

BEYOND THE BOX OFFICE

PRESENTED BY THE UK FILM COUNCIL, SOUTH WEST SCREEN AND
WATERSHED, BRISTOL

2 FEBRUARY 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 Watershed. The event was organised by the UK Film Council, South West Screen and Watershed.

Around ninety professionals attended from the film industry, education, press, local government and public policy. Discussion was followed by a reception. A video and audio recording was made of the presentations and debate which can be found at <http://www.dshed.net/beyond-box-office>

Chief Executive of South West Screen Caroline Norbury welcomed everyone. She stressed how interested she was in the cultural impact debate. On a day to day basis, her job was predominantly about economic impact, yet film was one of the most important art forms that projects our ideas and thoughts. She said it did not matter whether the films budgets were big or small or what their subject matter was about, they all had a part to play. Film was a way of telling stories to ourselves about ourselves in a profound way. The UK Box Office saw record receipts in 2009 up on previous years. Recent Oscar and BAFTA nominations showed how films stimulated debate. Look at the discussions around *Black Swan* about the treatment of ballerinas, and the impact of *The King's Speech* on raising the issues around speech impairments. South West Screen had played host to a number of important films including *Alice in Wonderland*, *Tamara Drew*, *Never Let Her Go*. There was a thriving industry based in the region including Aardman and a community of independent filmmakers. Caroline then congratulated Alison Sterling who was also speaking at the event on her BAFTA nomination for the *Turning*. South West Screen had had a number of BAFTA successes in the past including Aardman's *Matter of Loaf and Death*.

Caroline introduced Mark Cosgrove as the Chair of the event. She explained that Mark Cosgrove had worked in independent cultural film exhibition for over 20 years. He had started as Cinema Programmer for Plymouth Arts Centre, followed by Education Officer at Manchester Cornerhouse (1991 – 94). Since 1994 he had been Head of Programme at Watershed in Bristol, UK. He was also Creative Director of Encounters International Short Film Festival. He had been invited onto various film festival juries including The Europa Label at Directors' Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival, Edinburgh Film Festival and Berlinale 2010. He produced monthly film podcasts - watershed.co.uk/podcast and blogs / twitters from festivals he attended <http://www.twitter.com/msc45>. Mark Cosgrove's paper on cultural impact issues accompanies this note.

Mark Cosgrove explained that in his experience culture had been an uncomfortable bedfellow with the industry. One colleague had described culture as "the crust which forms on a jar of jam when the lid is left off it!" He felt that this was a problem. He commended the UK Film Council who had played a role in the sustainability of the film industry. The producers of *The King's Speech* had said that it would not have happened without the UK Film Council. Mark felt that it was unfortunate that this important work on cultural impact had happened at the same time as the UK Film Council was being abolished. He hoped that the findings would not be lost as we move through this period of change.

Mark Cosgrove explained the order of events for the day and strongly encouraged audience feedback on the issues raised. He then introduced the Head of Strategic Development at the UK Film Council Carol Comley to speak about why and how the study was commissioned.

Carol Comley welcomed the audience and thanked all those who were instrumental in making the event happen. She said the study 'Stories We Tell Ourselves' was very important for public policy. In 2007 Stewart Till had been mindful that film delivered both cultural as well as economic benefits. Stewart was the Chair of the UK Film Council at the time and had requested a study into the cultural impact of film. 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. This UK tax relief was now worth around £120 million a year for British feature film. 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. There had also been no 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 The Department for Culture, Media and Sport wasn't able to help!
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 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 rescoped 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). 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.

Carol Comley 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. An excellent event hosted with Screen Yorkshire and the University of York with Estelle Morris and Andy Harries speaking.

In the main, people said they liked what had been done and agreed that a study to capture the impact of film was long overdue. The biggest question was, why hadn't this been done before?

Carol 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. Today's discussion took place as they were kicking off Phase Two which would build on the initial findings, and deepen

and test those findings 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.

This afternoon's discussion also took place at a very difficult time when public funding in the UK for arts, culture and film is being squeezed hard. In many ways this was a timely piece of work as it came at a time when it was more crucial than ever to make a strong case for continued support for film and culture.

Carol explained that the UK Film Council was eager to hear this afternoon about what interested the audience about the study? What did they agree with? What did they find less persuasive? What questions should Stage Two address?

