

The Royal Society of Edinburgh

Cultural Flagships Series Discussion Forum (2) Cultural Flagships: being a 'National' – *Film*

Report by Joyce McMillan

26 June 2008

Report on a Seminar held at the Royal Society of Edinburgh on 26 June 2008, on the occasion of the Edinburgh International Film Festival, 2008.

The seminar was introduced by RSE Vice-President Professor Tariq Durrani, who then handed over to the event Chair, Professor John Caughie, Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Glasgow. In introducing the debate, Professor Caughie observed that while it is always relatively easy to 'score' the national contribution of the Scottish or British film industry in economic or commercial terms, it is much more difficult to define its cultural contribution. He said that the film industry in Scotland currently faces major issues, concerning both its general sustainability, and the impact of the forthcoming merger between Scottish Screen and the Scottish Arts Council, to form Creative Scotland. He said this raises questions about whether we are trying to create a Scottish film industry, or – in the wider sense – a Scottish film culture.

Professor Caughie then introduced the four members of the panel. They were: Ginnie Atkinson, Managing Director of the Edinburgh International Film Festival; Leslie Hills of Skyline Productions, a leading independent film producer based in Edinburgh and Chair of Edinburgh Filmhouse; Iain Smith OBE, the Scottish-born producer of major films ranging from Bill Douglas' *My Childhood* to *Local Hero* and *Cold Mountain*, an EIFF board member, and current Chair of the UK Film Skills Strategy Committee; and Robin MacPherson, Director of Screen Academy Scotland, and Senior Lecturer in the School of Creative Industries at Napier University, Edinburgh.

Ginnie Atkinson began by observing that film represents a meeting of art and commerce across a very wide range of production, in what is, in many ways, the most popular of all art-forms. Film is a huge, diverse field, encompassing everything from blockbuster popular entertainment to complex experimental work, and a whole range of ever-changing technologies – hence the term 'moving image', increasingly used to embrace and express the complexity of the field.

Ms Atkinson pointed out that when the Edinburgh International Film Festival was launched, it was one of only three major film festivals in Europe – Venice, Cannes and Edinburgh. Now there are literally thousands of international festivals, and the survival of Edinburgh as a major event, under these conditions, is in itself an achievement. Excellence in programming and execution is essential for any festival to remain at the top of the heap, and Edinburgh is famous for the quality of its achievement in this area. The event also has an intimacy which makes it particularly enjoyable.

So far as the Festival's role as a national flagship is concerned, Ms Atkinson suggested that being international implies, to some extent, being national, or having a sense of national identity and culture to bring to the table. She noted that none of the Edinburgh Festivals is actually designated a national arts company by the Scottish Government, unlike Scottish Opera and the National Theatre of Scotland, etc. Nonetheless, EIFF does provide an international showcase for Scottish film; the difficulty arises from the fact that it does not act as a showcase for every Scottish film, but only for those which are selected on merit, and this can cause upset and controversy. There is an element of 'Catch-22' in the relationship between EIFF and the Scottish film industry. On the one hand, it is the quality and high standard of Festival programming that make the EIFF a prestigious showcase; on the other hand, that commitment to quality, and to coherence in the programming of the Festival, means that tough and sometimes hurtful choices have to be made.

The Edinburgh Filmhouse, of which Ginnie Atkinson is also Chief Executive, has a different role in relation to the Scottish film community, as did the Glasgow Film Theatre; however, she did not explore that on this occasion, since it seemed appropriate to focus on the Film Festival for the purposes of this event.

Leslie Hills began by observing that, as an independent film-maker, she is not affiliated to any national cultural organisation. However, she said that she believes that the whole field of cultural activity in Scotland should be mutually supportive and seamless; she argued that national heritage and culture is indivisible, and is not just a matter for organisations designated as national cultural institutions. There should be space in the debate for a wide variety of independent voices.

Ms Hills said that it is difficult to overstate the recent achievement of the live and visual arts in Scotland, and the quality of Scotland's living cultural scene today. She felt that there is a general sense of film being slightly different from other arts, or not quite part of this scene. There is a huge global film culture affecting our national self-image and self-perception, but it often seems to be a completely external force, beyond our control.

Ms Hills describes herself as a relative newcomer to film production, as she has only been working in the industry for a little over 20 years. In that time, she has been responsible for producing lots of television, made for UK and European audiences. These were mainly drama series and documentary and current affairs series. Her work now consists mainly of 90-minute documentaries with high production values for theatrical release, made in co-production with Germany. They are films on Scottish subjects, usually set in Scotland, and filmed around the world; but the main investment often comes from German broadcasters, film funds or distribution companies, with Scottish Screen the only Scottish resource for funding such projects. They are also often funded by public film funds from other European countries or the European Union. Ms Hills said that she feels that Scottish Screen is a body much more respected abroad than at home – its much-mocked Scottie-dog logo is now recognised and respected worldwide.

