

UK FILM COUNCIL
BEYOND THE BOX OFFICE
European Parliament
2 December 2010

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 at the European Parliament , Brussels. It was hosted by Mary Honeyball, MEP.

Around 20 professionals attended the event including MEPs, representatives from the European Commission, staff and advisers from the European Parliament and members of the film community in Brussels including in particular those working in public policy and research.

Mary Honeyball chaired the event. Mrs Honeyball welcomed the audience and made an introduction, stressing the significance of the study from a public policy perspective and highlighting her own particular interest in cinema. Mrs Honeyball welcomed the UK Film Council and the presentation team and said that the UK Film Council had made a significant impact in supporting the UK film industry. Films have an important role to play in terms of both the economy and ‘beyond the box office’ into culture and the arts. In the UK we have a strong tradition of developing some of the best international talent. Film can benefit from more than economic support and the European Parliament think it’s important to support film and, have, for example, introduced the Lux prize to help promote new talent. Mary Honeyball expressed a desire for the European Parliament to build on its good work and to do more to support the film industry.

The Chair introduced the speakers: Carol Comley, Head of Strategic Development at the UK Film Council, Nessa Childers, MEP, and 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, Paris

Carol Comley thanked the Chair and welcomed the fact that the issues and challenges of film are firmly embodied in the thinking of the European Parliament and went on to explain why the UK Film Council commissioned the study. 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, the UK Film Council rescoped the brief to look at UK or British film only; second, it focused on a 60 year period only, third, they drew wholly on pre-existing materials e.g. academic literature, national and trade press, cultural commentaries whether in printed form or online. It took over a year to complete the study.

Over the last year, we have discussed the study with both film and research professionals in the UK and Europe, its findings and its methodology have been extremely well received. For example, presentations and debates have been held across the UK, in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and also in Spain, at the San Sebastian Film Festival Today we would like to consider whether the study and its methodology only have relevance for the UK or whether it may have application across Europe.

Nessa Childers then introduced herself, explaining that she had a background in psychoanalysis and that the training included compulsory components on analysing cinema. She finds examining the symbolic side of film fascinating. Ireland is going through hard times and film has an important part to play in that it can both reflect change and bring about change. Film has always had a very strong social and cultural relevance in Ireland. Because Irish films very rarely have a large budget they rely on social and cultural themes to give them significance. Important themes such as sectarian tensions are often suppressed in the national psyche and not discussed in day to day conversation, but they are played out in the cinema and across the arts. Indeed there is often a perception in Ireland that great events have not been properly digested until they make the big screen. The way we express language and consequently the meaning we take from it is often enhanced by visual images, which have an impact on the audience.

Cinema also plays an essential role in offering escapism. Whilst Ireland has suffered from the severe downturn in the past two years, cinema has been one of the few sectors which have maintained its revenue streams.

Nessa Childers explained that she hopes to make a difference for cinema in the European Parliament in her upcoming role as the Social and Democrat shadow rapporteur for a report on "The opportunities and challenges for European Cinema in the Digital Era". It is intended to help form the definitive European Parliament approach to this issue. The digital journey offers both challenges and opportunities Europe is playing catch up with digitisation. While 90% of American films produced last year were available in digital format, in France, which produces more films annually than any other member state, only 50% of films were produced digitally.

So, Europe must catch up with the United States quickly and aim for at least 90% digital master copies in the short-term. But what might digitisation mean for the continuing cultural impact of European cinema?

Digitisation will reduce distribution costs and make distribution more flexible; therefore, more European films will be able to travel. Taking a broader range of films to less populated areas will lead to promotion of linguistic diversity and social cohesion. By contributing to better circulation and access to film this will also create more commercial

opportunities. Creating a digital mass of European film will allow commercial operators to effect economies of scale.

Europe is facing many challenges and is in danger of failing in many ways unless we can communicate in an effective cultural way. It is more important than ever that we understand each other and the way we behave. Differences in national characteristics can lead to hostility unless we can understand each other's view points.

Member states can play a crucial role in aiding the film industry. Unfortunately, in the current age of austerity, arts projects are almost inevitably the first things to be cut back. It is important that industry make its voice heard to fight for financing. In Ireland, they have introduced a new project where people who are out of work can be offered internships in the arts. They will only receive social welfare, but they will have the opportunity to expand their creative skills. It is very important that Member States realise not only the economic importance of film, but its social and cultural importance. Nessa Childers said that she welcomed the study and was looking forward to continuing to play a part in promoting this important area.