Mark Cosgrove thanked Carol Comley and introduced Ian Christie as Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck College. He explained that 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 also Vice-President of Europa Cinemas (see www.ianchristie.org for more information). Mark also introduced Bertrand Moullier a Senior Consultant at Narval Media. Bertrand had over 20 years experience working broadly across the media industries and in areas of public policy. Ian and Bertrand were co-authors of the study and gave a presentation about the key findings of the study, 'Stories We Tell Ourselves. They reflected upon their ideas in context of film in South West England.

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>.

Mark Cosgrove introduced Rebecca O'Brien who has been an independent film producer for over twenty years. Rebecca has produced eleven feature films with Ken Loach including *Land and Freedom*, *Sweet Sixteen*, *My Name is Joe* and *Looking for Eric*. In 2006 Rebecca Produced *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* which was set during the Irish War of Independence and won the Palme d'Or in Cannes. This year they would release *Route Irish* set in Liverpool and Iraq and make a new film, *The Angels' Share* set in Scotland. Rebecca is a director of South West Screen and sits on the Film Industry Training Board. She runs her company Sixteen Films with Ken Loach.

Rebecca said that it was very interesting in that Ken Loach's movies seemed to make a bigger impact Internationally than in many parts of England. France was the best territory for his movies. They had generally not conquered 'Middle England'. The next movies they were working on were based in Ireland and Scotland. Ken had affiliations with the area because he lived in Bath. Rebecca went on to show the trailer of *Sweet 16* which was released in 2002.

Ten years after the movie had been made BBC Radio 4 had produced a show where they had brought together youth groups and asked how the movie had impacted them. It was particularly interesting because the film was a certificate 18 and most people hadn't seen it by the normal means. There had been considerable piracy because people wanted to see something that represented them and their way of life on screen (i.e. in Scotland). The movie used subtitles, but failed to make headway in the US. It was culturally owned by the kids in Scotland despite being a certificate 18. It was a gritty portrayal around the black economy, a side of life that people would not necessarily want to portray but it was honest.

Rebecca next showed the trailer of *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* set in Ireland in the 1920s. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* was released in 2006 and told the story of two County Cork brothers who joined the Irish Republican Army to fight for Irish independence from the United Kingdom. It took its title from the song 'The Wind That Shakes the Barley' and was Loach's biggest box office success to date. The film did well around the world and set a record in Ireland as the highest grossing

Irish made independent film ever. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* carried universal messages about defiance, sacrifice and the fight for independence.

This film was culturally owned by the Irish. After they won the Palme D'Or there was a terrible backlash in the press about why the Director hated the UK so much. The movie was about history and the reaction was extraordinary. It had a wider cultural impact and was even discussed in the Irish Parliament. The premiere was in a shopping mall in Cork. The movie was a great example of cultural ownership. The Irish felt it was their film, set in their country and using their language. It would have a very long tail. It was also British, because it showed what the British did but they put big barriers down from the start.

Mark Cosgrove then introduced Alison Sterling as an independent film producer. Alison worked for many years as an actor in television, theatre and film. She founded and ran Moving Target Theatre Company which produced new plays for small-scale touring venues, including the Edinburgh Festival, The Young Vic and the ICA. Since moving into film in 2000, she had produced short films (including nine films for UK Film Council, BBC Films and HTV), television documentaries, digital art installations, interactive and multiple screen projects and International web-based collaborations for Culture 2000. Alison had also developed feature film projects with funding from South West Screen and Cornwall Film. Most recently she has received a BAFTA nomination for her short film *Turning*.

Alison explained that she had been asked to speak because she was a local producer. She was interested in taking the 'particular' and turning it into the 'universal'. She talked about her movie, *Flying Bird* which was the ifeature she had been developing in Bristol. The film was about a woman in her mid 40s who worked at Filton. She explained that Filton Engineering was a major presence in the Bristol economy. Alison had fallen in love with an Algerian student and failed to see how dangerous he was to her. It had come about when Concorde did its final flight over Bristol. The starting point for the film was when the woman was on the bus and saw a beautiful African man. It was a love story. It took the 'particular' and made it 'universal'. It was a for the post 9/11 world. The director was Polish.

