

Opening our eyes
How film contributes to the culture of the UK
Notes on question time at the launch of the report

These notes cover the non-scripted parts of the launch event. There are four sections:

- Questions posed to the research team by the moderator (Bonnie Greer)
- The opening remarks made by the members of the panel.
- The panel Q&A
- The audience Q&A

1. Questions for the Research Team (Mike Kelly, Chris Chandler, Ian Christie)

Bonnie Greer (Chair) commented that the Errol Flynn *Robin Hood* was a formative film for her and it was only on reading *Opening our eyes* that she realised why: Robin Hood was a 'free person'.

She asked the Team about the 'Michael Caine corrective' (the number of times Michael Caine appeared in a film mentioned by the survey participants). Chris described Michael Caine (MC) as an 'archetypal 1960s self-reliant character, a working class man made good'. Ian described him as 'a reliable presence in people's lives' and reminded the audience the study was a 'bottom-up account' of cultural contribution. Mike commented on the diversity of films in which MC had acted; how his range went from an upper class officer (*Zulu*) to a working class old age pensioner (*Harry Brown*).

Bonnie agreed that he had 'visceral appeal'.

Bonnie expressed her surprise that *Trainspotting* was the most-often mentioned British film in the survey. Overall the emotional response to the titles mentioned was stronger than Bonnie expected. Ian and Chris said that people were using 'their own critical kit' and didn't think about industry definitions or in relation to industry terminology.

There was strong support for Lottery funding of film.

Bonnie asked whether there was a divide between policy makers and the value of film as seen by the public. Ian described UK films as having 'an attitude' and noted that films with fantasy/imagination were highly regarded by the public. Bonnie had noticed that animation was popular with audiences from minority ethnic groups. Mike felt that even if there was a gap between the critical and the popular view, this presented policy with a period of opportunity. Chris reminded the audience of the finding that 'popular' does not imply 'meaningless'. On the contrary members of the public found profound meaning in popular films. Policy makers therefore needed to trust the public.

2. The Panel Discussion

The panel was composed of Sara Selwood (SS), Christine Whitney (CW), Catharine Des Forges (CDF) and Christine Langan (CL), with Bonnie Greer moderating. The session was in two parts: opening remarks, followed by Q&A.

2.1 Opening remarks

Sara Selwood

SS (a museum sector consultant) regretted that the museum sector also knew so little about its cultural impact. During the New Labour years the emphasis tended to be on instrumental/educational effects, the target culture, quantitative measures and economic value (in a 'market failure' context). The Green Book and the exploration of subjective wellbeing were both given an economic interpretation.

Stories we tell ourselves (the UK Film Council's report on the cultural impact of UK films) was an excellent start at looking at impact. *Opening our eyes* reminded us that not everything about wellbeing was positive. Cultural material could be unsettling. Like her own findings in relation to the cultural impact of museums, *Opening our eyes* reveals a 'will to empathy' and might encourage thinking about cultural contributions to a more empathic culture.

Christine Whitney

CW's background is in education, especially primary, and she wanted to give a classroom practitioners' point of view.

Film addresses sensitive issues and shows people from many different backgrounds. This gives film great potential for use in the classroom. This is reinforced by the findings of *Opening our eyes*. Christine has been involved in sessions with parents on 'how to read a film' and these have been a success. The family-oriented aspects of the findings of *Opening our eyes* support this approach.

The report finds that films seen in childhood have an influence over the whole of people's lives. This too is an argument for increasing the use of film in education.

The report also highlights the aesthetic appreciation of film, which reinforces the desire of schools to focus on standards and the technical quality of what they do.

Film needs to be in the primary curriculum in its own right.

Catharine Des Forges (Independent Cinema Office)

Catherine welcomed a cultural report into film and, in particular, the evidence of regional and local impact, which could be used in advocacy with Local Authorities. CDF noted the broad range of films that have an impact on British culture, including world cinema.

CDF noted the role of new technology in film distribution, which is potentially more democratic but raises the question 'how do you find stuff?' The material people know about is often the material backed with a large advertising budget.

CDF noted the challenge of building a sustainable film industry when companies come and go and urged that we shouldn't expect all films that receive public funding to be profitable.

Finally, CDF said that the findings of *Opening our eyes* should add to the industry's confidence and encourage us to make a more diverse range of films.