Ms Hills then reflected on the complex funding of some recent projects. Her own short film about the artist Alison Watt was part-funded by BBC Scotland, PPG, the Glenfiddich Company, and an American 'angel' (or private backer) based in Prague. The film *Stone of Destiny*, shown at the EIFF, was financed by the Canadian Film Fund. Kenny Glenaan's *Summer* was made possible by German production money. *Death-Defying Acts*, a film about Houdini in Scotland, is a Scottish story produced and filmed entirely outside Scotland. The nature of the modern industry, in other words, raises questions about the definition of a 'Scottish' film. The industry is international, and it is worth noting that 'Scottishness' is often a positive asset – a blessing or an entrée – in dealing with the film industry in other parts of the world. Ms Hills' next project will be about a Japanese sculptor working in the toe of Italy with the Italian architect Renzo Piano – but produced by a Scottish-based company. And this is how the film world will increasingly operate in future.

On the matter of training, Ms Hills said that good training is indispensable, but that it is no substitute for an industry that enables people to work, to make movies, and to develop careers in Scotland, if they wish to do so. We need a film industry, not just a training structure. And we need training institutions which will attract students from all over the world, so that students here can begin to build the network of international relationships they will need. Ms Hills said that she often speaks to groups of film students working together at summer schools or special projects all over Europe, but that she has never seen a Scottish student at one of these events. This is a concern.

In summing up, Ms. Hills said that she feels national identity is very important in forming film cultures. She cited the current strength of, for example, the Rumanian film industry. She said that she feels film has a great role to play in articulating the relationship between modernity and tradition in Europe, and that both a strong national culture and a strong sense of internationalism are necessary for that task. She argued that while it would be great to fund films made in Scotland that would make money internationally and bring it back into our industry, it is also necessary for us to nurture our own identity and heritage. Currently, Scotland punches above its weight in the world of film; but Ms Hills is concerned that our film culture could lose out in the coming merger between Scottish Screen and the Scottish Arts Council if Creative Scotland is not adequately funded for the complex and vital job it has to do.

In introducing his talk, Iain Smith described himself as a 'detrified' Scot, meaning one who has spent most of his working life outside Scotland - nor, he said, has London been far enough for him. His life has been a journey into international film production, and it has taken him to Hollywood and beyond. He feels that the experience of living with such a powerful neighbour gives Scots in general an enormous sense of empathy, an ability to read and recognise the feelings of others that is a huge asset in negotiating the global film industry.

Mr Smith said that he is always very suspicious of people who begin their pitch by saying what type of film they want to make – an ‘art’ film, or a ‘commercial’ film, or a ‘Scottish’ film. He said that this kind of category-thinking is usually an act of concealment, designed to obscure the fact that the film-maker does not have much of an idea, or much of a story to tell. He said that he thought there was an ongoing Scottish crisis of identity. Sir Walter Scott had been one of the greatest brand-masters of all time, with his sentimental creation of the kilted Highlander as the archetype of ‘Scottishness’, but it is a temporary solution with which Scots comply, rather than a real resolution of the issue.

The first feature films with Scottish content therefore followed the Sir Walter Scott/Ivanhoe model, and that was not seriously challenged until Bill Douglas came along in the 1970’s with his hate-filled vision of a very different Scotland. *My Childhood* (1972) was one of the very first truly Scottish films, in that it addresses aspects of Scotland that we would often rather not look at. Early Scottish film-makers were often making propaganda films for Films of Scotland or the Highlands and Islands Development Board, but in the 1980s things began to move forward, with the famous conference on *Cinema In A Small Country*, and the Film Bang events. Then there was *Chariots Of Fire*, and Bill Forsyth went to the Dolphin Arts Centre in Glasgow and decided, come what may, to make the film that was eventually called *That Sinking Feeling*, which led on to *Gregory’s Girl*. *That Sinking Feeling* is one of those great films that has a strange feeling of familiarity about it – the feeling that the film has existed forever, but you have just discovered it.

Iain Smith concluded that the idea of national consciousness in film can very easily be abused – see, for example, *Braveheart*, and its distorted but hugely influential external view of Scottish history and identity. This is something about which we have to be vigilant. As a member of the Creative Scotland transitional board, he welcomes the setting-up of the new body, in that it seems to signal that governments increasingly recognise the importance of creativity. He talked briefly of his experience of film culture in Bengal, and said that in his view, Scotland is now gradually joining the ‘great river’ of human self-expression, and is gradually moving on from the time when the nation was self-inhibited by a confused national identity.

Robin MacPherson began by posing himself two questions, asking why Scotland needs a National Film School, and what conditions would make such an institution into a ‘national’ organisation. He suggested four criteria for a national institution: that it should have an ambition to operate at a national level; that it should achieve at a national level; that it should be designated as a national body; and, that there should be an expectation that it will contribute to national life. He feels that a national body should have some sense of being accountable to a wider national project – and that all of these criteria apply to Screen Academy Scotland.

He then turned to the question of why we need a National Film School in Scotland. After all, there is already a National Film and Television School outside London, at Beaconsfield, which has fostered a great deal of talent and, under the Directorship of Colin Young, has specifically encouraged Scottish filmmakers such as Lynne Ramsay. Mr MacPherson said that a good film school should foster talent, provide space for it to develop, encourage young artists to take risks, offer opportunities for them to meet others, give them the chance to learn about relevant technologies, and mentor them in finding the right path. And he said that if Scotland was a nation with a distinctive cultural identity, then there should be a chance for people to experience this learning process in Scotland, should they choose to do so. At the moment, Screen Academy Scotland is able to foster some elements of talent, among writers, producers, directors and animators; but is not able to teach or develop the other skills involved in film production at postgraduate level. (It is quite successful at undergraduate level and has been so for some 20 years).

