

BEYOND THE BOX OFFICE

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 in Cardiff on July 19th at Cineworld, Mary Ann Street, Cardiff.

It was hosted by the Film Agency for Wales and attended by UK Film Council representatives.

There were about 50 people at the event from the film industry and allied areas including education, research and public policy. Jill Tandy chaired the event.

The event began with a new show reel from Screen Commission Wales depicting magnificent Welsh shooting locations.

Pauline Burt, the Chief Executive Officer of the Film Agency for Wales welcomed the audience. She made a short introduction, stressing the importance of the debate around the value of film beyond its economic importance.

John Newbigin, representing the UK Film Council, introduced the session and explained its purpose as one of a series of similar events being held across the UK to disseminate the study's findings, respond to comments and questions and to obtain feedback on the key issues and what the next stage should be for further work in this important and relatively unexplored area of cultural study. He explained that it was very important for the UK Film Council to build on this work and to build up a clear body of evidence on the significance of film to citizens' lives beyond its economic importance.

David Steele, the Head of the UK Film Council's Research and Statistics Unit, presented the context of the study and some of its methodology, explaining that the UK Film Council had decided to study the impact of UK film directly, rather than trying to derive a monetary measure of cultural value.

David Steele's slides accompany this note.

Ian Christie, Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck College and Bertrand Moullier, Senior Consultant, Narval Media, the authors of the study, then set out the main findings, with particular emphasis on the contribution of films made in or about Wales. Their slides accompany these notes.

Elan Closs, Professor of Communications and Creative Industries, Aberystwyth University commented on the study, in particular on the importance of the relationship between film and television and how we should celebrate it; how great talent had come from the TV tradition, the significance of narrative led production and TV as a driver in social realism. The question was whether the stories we tell ourselves are exportable or whether we have to mythologize to be exportable. She questioned whether the more a country speaks to its own people the less it speaks to the outside world. Being able to tell my stories is not about telling a story to me. She also questioned whether the Welsh language is a limiting feature or is it that the audience is not open to subtitles – are there things that can be done about this. She discussed the policy issues around defining Welshness and Britishness

and how that influenced public support and the sorts of films we make. She suggested that support was needed in disseminating knowledge around our films e.g. BFI on-line. Support is needed for smaller films. Is there a growing sense that art-house is a dirty word?

Peter Edwards, Chair of the Film Agency for Wales and founder of the production company Barefoot Rascals followed with an interesting commentary about the evolution of filmmaking in the "noughties". The key points of his speech are posted with these notes.

Steve Blandford, Professor of Theatre, Film and Television in the Cardiff School of Creative and Cultural Industries at the University of Glamorgan then moderated a panel consisting of Ian Christie, Bertrand Moullier, Elan Closs, Peter Edwards, David Steele and John Newbigin. An engaging and wide ranging debate with the audience followed.

The first question related to the 1970s and whether the authors had struggled to address this era, as many of the successful movies evolved from TV Production. Ian Christie responded that there had been a long debate about spin-offs from successful TV series and whether they were "real" films or television programmes which made it on to the screen. Whilst their mandate had covered the whole canvas, because of limitations on number of words, choices had to be made. It was important to not only talk about films which had been in some way culturally validated.

There was a question from an exhibitor about whether there was research on the impact on the viewer of the "B" feature and a discussion about the value of quotas in helping British or Welsh films. Ian Christie commented that from 1929 -1984 there had been a support system in place and then the British Government abandoned the quota. He personally thought there was a good argument for quotas. Many great British filmmakers were the product of a market which was forced to make British films.

The next questioner asked how we ensure that the Welsh public have the opportunity to see the Welsh films that are produced. Peter Edwards commented that there was an unfulfilled need for a specialist circuit within Wales. Peter thought that Festivals had their role to play and specialist film exhibitors. Films can often get shown by specialist chains in London and thereafter can gain the respect of their own country. He commented that one big popular success would create a different dynamic. Work is needed on every level to promote good Welsh films from education to exhibition to funding. Also, the involvement of TV Broadcasters in a cohesive and on-going fashion. Broadcasters need to be aware of their responsibilities. Elan observed that the internet now releases us from the restrictions of geography and that together with digital cinema should provide cheaper and more effective ways for Welsh films to find their audiences. Broadcasters continue to have access to the broad swathe of audiences and their models of distribution and marketing are evolving. The under 25s now spend their time on other than watching TV and we need to consider how best to attract these younger audiences.

John Newbigin commented on the extraordinary growth of Film Societies and Film Clubs targeted at the youth audience and how they had their role to play creating a more discerning audience. Peter Edwards explained that the Film Agency for Wales had funded a

number of film societies. Further debate ensued around how to make Welsh Films more accessible and the hope with digital distribution is that this will be the case.

Debate then turned to marketing support for Welsh Films, one exhibitor commented that there could be no absolute mandate to exhibit Welsh films and any degree of compulsion would require adequate marketing support.

Ian Christie commented on Europa Cinemas and the fact that money is channelled from Brussels to incentivise cinemas. The system does not favour local national product but incentivises diversity. Ian also said that there were moves afoot to create a mini network of supported cinemas. There was always a danger that where there is any sort of compulsion in showing movies that those movies are inherently regarded as second rate, although getting diverse films on the screen is important. It should be simple and relatively cheap to bring key films back to the cinema in the digital era but support work around this is needed. One audience member advocated the French system. Bertrand Moullier clarified that it was not a system of quotas, but a system which encouraged investment in French language feature films through, amongst other things, recycling monies from Broadcasters.

The debate then turned to the role of short films. One person commented that they were a good way for directors to learn the ropes and easy to watch and distribute. Peter Edwards reinforced that they were essential in any filmmaker's development.

One of the academic members of the audience urged everyone not to forget the importance of education to the system and appreciation of film. Ian Christie thought that film studies in the school curriculum had not been widely enough adopted compared to English, for example. The academic said that it continued to grow in Wales and was increasing in popularity. Elan Closs explained that Welsh A-level contained a compulsory element which involves studying a film.

Discussion turned to what is British. An audience member questioned why Peter had said that *Twin Towns* was Welsh and not British in so far as it was a universal theme about post-industrial malaise. Peter thought that context is everything. He commented that in Wales they are on a different type of journey post-devolution saying it is tougher to have a conversation here which will affect the broader British constituency. We have to consider what sort of story we can tell the world. It does not matter if it's a British story provided it is from our perspective.

The conversation moved back to marketing support for film and why so often Welsh filmmakers had to turn to London specialist distribution companies – more local wherewithal was needed to make a splash.

A questioner asked what the new Government's policy on filmmaking was. Is enough being done in Wales to foster political links?

Peter said that film is not a devolved issue. Local politicians were supportive and engaged, but have no funds. Hargreaves has happened and will be implemented by Christmas. John Newbiggin said that Ed Vaizey at the DCMS wanted to examine public support for film, that

he is also seriously engaged and interested. It is worthwhile lobbying hard for some good outcomes.

A question was raised about whether the research had addressed the low profile of Welsh films and whether there was an unsatisfied demand or not. There was a discussion that for too long policy had focused on the producer as the key constituent and there needed to be more of an audience focus in public policy. In the digital world, the producer will inevitably have to think more about engaging with his audience.

An additional comment was made about the importance of considering media policy at a European level, not just a National level.