Christine Langan (BBC Films)

It is great that *Opening our eyes* affirms the value of culture. It is important to pursue 'instinct and passion'. BBC Films is part of the independent sector, in the intermediate area between blockbusters and low budget films. It is great to have a study into 'what makes us tick' and the longevity of film. It appears from the report there are certain genres that BBC Films has not paid enough attention to; this needs to be discussed inside the organisation. CL likes the 'voices' quoted in *Opening our eyes*. She liked the use of the word 'metaphysical'. The report is relevant at a time the BBC is re-thinking its role and is part of the general re-thinking of the value of life going on in the UK at the moment.

2.2 The Panel Q&A

Bonnie: I'd like to put it to the panel that the audience is way ahead of the industry, that it is the most diverse, sophisticated audience in the world. Furthermore, people don't seem to care about the nationality of a film.

Mike: A very wide range of films was referenced. People respond both with their hearts and their minds.

Ian: We didn't survey overseas audiences, so we can't really compare the British audience with other audiences overseas. Our findings show that nationality is part of the mix, but people tap into a wide range of films.

Bonnie: I was shocked to see *Trainspotting* at the top of the list of films quoted by members of the public.

Christine Langan (CL): We can make a comparison with TV. Think back, for instance, to the 'ferocity of writing' in the early days of *Coronation Street*. It was easier then to build a body of work and support early careers. There is 'a *mêlée* of talent in the UK'. There is commercial pressure for films to succeed, but each film is a unique moment. In the case of *Trainspotting*, 'there was a perfect storm; all the stars were aligned properly.'

Bonnie: What about the theme of family and empathy, particularly in the aftermath of the English riots of Summer 2011?

Ian: The empathic response to film has not previously been studied. This relates to television too. It's interesting that, in our survey, *Cathy Come Home* was remembered as a film, rather than a TV programme. Two particular companies – Woodfall Films¹ and BBC Films – played a key role in the 1960s.

CL: In the 1960s there was more confidence in backing filmmakers, partly as a result of lack of competition.

Bonnie: There seems to be passion in British films. They are not purely a commercial quest.

Sara: Why haven't we thought about the audience before? The discussion of film is generally dominated by academics, researchers, policy makers – generally the elite – whereas *Opening our eyes* has revealed the nature of people's experiences. The key policy question is: what do we now do with the information?

3. Audience Q&A

Audience member: the survey was of 2000 people. Can such a number really provide a basis for policy making?

Ian and Sara responded that it was great to have as many as 2000 ordinary members of the public influencing policy-making. This was not typical of policy processes.

Mike and Chris referred the questioner to the 'methods' section of the report where the survey process was described. As mentioned in the PPT presentation, the sample of 2000 was designed to be representative of the whole adult population of the UK.

Audience member: we need to think about the definition of film. With changing consumption patterns, TV and shorts may also qualify as 'film'.

Audience member: What great art has come from people who worry about what the funders think? Should the gates therefore be thrown wider?

Audience member: Has been involved in a schools project (ages 8-18) called 'making history'. There is a gap between kids' interests and what they see on TV. They feel disconnected. For example, he knows of English-speaking kids of Turkish origin who go home and watch Turkish satellite TV. The barriers between cultures are breaking down. For example, he was talking to Lenny Henry at a recent function and Lenny asked 'where is the West Indian population going?'

Audience member: *Opening our eyes* seems to be unequivocally positive. But are there any negatives? Horrific or disturbing aspects of film? As well as how people

¹ *Look Back in Anger, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, The Charge of the Light Brigade* etc.

react to films we need to be looking at what people do with films; how they create spoofs, copy material etc – their cultural practice.

Christine Whitney: Kids at school go on to make their own films; even kids as young as four, in educational settings. They put their voices on screen.

Mike: The survey did pick up a proportion of respondents who went on to do things after seeing films, for example to make a film or join a film society. The survey also showed that digital consumption is happening. One in ten view films on mobile devices. We are at 'a moment of transition'. TV is still dominant in volume terms, but there is great variety in film consumption. There were also some negative responses in the survey results. The reaction reported was not uniformly positive.

Chris: Remembered from previous work of the British Board of Film Classification that when people were worried about the negative impact some films might have, they were worried about the supposed impact on others, not on themselves.

Bonnie: How do we break through the edifice of UK film?

CDF: We need more radical models of production and distribution. We need to put pressure on the money people and the policy people.

4. Closing Remarks

Bonnie: The industrial and cultural aspects of film go together. The study has confirmed the importance of film in the life of the UK and for the century ahead.

David Steele
19 Sept 2011