

The McMaster Review 'Assessing Excellence in the Arts'

Submission from UK Film Council

Introduction

The UK Film Council welcomes the review being undertaken by Sir Brian McMaster, on behalf of the Secretary of State, with the purpose of encouraging agencies that provide public support for the arts to strive for “excellence, risk-taking and innovation.”

We note, with some disappointment, that the review will focus “primarily on the performing arts, the visual arts, literature and classical world music. The work of museums and galleries will also be included.” This definition excludes film, probably the most popular and accessible art form in the world, one in which British talent is acknowledged to excel internationally and one which draws increasingly from the same talent pool as the performing and visual arts - and contributes to that pool. Not for the first time, we find that public policy has not given film-as-an-art form parity of esteem with film as a creative industry. This does a disservice to UK filmmakers and UK audiences and fails to recognise a growing cross-fertilisation between the art forms which energises each and is one of the most distinguishing features of the vibrant arts environment of the UK today.

The UK Film Council has as one of its six strategic principles “*To encourage excellence and innovation, particularly through the use of new digital technologies.*”

This commitment to excellence extends across the full range of the Council’s work, from the development and production of films, to training in creative and craft skills and to the experience of the audience, where the UK Film Council, in conjunction with the British Film Institute (which is in receipt of public funding made available by the UK Film Council) has in place initiatives to extend the range of British and international cinema available to audiences, to raise the media literacy levels of children, young people and adults and to improve the curation and accessibility of publicly owned archives, including the BFI National Archive.

Summary

- The UK Film Council is committed to the encouragement of “excellence and innovation” as one of six strategic principles that guide all its work.
- The UK Film Council believes that to be a useful guiding principle, the commitment to excellence and innovation must extend beyond the quality of film production and include the quality of the viewer experience. Furthermore, it should aim to impact on provision in every part of the UK.
- The UK Film Council believes that excellence in film can be an important means by which a positive image of the UK is projected to the rest of the world.
- The major impediments to risk taking and innovation in film production are uncertainty of finance and uncertainty of distribution. The UK Film Council maintains initiatives designed to ameliorate both problems. The lack of risk-taking in distribution reduces audience exposure to a wide variety of content and thereby depresses potential demand for innovative and risk-taking new work.
- Broadcasters, especially the public service broadcasters, have an important role in driving quality, both in production and in the range of content available to audiences; but this role is not being fulfilled as effectively as it could be and should be.
- Systematic initiatives to promote media literacy, formally in the curriculum and informally in the community, are important elements in extending the “enjoyment and understanding of cinema” which is one of the UK Film Council’s core aims and an essential ingredient to driving excellence and innovation.

What excellence means to you and how that might be defined

‘Excellence’ in film is a complex blend of artistic, craft and technical excellence – from the quality of the script to the performance of the cast, the quality of cinematography, editing, art direction, and sound recording. Furthermore, however great a commitment to excellence in production may be, it only makes sense if there is a comparable commitment to excellence from the perspective of the audience; that’s to say the quality of the viewing experience and the range of films available. Part of the core aim of the UK Film Council is “...*to promote the widest possible enjoyment and understanding of cinema throughout the nations and regions of the UK.*” The Council takes this to mean that initiatives are required (a) to promote the public availability, on any platform, of as wide as possible a range of UK and international films, both contemporary and classic; (b) to raise levels of media literacy and critical understanding of film, and (c) that, insofar as possible, this range of experiences should be available throughout the UK and not simply in a limited number of major urban areas.

The UK Film Council also recognises the importance of cinema as a means of promoting understanding within and between nations and cultures and is committed to “...use film to raise the profile of the UK and UK culture across the world.” In this context, the Council encourages British filmmakers to aspire to win internally prestigious awards and uses the opportunity presented by the BFI London Film Festival, and other festivals across the country, to celebrate the best of current UK and international production.

The UK Film Council invests a substantial proportion of its available funds to promote excellence, risk-taking and innovation. In particular, it is committed to improving the quality of screenplays and, to this end, maintains a Development Fund, which, with £12m spread over a three year cycle, is the largest of its kind in Europe. Other funds support new talent, innovative productions and help overcome barriers to entry into the industry that are still experienced by a variety of marginalised groups. While all these funds are in part intended to increase the commercial success and critical mass of the British industry, they all nevertheless have within them an implicit or explicit commitment to the raising of quality and the promotion of excellence and innovation.

The UK Film Council enjoys a close and collaborative relationship with Arts Council England, which includes joint initiatives such as ‘Single Shot’ and anticipates a strengthening of this relationship as popular ‘screen culture’ evolves under the impact of the digital revolution and as more and more artists use moving image technologies as a medium of expression.

The UK Film Council, in conjunction with Skillset, the Sector Skills Council for the Audiovisual Industries, has been instrumental in the foundation of a Network of Screen Academies to help ensure that there is a commitment to excellence and innovation at every point in the process of creating film.

| This Network includes the National Film and Television School, widely regarded as one of the best film schools in the world.