Mary Honeyball thought it was very interesting that economic recession did not impact on cinema attendances. There are many opportunities for Europe in this area.

Ian Christie opened the presentation by commenting on the impeccable transnational credentials of the presentation team who came from the UK, France and Italy. Mr Christie, Bertrand Moullier and Silvia Angrisani then gave a presentation about the key findings of the study, *Stories We Tell Ourselves*, expanding their ideas to the questions of the relevance of the approach in a European context. (The slides of the presentation accompany this note and the study can be found at http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/media/pdf/f/i/CIReport_010709.pdf.)

Mary Honeyball thanked them for a very interesting presentation. She was particularly fascinated by the Full Monty case study. Commenting that the film in so many ways had impacted on so many communities across the world. It had a very specific cultural Northern England setting and yet it travelled because of a universally appealing subject matter.

Joao Correa from World Film Alliance, a director, representing independent producers explained that being a producer in Europe was a very different job than being a producer in the US. European film needed more support and less bureaucracy. Promotion of European film was difficult and there was a lot of work to be done to raise its profile. He quoted the example that the European Union had put money into the Shanghai exposition, but that it was impossible to show a film on the European Union stand at the Festival. He urged the European Parliament to do more in this area. Mary Honeyball responded that the CULT Committee worked hard to consider and promote these issues and film was especially championed by Doris Pack.

Philippe Kern, from KEA European Affairs, welcomed the study and the presentation He said that British films had made a particular cultural impact through humour e.g. the *Full Monty* and *Trainspotting* and through big costume dramas. The presentation was particularly interesting and he felt that this work could be extended to demonstrate the importance of film to overall European policy. Secondly, he commented that US films

succeed so well partly because they are well distributed. It is key that European film obtains the right sort of distribution support. Thirdly; he commented that music and films are intertwined and each can be used to promote the other. Ian Christie responded that music is very important when considering audience impact .He gave the example from the study of *Chariots of Fire*; the music is seen as a signifier of British sporting spirit in international competition. The strength of the impact was not just about the film, that talent or the music, but the fusion of all three. People keep snapshots of film in their long term memories. Filmmakers and talent, such as Hugh Grant play a significant part in this.

Mary Honeyball stated that language is a huge issue in establishing a European wide film industry. English is a universal language which helps film to travel internationally. Ian Christie pointed out that a significant part of the audience for the Full Monty was not seeing it in their own language and it can still carry important messages to diverse linguistic audiences. Philippe Kern commented that British film has more chance of obtaining international distribution than other European films.

Silvia Angrisani made a point on talent. Audiences very often follow actors and we do not have a star system in Europe. Do we think of cinema as European or as French/ English/ Italian? Distribution is certainly key: if a film is poorly released it will hardly have international impact. (for instance, television broadcast can be as important as theatrical release). Nevertheless, there is not always a direct correlation between theatrical box office and audience impact and that is one of the elements of interest of a “cultural impact” approach to cinema

Joseph Johnston, from the European Coordination of Independent Film and Television producers said that the question of how best to support distribution was an interesting one. The issuing of multi-territory licences is important both commercially and in the interests of cultural diversity. Can this be supported by strengthening the MEDIA Programme. On-demand services also throw up complex issues. Ian Christie responded that he was also Vice president of Europa Cinemas and they were also wondering what the future has in store. They realised the importance of joined up thinking in the digital world and had invited many people who are working in on-line services to their conference. The link between all forms of distribution is being examined and the loop needs to be closed. We are standing at the threshold of universal digital distribution. Something needs to change to take account of a more finessed form of distribution. Event cinema is now making a mark in the UK. There is an organisation called Secret Cinema which uses multi art forms. Cinema needs to create a sense of event and there is a feeling that there is a move against commoditisation.

Carol Comley thanked everyone for coming to the event and participating so actively .Each time the study is presented the debate is different. It would be fascinating to conduct a similar study into European film and consider the findings in context of today’s debate. The UK Film Council is just about to commission phase two of the UK work which will include substantial market research and survey work talking to “real people” about the cultural impact of film. She hoped the work would be of value and said that she would be delighted to receive any contributions to the debate and could be contacted through the UK Film Council. She acknowledged that the study had a particular focus, but it has given us a clear finding about the value of film to citizens. We need to build on that knowledge, and Ms Comley was proud that the UK Film Council had started down the road of what

was a longer journey. She very much hoped that others would also pick up on this work in Europe and at the European Parliament.

Mary Honeyball called a close to the proceedings and thanked everyone for participating in the debate and thanked the UK Film Council for a fantastic piece of work and a very interesting presentation.

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