

Filmmaking in Scotland

In this short paper, I attempt to lay out the current state of film-making in Scotland before addressing four separate but connected issues: film funding, a film studio, the filmmaking community's attitude towards Creative Scotland, and film education.

The current position

On 5 November 2014, *The Times* published an article headed 'Crisis talks to revive "failing and neglected film industry"'. The article reported that a funding application to Creative Scotland from Independent Producers Scotland had been rejected and Scottish film producer, Gillian Berrie, was quoted as saying that filmmaking in Scotland was 'a failing industry'. This was only the latest in a series of press articles highlighting a perceived crisis in the Scottish film industry. For instance, on 28 September 2013, *The Herald* published an article titled "'Lack of funding" is killing the Scots film industry'. The article raised fears from industry insiders that the film industry in Scotland was perilously close to collapse. On the same day, however, I had an article published in the *Financial Times* which pointed to the strength and diversity of filmmaking in Scotland. The article highlighted a group of films with imminent release dates, which were either made by Scottish-based filmmakers or shot in Scotland - *Filth*, *Sunshine on Leith*, *The Railway Man*, *For Those in Peril* and *Under the Skin* – and also noted significant successes in documentary work. It is, to my knowledge, the first time that the *Financial Times* has devoted a major feature on filmmaking in Scotland and, at first blush, appeared to contradict the position postulated by industry insiders. If the industry was close to collapse, how could we account for such a strong body of work?

Fast forward twelve months and more films with a strong Scottish connection, including *God Help the Girl*, directed by Belle and Sebastian's Stuart Murdoch, and *Starred Up*, directed by David McKenzie and produced by Glasgow-based Sigma Films, have been released. Other films with significant budgets scheduled for release include Robert Carlyle's directorial debut *The Legend of Barney Thomson* and the long-awaited adaptation of *Sunset Song*, directed by Terence Davies. On top of fictional features, there has also been a raft of documentary films released. These include *The Possibilities are Endless*, which focuses on Orange Juice front man, Edwyn Collins, and *To Scotland with Love*, which have both received considerable critical acclaim. In addition, the leading Spanish actress and filmmaker, Icíar Bollain, directed a film about Spaniards living in Edinburgh, and the Mexican-born artist, Carla Novi, made a documentary film and theatre performance about the collapse of a factory in Bangladesh. Some of this work may not be at the commercial end of filmmaking, but it adds to the diversity of film culture in Scotland. Despite apparent growth in documentary filmmaking, 2014 does not appear to be as strong as 2013 for fictional features and, retrospectively, 2013 might be viewed as something of a high water mark for filmmaking in Scotland.

A historical view enables us to contextualise the current position. Bill Forsyth's 1979 feature-length directorial debut, *That Sinking Feeling*, was the first fictional feature both financed and made in Scotland. The establishment of the Scottish Film Production Fund in 1982 ensured that significant decisions pertaining to filmmaking

in Scotland were made in this country. Film policy has been increasingly devolved and there also has been considerable growth in film production in the intervening period. According to Creative Scotland, between 2001 and 2014, 181 fictional features were shot in Scotland.ⁱ This figure is not restricted to work by Scottish-based filmmakers and production companies and includes films such as *World War Z* (USA) and *Tezz* (India) in which Scotland is used primarily as a location. This breaks down as an average of 12 a year, but the figure for what might be termed 'indigenous' or 'home-grown' production is closer to half that figure. Filmmaking in Scotland has, then, come a long way since 1979 although the general view among filmmakers is that the infrastructure to support a sustainable industry is absent and that success will be occasional rather than continuous.

The films outlined above indicate that there is a significant talent base in Scotland. There is a significant gap, however, between the talent base and the opportunities on offer for both existing and emerging filmmakers. A small indicator of this was that a record 32 Scottish short films screened at this year's Glasgow Short Film Festival; yet the average age of a first-time feature film director in Scotland is 39.ⁱⁱ A further signifier of the lack of a sustainable industry is that many talented filmmakers and actors seek to move elsewhere to further their careers. Indeed, in the findings of a recent Royal Society of Edinburgh-funded study into talent in the Scottish screen industries, Lisa Kelly and Katherine Champion note that 'while Scotland may successfully train a large number of creative students in film, TV and media, a high level of migration occurs after graduation resulting in problems retaining talent and developing a skillbase.'ⁱⁱⁱ To retain that talent in Scotland, significant investment in film production is required.

