THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

Does responsibility for the lack of quality screenplays really lie at the door of inadequately trained screenwriters?

By
ERIK KNUDSEN

When the Film Council was created with a view to consolidate public intervention in British cinema, it immediately decided that 'under-resourced script development [resulted] in too many poor quality films being made'[1] and that this required 'the creation of specific training programmes for writers and business executives'[2]. In making this a core policy platform, the Film Council were, effectively, blaming the screenwriting talent pool in a diverse dynamic country of 60 million people for not being up to scratch. On what basis are they making this judgement and what is the role of the gatekeepers of the film establishment in this state of affairs?

It is, perhaps, worth noting that the chairman of the Film Council, Alan Parker, is one of a steady stream of British talent that has over the years 'left the country' to make their best work. In this irony lies a, perhaps, uniquely British problem which is also reflected in other parts of the British culture and economy[3]. While there may be complex historical, cultural, sociological and political reasons for this seeming contradiction, I would suggest that at the heart of it lies a conflict between the ruling establishment, with its conservative, centralising and ultimately paternalistic tendencies, and the majority populace, traditionally disenfranchised and marginalised and condescended to by this establishment. While we can acknowledge the burgeoning of the bourgeoisie in the last half century, freedoms fought for and won, and wealth and choice enhanced, the centralised and paternalistic dominance of our institutions reminds us that the underlying schism is perhaps still with us.

There is little doubt that the British economy has gone through a modernising transformation over the past 20 years which has seen it become the 4th largest

---

[1] www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/towards/environment (accessed 19 August 2004).

[2] www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/towards/actionplan (accessed 19 August 2004).

[3] When I walk around a British city and look at the buildings built since the Second World War, I would be tempted to think that Britain failed to produce any innovative or imaginative architects this side of that landmark in world history. If I were to confine my eye to public buildings or publicly funded buildings, my assessment would be even bleaker. However, making a similar observation of cities like Washington DC, New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Paris and Berlin not only would I see a higher level of commitment to innovation and imagination in buildings built during a similar period, but I would also note that some of the greatest of these examples were in fact designed by British architects. I am not suggesting that British architects do their best work abroad, but that at home the commissioning process for work itself encourages mediocrity and stifles expression and innovation.

economy (and not without a lot of pain), fuelled to a large extent by small and medium sized enterprises innovating, adapting and adopting to the skills base within the country. Can one, equally confidently, talk of a transformation of the British movie industry, it's practices and the outcomes of these practices? When one talks of an industry where career paths are largely determined by various forms of nepotism, where funding for talent is predominantly on a project by project basis, where the vast majority of people work on a casual freelance basis, where funding models and processes favour 'deal-makers' – can one really talk of a modern, diverse industrial structure that allows for diverse talent to find its place?

While I agree with the Film Council's line that there is a dearth of quality British films in cinemas, I would contend that the primary problem with the lack of quality screenplays – indeed films – is not so much to do with the lack of adequate talent or inadequately trained talent, but a problem inherent within the establishment of the film industry. To successfully tackle this problem and to achieve true diversity, imagination and innovation, we must look at the eyes of the beholders who make decisions. Who are these people? What do they see? And why do they value what they value? And on what basis do they determine what the audience wants, needs or deserves?

In the new digital climate, there is a chance that institutions such as the Film Council, and its satellite agencies, may become irrelevant in the years to come. Robert Bresson's observed back in the 1970s that 'the future of Cinematography belongs to a group of young solitaries who will spend their last cent on making films in order to stay clear of the material routines of the trade'[4]. With the advent of digital moving image production and dissemination technology, this is already a reality. Interestingly, parts of the developing world may be giving some pointers as to the consequence of the arrival of this technology and its effect on established practice. In Ghana, for example, the film industry was dominated by the publicly funded Ghana Film Industry Corporation, which was not only responsible for production, on film only, but also for distribution across the whole country. They produced a very small number of Ghanaian movies for distribution in mainly city cinemas and then imported US movies for exhibition. In 1987, Sidiku Buari, an entrepreneur, imported Betacam equipment and decided to make his own movie on video and distribute it through a series of videoteques (mainly bars and clubs with a TV and video player) and through direct video sales. Distributing his work in this way, he was able to reach rural audiences, as well as those in the cities. His video movie, Aaya-Lolo (We Are on the Move), became a great hit and he made a lot of money. This was the beginning of a shift of the entire industry there. Now the GFIC no longer exists and there is a very lively commercially sustainable industry, using predominantly digital and video technology, and based on indigenous production and stories. This is product that is much more popular than Hollywood and European product and there is a commercially viable industry employing a substantial number of people that, by the early 1990s, made in excess of 100 feature movies a year in a poor country with a population of just under 20 million[5].