Mr MacPherson emphasised, though, that international currents in the film industry are of great importance, and talked about the development of an international network of film schools, to help students develop a global awareness. The European MEDIA programme has already supported Screen Academy Scotland to mount events in Tallinn, Dublin and Edinburgh, designed to encourage this kind of awareness and networking, and to help students develop international creative projects. He believes that talent and craft could be developed in Scotland, or revisited in Scotland by those in mid-career. Career development for existing professionals is extremely important. And he pointed out that with the BBC and Channel 4 promising increased levels of television production in Scotland, we will need to develop the skills base to meet that growing demand.

The discussion session began with a question about the poor quality of some films that claim to represent Scotland on screen. The questioner mentioned the EIFF premiere of *Stone of Destiny*, which she had not enjoyed, and asked how poor representations of Scottish history and culture could be avoided. Iain Smith commented that the general expectation in Hollywood is that only one script in 80 - or perhaps, more recently, one in 40 - will be successful at all, and that almost all films made are complete 'turkeys'. Even in the best times for the British film industry, the strike rate has not been higher than one in 20. It's therefore not surprising that most of the films identified one way or another as 'Scottish' are not much good; and governments need to take the long view.

Another questioner asked about the plans for a new Edinburgh Filmhouse to replace the current run-down premises, wondering whether they were 'dead in the water.' Leslie Hills, recently appointed Chair of the Board of Filmhouse, assured him that the plans are not dead, that funding is being actively sought, and that something has to be done about the housing of Filmhouse as the current situation cannot continue.

On the question about the quality of 'Scottish' films, Ms Hills said that the Scottish Government is definitely interested in the idea of nationhood and culture; and that although it is always necessary to guard against jingoism, this could be useful in beginning to get the ear of government, and campaigning for the resources that are needed to develop our film culture, and the economic base of our industry.

Robin MacPherson affirmed that he thought it would be possible to build something positive over 10 – 15 years, including a National Film and Television School in Scotland.

A questioner wondered whether people will still go to the cinema in future, as sophisticated new technologies for home and personal entertainment become ever more widespread. Iain Smith said that new technologies might actually make possible the development of a new wave of 'boutique' cinemas, with fans of particular periods or types of film able to download the programme of their choice electronically, in seconds, to small theatres across the country. He had noted that a development of this kind was already happening in Henley-on-Thames.

Ginnie Atkinson said that she feels people will always have a need to congregate in groups to watch films, and that the prevalence of home entertainment actually adds to the value of festivals like the EIFF, which provide not only the chance to watch a huge range of films in theatre conditions, but also a live encounter with film artists, through personal appearances by directors, stars etc. Leslie Hills said that in the 21st century film world, the expert professional programming of festivals like EIFF has even more added value than before.

Iain Smith pointed out that technologies are changing at breakneck speed, and said he has heard that teenagers are not bothering to go to see films like the recent blockbuster thriller *Wanted* – built around a series of spectacular action sequences – because the 'best bits' have already been downloaded from trailers weeks ago, and circulated by mobile phone around the world. He said that rather than trying to hold back the tide, the film industry had better get 'very fresh-eyed' about such developments, and try to seize every new opportunity.

From the Chair, Professor Caughie said that he feels it is becoming very difficult to experience the history of cinema in theatre conditions. New releases still have an extensive theatre life, but people are expected to hire or buy old films on DVD, and watch them at home.

An audience member asked for reassurance that there would be enough demand for the product of a National Film School in Scotland – i.e. will there be work for all the graduates? Robin MacPherson said that there is a very strong business case for generating more talent in Scotland, and trying to keep production and profits in the country. The problem is that this kind of development has a long lead-time. It is unlikely that the results will be obvious in less than ten years or so, since it will take that long for a first generation of film school graduates to begin to emerge as feature-film-makers – maybe even longer. And politicians investing resources tend to want quick results.

Professor Caughie said that this reminds him of the saying that "the products of medical schools will keep you alive, but the products of film schools will make you glad to be alive". Scotland already had a world-class track-record in medical education – perhaps it is time to prioritise film education, too.

The final question from the audience was about the impact of National Lottery funding on British film culture, and whether it has been generally good or bad. Iain Smith said that at the National Film Council (UK) there had been a move to 'get rid of the Committee', and to appoint individual gatekeepers who would act as producers, giving green lights to projects, and taking responsibility for their own creative decisions, since committees notoriously cannot do this very well. He said that given the low proportion of successful films that can be achieved under any funding structure (see above), British Lottery funding has probably not done too badly. He cited *The Potato Man*, a British film which had been a disaster critically and at the box office, but which he saw as a good example of a film which had been trying to achieve something worthwhile in new British film-making, and had represented a risk worth taking.