Funding

It is instructive to compare funding levels with some of our neighbouring countries. Earlier this year, Robin MacPherson, noted that Scotland spends approximately £1 per year person on film compared to £2 in Ireland and £10 in Denmark.^{iv} In November 2014, the Danish government, however, announced plans to invest an additional £7.3m (DKK 70m) into a new fund for low-budget productions. The money will be spread over four years and should provide financial backing for 12-24 films. The agreement had the backing of all of the major political parties and will now mean that the Danish government allocates annually \$59.6m/DKK 563m (up from £56.1m/DKK 530m) to filmmaking. Their aim is to support the production of up to 26 features and 35 documentaries annually.^v The filmmaking community in Scotland can only look in envy at the position. In an online discussion which followed this announcement, Scottish producer, Paul Welsh, welcomed the funding of low-budget features arguing that it was 'the kindling that lights the fire'. Another filmmaker, David Griffiths suggested that 'Low-budget production provides the base of the filmmaking pyramid. No base - no pyramid!'^{vi} The Danish approach to supporting low-budget filmmaking can be contrasted with Visit Scotland's decision to spend £7 million on the marketing of the Disney-Pixar production, *Brave*.^{vii}

Prior to the referendum, film producer Eddie Dick had proposed that VAT on cinema tickets should be set aside for a film production fund. This proposal was taken up by Independent Producers Scotland who calculated that it would create a production fund of £23.1m.^{viii} This is a potentially transformative sum and without

investment of that order, it is difficult to see how the film industry can become sustainable.

Film Studio

Much has been written on the need for a film studio in Scotland. It is worth noting that the subject was raised in a 1944 *Scotsman* editorial.^{ix} There now appears to be a consensus that this will come into being, although in what exact form is not certain. The lack of studio facilities undoubtedly is a negative factor in attracting international companies to Scotland, but it also leads to Scottish/UK companies working elsewhere. Notably, the makers of *Sunset Song* utilised studio facilities in Luxembourg.^x It would be a mistake to view the creation of a studio as a panacea, but without appropriate studio facilities it is difficult to see how the filmmaking industry in Scotland can match the achievements of countries with fully-equipped facilities.

Creative Scotland

Although I have no direct experience of working with Creative Scotland, anecdotal evidence, suggests that the majority of filmmakers feel ill served by the organisation. This is not simply a matter of funding, but relates to the difficulties negotiating the fact that filmmaking is both industrial and cultural. Although bringing the diverse branches of Scottish arts and culture under the umbrella of Creative Scotland could have allowed for a more integrated approach, there is a widespread perception among filmmakers that this has been unsuccessful in relation to film and there appears to be support for the establishment of a dedicated film agency.^{xi}

Education

Creative Scotland's Review of the Film Sector in Scotland, points out that 'only 10% of Scottish children receive film education, compared with ... 25% in England, 80% in the Republic of Ireland and 81% in Denmark.'^{xii} It is important that school students have the opportunity to view films other than the staple fare of the multiplex in their school experience. This could also be important in terms of how it might influence exhibition in future years.

In a lecture at the 2014 Edinburgh International Film Festival, I raised the idea of establishing a National Film School for Scotland, one which utilises the academic and filmmaking talent across a range of Scottish higher education institutions. I will not repeat the argument here – it is available to read at the link provided below - but I take the view that it is worthy of consideration.^{xiii}

Conclusion

There exists an abundance of talented filmmakers in Scotland but there is a disconnection between the talent base and the opportunities on offer. If filmmaking in Scotland is to be sustained and developed, it will need a significant increase in government support in terms of funding. Other aspects of film culture need to be addressed in relation to studio space, film education and a dedicated film agency.^{xiv}

ⁱ Information contained in an e-mail from Creative Scotland staff, 13 November 2014.

