Estelle Morris had often used to explain to visitors about our history. How often did we use Shakespeare and Austen to explain our cultural past? Film was the newcomer to the arts that can so strongly tell the stories of our past. It was magical and lives in people's memories. It brought an ability to deal with time and space in a way that other art forms could not. Unlike theatre it felt real. Movement in time was seamless and people become part of the experience. It engaged the young generation the way other art forms did not because of its technical nature. Film was the means by which our community talked about and to its nation. It did it in a way which engaged this generation. Other art forms did not create the culture of celebrity in the way that film did. Gordon Brown would see Dickie Attenborough because he was famous. Film was a brilliant tool to communicate life in Britain.

Film could move from entertainment to reality in the eyes of the audience and there was a problem in some children's ability to tell fact from fiction. *Saving Private Ryan* did not claim to tell the truth, but some children did not know that. Estelle questioned how filmmakers could help teachers to make children separate celebrity from reality and fiction from truth. When was a film pure entertainment and when was it an education. Teachers would like film to be their ally. There was a danger in film. Estelle, as a citizen who enjoyed film, as a teacher who knew the potency of film, as

a politician who understood how people can get caught up in the celebrity of film, made a plea to filmmakers to beware the power of film.

The Chair then invited the audience to make comment. Bill Lawrence said that he liked the idea of *Stories we tell ourselves*. He questioned why the issue of impact had not been defined. As the Manager of the Odeon in York he recalled successful films such as *Carry on Camping* and the Cubby Broccoli film *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*. Had the qualitative side of impact been considered? Also, only a small percentage of the films we saw here are British films. The interplay between the experiences was interesting. In every country people appreciated home-grown films differently. Did the survey ask people what they enjoyed? The *Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, for example, may have had a different qualitative response to those who brought in the money. Impact meant what the film did to you after you left the cinema. If it modified behaviour, left a trace, then is that impact? They were not necessarily good films, but did films that lived on in the memory such as *Carry On Camping* leave an impact? Bertrand Moullier thought that films like *Doctor In the House* did have a cultural resonance and they were still watched by people.

Another audience member asked whether Phase 2 could in some way address how we maximised intercultural understanding. Carol Comley said that because Phase 1 was so well received we were now moving on to Phase 2, which was a survey of real people and the impact of film on their lives. It was not just about British films, but all films that impact on our lives. Ian Christie said that there was a chapter in the study which addressed representation of ethnic minorities and the way self-expression has been pursued. Films could show us how others live their lives. To value others you first needed to understand them.

Estelle Morris was then asked what was the difference between entertainment and education. Young people needed to be trained to decode and interpret information. Baroness Morris responded that education should be entertaining. She used to show a film to her pupils as a treat. Film would only take a meaningful place in education when it was melded into teachers training e.g. a teacher could achieve more if *Cry Freedom* was packaged accordingly.

Another audience member then asked whether we had a definition of culture around anthropology. We were getting too much of a sense of British cinema academically which is not related to industry. There were different audiences for different films. It is not helpful to look at *Four Lions* next to *The Queen*, for example, because the audiences did not overlap. Different audiences engaged in different issues. Something needed to be done to make more use of films made in Britain and what their impact was outside the UK. Ian Christie said that he agreed and disagreed that the audience for *The Queen* was not the audience for *Four Lions*. The questioner responded that *Four Lions* was most successful. It made over £2 million at the box office. It had had a huge audience within its target audience. *Four Lions* was not the same as *the Kings Speech*.

Andy Harries said that the concept of British cinema was very important. Nation State funding was organised on a national basis, hence the **UK** Film Council and the **British** Film Institute. It was important to examine the impact of British film if part of the reason for the study was to make a case for national funding. Bertrand Moullier said that they had not hidden behind the comfortable notion of national cinema and had gone for a monolithic approach. The study showed something which had never been established before.

Another questioner said that it was fascinating. They were interested in regional cinema and to what extent did the panel think that the Regional Screen Agencies had impacted on regional film cultures. Carol Comley said that she believed the Regional Screen agencies had played an important role. If there was a Phase 3 she would like to examine in detail the relationship of the economic and the cultural. On the regional issue, Ian Christie also made a comment that their research had shown the films shot in the North of England seemed to have greater impact as British Films than those shot in the South.

Andrew Higson commented that Universities could also play a role in taking this work forward. They had access to other sources of funding for focused research.

A member of the audience questioned whether there had been any regression in the cultural impact of film. She had studied film in Singapore. There was such a paucity of Singaporean film she had studied British film. She wondered whether there would be a change in cultural efficacy as funding sources change. Ian Christie said that we have become more used to films these days that take a micro view as opposed to, say, Ghandi which took a macro view. Does that mean they make less impact?

Andrew Higson then wrapped the debate, commenting that Morris had made a vibrant case for the importance of film in culture and, commented specifically on its role in education. Ian Christie and Bertrand Moullier had made the point that films were not just about the stories we tell ourselves, but about the way we tell those stories and how images and sounds can support and develop those stories. Funds for filmmaking should continue to support culturally valuable films. He urged that debate and research continue in this area to feed into public policy.

Thanking everyone for coming, he invited people to the reception to continue discussing these important issues.

Jill Tandy