Alison had first seen her short film at Watershed during the Encounter's Short Film Festival. It had started life as a documentary and was a project about immigrants coming over the border. She was attracted because it was a local story with international resonance. Alison showed the trailer to the audience. Kasia came over to Bristol to work on *Flying Blind*. Alison wanted an International pair of eyes to look at the city with afresh. The ifeatures funding structure was instrumental in getting the movie greenlit. The money came from four sources – The BBC, the UK Film Council, South West Screen and Matador Pictures (which was commercial money). Bristol City Council had also invested money. There were no conditions attached to the Bristol City Council money on where it came from but it had to speak of Bristol. This film would never have seen the light of day without these various public funding sources.

Mark Cosgrove then invited Ian Christie, Bertrand Moullier, Rebecca O'Brien and Alison Sterling to the front of the cinema to sit on the panel for the debate with the audience.

The first question came from Jane Arthur, Head of Culture Media and Drama at UWE, who asked Alison Sterling how her way of looking at Bristol had changed as a result of working with Kasia. Alison explained that it had changed when she visited Warsaw. She actually saw through Kasia's eyes, the continuity and history of Bristol and the beautiful historical architecture. Kasia had fallen in love with Clifton.

Caroline Norbury then asked Ian Christie and Bertrand Moullier if they had any recommendations for public policy as a result of the study. Ian said that they were clear that British filmmaking had required incentives, subsidies etc to survive and there was no reason why that should change. Back in the early 1900s, Parliament had brought in legislation to ensure that British films would be made and this provided a huge catalyst for British movie making. Ian said that it was very important to keep recalibrating this, particularly if you considered *The Long Tail*. A film that everyone thought was very British was *Lawrence of Arabia* but it was financed by America and it was tweaked to make it look British. It always had lived in a difficult position.

Producer Kate Swan commented that audiences did not care where the money came from if they felt they culturally owned a movie. As a Scottish producer she was very glad that there would continue to be funds to produce. The Scottish government was very keen to keep Scotland on the screen. Ian Christie raised the question of *Brave Heart* and whether that was a Scottish movie. Bertrand Moullier said that this country was afflicted by economic machismo. There was a disconnect for fields which are viewed as culturally noble – compare the Opera House to film. Bertrand very much hoped that they could add methodologies and formulations around the area that could be trusted and fed in to the public policy debate.

Rebecca O'Brien commented that the UK Film Council had a rule that the projected sales figures must be at least 50% of the budget. She said that she would be interested to see what the reality was. It was impossible to tell what would be successful. She had worked on *My Beautiful Launderette* and they had not known at the time that it would be viewed as a culturally significant film. Bertrand Moullier commented that the relationship between culture and commerce was complicated. The question was raised as to whether cultural impact was intensified by ownership. Was it related to the relationship with the writer – researcher? Rebecca said that research was very important. Paul Laverty, the writer on *The Wind That Shakes The Barley* had spent six months meeting historians, academics etc. Rebecca said that she was happy to see fantasy, but if the film professed to be about real issues then there was a disconnect if the geography or the historical details was incorrect.

Another audience member asked the panel what their view was on current TV. For instance the drama coming from the US, and what was the future of TV commissioned drama likely to be? Ian Christie said that we are seeing a convergence effect. TV drama can by-pass cinema and still have a long life. Query the impact that will have on cinema if there is a long tail for TV drama, where will the one off film be. In some parts of the world producers make a TV version and a film version at the same time. Bertrand Moullier said that TV drama was in a state of crisis. Spooks would have been substantially deficit financed by DVD. Now the deficits are growing and can be 20%. The BBC wanted high quality high profile drama but would not pay the premium. In France broadcasters were obligated to plough revenues back into the independent sector. Studios had output deals with the broadcasters and could demand heavy premiums. It was more and more difficult for Independents to leverage good television sales. Rebecca O'Brien commented that there was a top heavy homogenous approach to movie making these days. There needed to be an outlet for good experimental writing. She said that TV had forgotten that it had a responsibility to that and she hoped that a responsibility to culture would prevail.

Mike Higgins who was an assistant director and location manager commented that he was often surprised what cultural impact entailed for film buffs. He said that most people go to the cinema to be entertained rather than for a cultural experience. Films like *My Beautiful Launderette* and *The*

King's Speech got themselves into the situation where they had made an impact. In 1946-2006 most of the major studios had offices in the UK, and most of the films in the UK had foreign money in them. If there is good acting and good stories a film will go irrespective of where the money is from. Art is a universal thing that can be understood all over the world.