Aside from these initiatives at a UK level, the UK Film Council, through its support for a network of national and regional screen agencies, seeks to replicate these initiatives to encourage new talent, high quality ideas and experimental production in every part of the UK. This extends beyond the professional industry to community film-making, community-based film clubs and initiatives for the benefit of children and young people, in particular First Light Movies, which gives young people between the ages of 8 and 19 the opportunity to make short digital films and which includes a strong emphasis on the importance of good screenplays as well as high production values.

Although film as an industry is subject to the commercial disciplines common to any industry, for many film makers a commitment to creative excellence is at least as great as any ambition for commercial success. They are committed to sharing the intrinsic value of their creative work with their audience, not simply turning it to commercial gain.

Factors that encourage or discourage taking risks and being innovative in what you produce or experience

The two major uncertainties for filmmakers which are likely to militate against taking risks are the uncertainty and inadequacy of finance for production and the uncertainty of finding effective distribution to give a film profile in the market and the chance of a commercial return on production costs.

UK Film Council works in a variety of ways to support innovative filmmaking, through its New Cinema Fund and Premiere Fund. Its Print and Advertising Fund supports the distribution of specialised (or non-mainstream) films which are regarded by the commercial distributors as too risky to merit significant support, but which are important in other ways aesthetically, politically etc. Its International Department, amongst other functions, helps promote significant new British films in international markets.

The UK Film Council is exploring joint ventures with public and private sector partners to identify financial models which can encourage innovation, risk and a commitment to quality without losing touch with the commercial disciplines necessary to enhance the likelihood of a film finding success in the market.

Through its Digital Screen Network the UK Film Council has instigated a radical new way of bringing what would previously have been regarded as minority interest - specialised - films to a wider audience, matching the technical and cost advantages of digital dissemination with experiments in wider marketing.

Television broadcasters and online distribution businesses have an enormous influence on the confidence of film makers to bring innovative stories to the screen. The growth of specialist film channels, both pay and free, opens up possibilities of building new audiences for specialised films. These possibilities are not being as effectively exploited as they could be and should be by public service broadcasters and other media businesses.

The importance of the audience and the role it plays in developing work and setting the direction an artist takes.

Cinema audiences can only respond to films that they have an opportunity to see. Through the work of the BFI, regional film theatres, the dozen or so mixed art form venues which UK Film Council and Arts Council England support and the Digital Screen Network, the UK Film Council seeks to open up greater opportunity for audiences to see a wider range of British and world cinema, both contemporary and classic.

The possibility of developing new means of digital access to the various UK film archives, including the BFI national archive, creates significant new opportunities to engage audiences, and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that when such opportunities are made available audiences respond positively – the Mitchell and Kenyon films shown on the BBC being a case in point.

In other respects, too, the UK Film Council encourages broadcasters, in particular the BBC and Channel 4, to support both the production and dissemination of film. Both organisations have played a central role in sustaining a dynamic culture of innovative production. The UK Film Council believes both could do more and that both could be using the opportunities opened up by almost limitless digital bandwidth to offer their audiences a fuller range of contemporary and classic films from the UK and the rest of the world. The UK Film Council has consistently urged Ofcom to invest more energy in its stated obligation to ensure that the public service broadcasters use their resources to promote film.

The long-established schools service, Film Education, and the newly formed Film Club, together with the dissemination of films and other content made by young people under the First Light Movies and Mediabox schemes, offer opportunities for young people to see and respond to film made by their contemporaries. The UK Film Council's commitment to the promotion of media literacy is intended, in part, to deepen audience engagement with cinema (especially young audiences) in a way that will help drive a market for a more varied and demanding range of content.

How audiences might engage more deeply in the work they experience.

Some of the initiatives outlined above help extend the “enjoyment and understanding of cinema” which is one of the UK Film Council’s core aims. The advent of widespread broadband access and increases in bandwidth speeds create dramatic new possibilities for a more sophisticated and comprehensive film culture in the UK. With eighty years of experience in this area, the BFI’s current initiatives to bring more of its educational work into the online world will be of great benefit in this regard, and the UK Film Council welcomes the recent decision by DCMS to award substantial sums to improve the curation and accessibility of the national and regional film and television archives.

In partnership with the BFI and others, the UK Film Council is developing an overall strategy for film education with a view to optimising a joint approach between the existing providers. In particular, changes to the national curriculum and a growing emphasis on out-of-school learning initiatives, taken with the emerging ‘cultural offer’ of DCMS and the education departments, opens up an opportunity to provide children and young people with an integrated experience of cinema:- watching film in a learning environment with the new Film Club, backed up by the BFI screen online service, and being able to translate that understanding into film creation through First Light Movies and other comparable projects. Already some 15,000 young people have worked on First Light funded projects.

Under-pinning these film-related opportunities is the Media Literacy Charter, drawn up by the UK Film Council in conjunction with the public service broadcasters and welcomed by the government. The UK Film Council believes that as screen culture becomes a more significant element in the lives of children and young people, a more structured approach to media literacy will become of paramount importance. The recent report by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, which suggested that reading levels amongst children in the UK are dropping and that this is in part due to the amount of time they spend online, emphasises the need for a more holistic approach by the education system to the way in which young people acquire and use information.