---

[4] Bresson, R., Notes On Cinematography (Urizen, New York, 1977).
[5] Berwanger, D., Television Training Centre News (SFB, Berlin, 3/1994). I also conducted two workshops in Ghana (2000 and 2001) where I had an opportunity to talk with quite a few Ghanaian filmmakers about this subject.

One might argue that the technical and aesthetic standards of this new generation of product does not reach those achieved by the GFIC, governed, as it was, by the great and the good of the Ghanaian film establishment, but clearly the creative talent and the audience have other values that take precedent. Consequently Ghanaian audiences are getting to see movies reflecting their interests and concerns, and it has been the creative talent itself that has been best equipped to gauge what those needs and concerns are. Is there a lesson to be learned from this?

To attempt to measure the relative strength of something as ephemeral as art is, of course, fraught with problems, just as to use entirely fiscal measures to ascertain the relative health of an arts driven sector is misleading. Unlike our American and French counterparts, whose cinematic traditions have created a steady stream of master cinematic story-tellers, in Britain our understanding of the strengths of the cinematic form has, to a significant extent, been held back by these strong literary and theatrical traditions. It is often the case that where there is a call for a firm grip on screenwriting, there is a reliance on writers whose backgrounds are rooted in literature or theatre, the assumption being that the skills required for writing a screenplay are best built from literary and theatrical experience. While it could be argued that British television was strengthened by having these roots, this cannot be said for British cinema. We only have to look at the ingredients that have gone, and continue to go, into, particularly, commercial British cinematic product to see how deep these roots are that have shaped how we make films: from theatrically trained actors and their theatrical acting methods, to literary and theatrical sources of content, right through to how theatrically inspired dramaturgical approaches dominate what the establishment considers to be good cinema (though, perhaps, British audiences are not so sure[6]).

While there, of course, are exceptions, usually working on the fringes of established culture, most commercial British product seems to fall into categories characterised by specific stereotypical views of Britain and British life: the heritage film, usually sourced from literature or theatre, or the gritty class film perpetuating outdated views of class and the class struggle, for which, of course, Britain is famous. While class still is a feature of British life, its configurations and forms have changed considerably. Nevertheless, there is an obsession with heritage and a static view of class that permeates a disproportionate amount of British cinematic product, perpetuating a clichéd view of contemporary British life that may well go down well with some audiences abroad, but perhaps doesn't quite ring true with British audiences any more. Much of this may be unconscious, but nevertheless can be very damaging to attempts to solicit original creative material that grows organically through individuals rooted in their communities. It is ironic to note that while many UK screenwriters might best realise their talents by writing scripts about subjects that are dear to them and which may emerge from their lives in the UK, and thereby develop a genuine relationship with the UK audience, the Film Council has identified UK screenwriters' '… lack of understanding of the tastes of audiences in the US and

---

[6] UK/US co-productions accounted for 13.2% of UK box office in 2003, while UK and UK co-productions (other than US) accounted for only 2.5% of UK box office receipts. (www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/statistics/statsyrb03 - accessed 19 August 2004).

continental Europe'[7] as a key problem, which they seek to address with a range of training initiatives.

Understanding how a play works or how a novel works, and then being able to use words as the main conduit for expression, requires quite different ways of thinking and quite different skills to that of a screenwriter. The dramaturgical structures that underpin the play, and the dominant role of dialogue in that process, are often alien to the cinema screen. We have developed a tendency, for example, for the primary information and conflict to be developed through dramatic conflict and dialogue in which the visual and aural aspects, not to speak of such things as rhythm and pace, are reduced to paraphrasing or augmenting the dramatic situation which remains the core. A proliferation of script consultants, script editors and development executives who often seem to rely heavily on the teachings of such script gurus as Robert McKee[8], help reinforce formulaic and mediocre approaches to subject and form. Could it be that when we talk about developing screenwriting talent, we are in fact inadvertently reinforcing the very traditions that have held back the development of the form in this country?