Rupert Miles introduced himself as a distributor. He asked how the films would be distributed and how did you go about getting the small niche films into bigger regions? He queried why there was not more support for British films and why there were not dedicated screens.

Alison explained that her iFeature had an International Sales Agent attached, but there was no deal for British distribution. It is difficult to pre-sell a movie without major talent attached. She said that casting is important. If it was a drama with no genre hook there was pressure to get a high profile casting name. How did you encourage British films in mainstream cinemas? Rebecca O'Brien suggested quotas. Bertrand Moullier explained that in the French system each exhibition chain had a commitment to programme a certain number of independent films outside the studio films. Ian Christie said that there is an incentivisation of cinemas through funding. Multiplexes were an inefficient way of getting British films out. Many movies would not get beyond one or two screens. They need to really chase the box office for smaller independent films. There needed to be a twin system of quotas and incentivisation.

John Adams, a film writer and film teacher congratulated the authors on the report and the methodology. He said that cultural impact in the US was taken for granted, but that was not the same with British audiences. He wondered how narratives expressing local and regional values could reach their audiences when Hollywood dominated and what hopes there are for digital distribution. Rebecca said that their next film was about contractors from Iraq who work in Liverpool. It was going out on twenty prints, but was also having a Sky premiere channel download. It would reach the specialist Loach audiences through the cinema and the broader younger audiences through the download. They were trying to extend themselves. Bertrand Moullier said that he was a subscriber to MUBI but that he queried the business model in terms of making substantive impact. Exhibitors and distributors would be unhappy and the question was who had the power. Mark Cosgrove said that there should be flexibility in the way movies were distributed so that the right audience was reached in the right way.

Mark invited Dick Penny to the floor to make some final observations. Dick worked as producer, manager and consultant in the creative sector.

He was introduced as the Managing Director of Watershed in Bristol. A path finding cross-artform digital producer innovating at the intersection of society, arts and technology (www.watershed.co.uk). Published digital projects are located at www.dshed.net. Collaborative innovation projects are at www.pmstudio.co.uk. As a theatre producer credits included the World Premiere of *When the Wind Blows* adapted by Raymond Briggs from his book, Pete Postlethwaite in *Macbeth*; and two award winning one man shows: *Baglady* with Sorcha Cusack and *Scaramouche Jones* with Pete Postlethwaite which premiered at the Dublin Festival and toured Internationally. Dick Penny was also playing a leading role in Connecting Bristol to deliver a digital inclusion strategy for Bristol. He recently stepped down as Chair of Bristol Old Vic Theatre and was the current Chair of the Bristol Partnership.

Dick Penny said that it was fascinating that the debate kicked off with Caroline saying it was a rare

opportunity to talk culture. He made various observations in summary of the afternoon. He loved the description of culture as “a crust which formed when you took the lid off a jar of jam” but was disappointed that it did not lead to fireworks. Carol Comley had explained about the background to the study and the fact that people thought that a cultural impact study should be intuitively simpler than an economic study, but in fact that there was no agreed definition of culture. The fact that the size of the audience did not correlate with its impact. New media was revitalising an interest in film and creating access in a manner similar to the multiplex boom. Rebecca had commented about films being culturally owned and that people seeing themselves and their communities on the screens created an impact. Bertrand Moullier commented about the UK being infected by an econometric machismo. Yes, Filmmakers have to take responsibility for making money .but solely economic metrics limited the debate. Dick Penny reflected on the commerce v culture debate and how it created tension. How do you bring the two together? Culture came through participation and sharing. Was there a possibility now of new models? We needed more flexibility. He commented that Kenneth J Foster from YBCA in San Francisco had recently written an interesting Article on the arts called ‘Thriving in an Uncertain World’ where he says that you cannot get innovation without diversity. He said that we needed to experiment and there was a moment to re examine the balance between commerce and culture. He suggested that since UK Film Council first launched in 2000, apart from the discussion of the long tail the issues remained pretty much the same.

Thanking everyone for coming he invited them to join the reception and continue debating the points.

Jill Tandy 23.02.11