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- ⁱⁱ Robin MacPherson, 'How to get more films like *Under The Skin* made and develop domestic talent', *The Conversation*, 13 March 2014. <http://theconversation.com/how-to-get-more-films-like-under-the-skin-made-and-develop-domestic-talent-24253> [accessed 13 November 2014]
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lisa W. Kelly and Katherine Champion, (under review) 'Shaping Screen Talent: Conceptualising and developing the Film and TV Workforce in Scotland', *Cultural Trends, Early Career Researchers Special Issue*. As a separate but connected issue, this has been exacerbated by changes in immigration policy. In recent years there has been a significant increase in the numbers of postgraduate students who have travelled to Scotland to study. The legislation in place at the time allowed them to stay for an additional two years, enabling them to develop networks and to boost the grassroots arts scene, The withdrawal of this opportunity has had a negative impact on Scottish culture and is likely to have a negative impact on postgraduate student recruitment.
- ^{iv} Robin MacPherson 'Independent Screens', <http://robinmacpherson.wordpress.com/2014/05/18/independent-screens/> [accessed 19 June 2014]
- ^v 'New Danish Film Agreement Signed', *Screen Daily*, 10 November 2014. http://www.screendaily.com/5079842.article?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Newsletter78 [accessed 10 November 2014]
- ^{vi} https://www.facebook.com/groups/AFTPS/367715510050464/?notif_t=like [accessed 13 November 2014].
- ^{vii} BBC News, 'Pixar's Brave forecast to generate £120m in five years' 9 September 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-24014661> [accessed 13 November 2014]. For an study of film tourism in Scotland see David Martin-Jones, 'Film Tourism as Heritage Tourism: Scotland, Diaspora and *The Da Vinci Code* (2006).' *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 12: 2 (2014), 156-177.
- ^{viii} 'Cinema ticket tax calls to help fund Scots films', *The Scotsman*, 27 July 2014. <http://www.scotsman.com/what-s-on/film/cinema-ticket-tax-calls-to-help-fund-scots-films-1-3490104> [accessed 13 November 2014]
- ^{ix} <https://twitter.com/clunytunes/status/469762288694878209/photo/1> [Accessed 23 May 2014].
- ^x Information available at <http://www.hurricanefilms.net/2014/10/02/sunset-song-post-production/> [accessed 13 November 2014]
- ^{xi} Scottish-based producer Eddie Dick has argued that Scotland is the 'only country in Europe without a dedicated film agency'. Leo Barraclough, 'Scottish Desire for Freedom Raises the Question: And Then What?' *Variety*, 19 June 2014. <http://variety.com/2014/film/news/scottish-desire-for-freedom-raises-the-question-and-then-what-1201222804/> [accessed 19 June 2014]
- ^{xii} Creative Scotland, *Review of the Film Sector in Scotland*, 2014. [http://www.creativescotland.com/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/25245/Review of the Film Sector in Scotland - Jan 2014.pdf](http://www.creativescotland.com/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/25245/Review_of_the_Film_Sector_in_Scotland_-_Jan_2014.pdf) [accessed 19 June 2014]
- ^{xiii} The lecture is available to read here: David Archibald, 'Should Scotland have an independent film industry?' Open Democracy, 27 June 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/david-archibald/should-scotland-have-independent-film-industry>. See also 'Scotland needs a national film school, academic tells festival', *The Herald*, 24 June 2014'. <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/scotland-needs-a-national-fim-school-academic-tells-festival.24573243> [accessed 13 November 2014]
- ^{xiv} For a detailed account of the problems of developing a sustainable film industry, see Gillian Doyle's analysis of the UK Film Council: 'Film Support and the Challenge of 'Sustainability': On Wing Design, Wax and Feathers, and Bolts from the Blue' *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 11.2-3 (2014). 129-151.

Dr David Archibald
 Lecturer in Film and Television Studies
 University of Glasgow
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