Add to this the confusion between commercial value and cultural value. It does sometimes seem that to use the word 'art' in British film production circles is a dirty word. While we may be caught somewhere in the middle between French 'art' movies and Hollywood, with a particularly keen eye on the Hollywood model, let us not forget that although the moguls in Hollywood will unashamedly say they are there to make money, there is also a sizable fringe in Hollywood who would not be ashamed to say that they are making art and that it forms a critical part of the American cultural identity, let alone, independent American film. The difference here is that when we talk about the Film Council, for example, we are talking effectively about public money being used to help create a sustainable film industry, with a small amount siphoned off to cater for 'cultural' production.

This kind of distinction between industry and culture is a false one that can be of little help in the development of screen talent. For example, the notion that innovation belongs to cultural production and not to the commercial sector is not only misleading but counter productive. All cinematic product, commercially intended or not, is based on culture, on dreams, on imagination and creativity. Creativity is, by its very nature, innovative. The commercial success of a film depends on many other more potent factors than whether a script is 'good', 'creative' or 'imaginative'[9]. By forcing creative talent to fit into pre-defined notions, categories and processes set from within an institution, we see the beginnings of the killing of creative impulses that inevitably leads to repetition and mediocrity. We also see tendencies, rather like farmers responding to the latest funding models from Europe, of trying to second-guess what 'corporate policy' or 'corporate tastes' are. We are seeing what this has done to farming and farmers[10] and there may be a suggestion that decision makers encourage

---

[7] www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/initiatives (accessed 19 August 2004).
[8] See for example Story (Methuen, London, 1999).
[9] Such as advertising spend, screen penetration, star appeal, reviews and so on.
[10] Formerly butter mountains and the like, latterly land usage changing to such things as golf courses. A friend of mine who works for the European Commission once told

certain fashions which those applying for funding consciously, or unconsciously, respond to.

Most people recognise (The Film Council, too, in theory, at least[11]) that for a healthy film culture, and industry, there must be creative diversity. I am reminded of a cartoon in which a group of five middle-aged men in dark suits and dark ties, hair brushed back and sporting handlebar moustaches, look at another man sitting on his own at the other end of the table, also wearing a dark suit and dark tie and also with his hair combed back and sporting a handlebar moustache. Says one of the group of five to the individual: "Frankly, Harry, we like the look of you…". There is no doubt that faced with making decisions, we all do this. To centralise decision making when evaluating quality or innovation is disastrous for diversity. No matter how many schemes one develops, how many consultants one hires to assess the situation, or how many token gestures are made towards one's view of what constitutes diverse communities, it will always ultimately reflect the image of the decision makers. By centralising the public intervention into the film industry by which a small group of people prescribe what a nation of nearly 60 million people need, we are effectively drastically reducing any chance of true diversity; not just in terms of what audiences are exposed to, but also in terms of what creative product is encouraged and developed.

As indicated, it is generally accepted that diversity is a crucial element of any healthy film industry, and particularly one in which the cultural value of the product is prominent. However, there seems to be confusion about what diversity is. Ethnic diversity, for example, is only one part of diversity. To achieve a representative mix of ethnic minorities in front of and behind the camera only for the values of what is produced to mirror the values of the establishment is not diversity and only goes as deep as the skin. Also, to continually view ethnic minorities as homogenous units is condescending and does not reflect the fact that within any community there are diverse perspectives, right down to the individual level, and even over-lapping across communities. Diversity must ultimately mean diversity of values, perspectives, priorities and attitudes. The paradox is that it is through such diversity that common ground is found between people and peoples and the creative person generating cultural product is an important part of the defining of our ever-changing cultures. Those individuals, and groups of individuals, must be listened to and their distinctive and diverse perspectives and approaches to form encouraged.

However, if we look at the evidence of what ends up on our screens, it is quite clear that the limitations on values – decreed from above – that our creative talent is supposed to adhere to are very narrow indeed. This is particularly evident in any work of fiction. Those who share and can adapt to those values – no matter what the colour of their skin or ethnic background - will succeed. Diversity can ultimately be uncomfortable for the establishment and may throw things at them that they don't like or find hard to accept or that is not considered to be of quality, or of relevance to an audience. A good example of this is that, given the extent that religion and spirituality plays in the lives of many communities and individuals, it is surprising not to see

---

me that she can see any changes to the Agricultural Policy when she flies across Europe purely from the changing colours of the fields below her.
[11] www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/actionplan (accessed 19 August 2004).

more work that reflects this. Were we to examine the values of those who make decisions about what gets made, perhaps we would find a latent antipathy to spiritual and religious perspectives on subject matter, in contrast to a comfort around psychological and socio-economic perspectives.

It is not the suggestion here that screenwriters do not need to improve their creative and craft skills, but that a significant barrier to the improvement of diversity and quality in British cinematic product lies at the door of those who make the judgements and decisions about what is developed and made. If, indeed, this is the case, what can be done to remedy the situation?

Given the historical context of British cinema, and the institutional structures emerging from that, we need to re-examine the processes of intervention in the industry and the power structures that govern this intervention. The creation of a focused Film Council may make sense to many people who argue that a single powerful institution may have more clout. If the idea is to be able to intervene in the commercial sector to secure a greater success for commercial product, nationally and internationally, then it could be argued that public money is being wasted, in that commercial product, by its very nature, ought to be able to function in a commercial environment and if it can't, it cannot be deemed to be commercial. If the market place is too skewed and needs intervention, then the Film Council is too small to make an effective intervention. Any intervention should be happening at government level through, for example, tax and investment legislation and the GATT negotiations, but there seems little chance of effective government action to this end.

If, on the other hand, the Film Council intends to foster a healthy cultural industries sector with British cinema, it will need to decentralise its powers and decision making processes. The efforts to intervene in exhibition are, broadly, right, but to achieve this from a centralised position will only reaffirm existing fault lines, particularly when considering diversity, creativity and innovation. Centralised institutions have a tendency to strengthen their own bureaucracy, shy away from risk taking and reinforce existing values, even if they cloak their activities within a liberal agenda. And there will always be agendas, which may be far removed from the creative perspectives out there in the communities of the nation. The systems created will favour those who speak the same 'language' and know how to play the right 'game'. This is no way to create a vibrant, diverse and inclusive pool of British screenwriting and creative talent. Evidence from many other national cinemas suggest that there is no direct conflict between the creative talent creating work emanating out of their experiences within their communities and primarily addressing these at those communities within the UK, and a successful international presence as well[12].

The issue of training also present a challenge. Training is normally associated with teaching people to carry out tasks according to existing practice. Given that this industry depends on creative output, there is an inherent conflict with the notion of

---

[12] The French, for example, have an aggressive film policy based on home grown talent making strong cultural product aimed primarily at the home market, yet their presence at the UK box office is stronger, at 2.8%, than that of wholly UK financed films. (www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/statistics/statsyrb03 - accessed 19 August 2004.)

training, particularly if creative diversity is one of the aims one hopes to achieve. While it may be possible to train screenwriters and other creative talent to fit an existing pattern of creation, very much apparent in television, the outcome is likely to generate more of the same product and undermine the very liberation and courage required to break the rules and emerge with fresh approaches and diverse solutions.

What is perhaps needed more than anything else is education. Education being the opposite of training, as it helps the learner to question existing practice, develop a freer and more independent mind that is capable of off-loading preconceptions and habits. To encourage that kind of free mind, may indeed, threaten, and should indeed threaten, the established view of quality, creativity and innovation.

To develop and create a healthy British film sector and, in particular, to encourage courageous screenwriting talent that will underpin this sector, we need to ask some tough questions about those who are making judgements. It is hard for someone in power to relinquish power, or even to delegate it, but all beauty is in the eyes of the beholder and if we feel that there is a problem with what we are making, perhaps we should fist look at who is doing the looking before rushing into conclusions about the inadequacies of the screenwriting talent that is available. In an age where – finally – the moving image is moving into a more democratic phase, largely as a consequence of developments in technology, perhaps the notion of a few still thinking they are arbiters of taste and quality from a central position, using public money to play a paternalistic role, is outdated and possibly counter productive. Hasn't the history of the arts and sciences shown us that almost all innovators emerged from outside centralised institutional frameworks and were often ignored, if not rejected, by the very people who claimed to be the arbiters of quality and taste.

Dr Erik Knudsen is a filmmaker and Programme Director of the MA in Television Documentary Production at the University of Salford, as well as Head of the Editing Department at the Escuela International De Cine y Television, Cuba. His latest feature film, Brannigan's March, was released in selected UK cinemas in early 2004. Visit www.onedayfilms.com for further details.

Bibliography

Berwanger, D., Television Training Centre News (SFB, Berlin, 3/1994)
Bresson, R., Notes On Cinematography (Urizen, New York, 1977)
McKee, R., Story (Methuen, London, 1999)

Web Sources

www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/statistics/statsyrb03 (19 August 2004)
www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/towards/actionplan (19 August 2004)
www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/towards/environment (19 August 2004)
www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/aboutus/towards/initiatives (19 August 2004)