

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH CINEMA

Industry, Policy, Identity

by John Hill

Sara Sugarman's Very Annie-Mary



Receiving his award for Best Original Screenplay at the Oscars in 1982, the writer of *Chariots of Fire*, Colin Welland, famously declared, "The British are coming." Given the up-and-down history of British filmmaking, he should, of course, have known better and it was, perhaps, inevitable that the British film industry should have entered something of a slump shortly thereafter. While the British media continue to take an inordinate pride in British success at the Oscars, there has been much greater reluctance to tempt providence by announcing yet another 'renaissance.' As Alan Parker, the chair of the new U.K. Film Council launched in May 2000, has put it, "Sometimes with the U.K. film industry it's hard to know if we're waving or drowning." As this suggests, the current state of British cinema displays a familiar mix of both strengths and weaknesses. Following a drop to an all-time low of fifty-four million in 1984, cinema admissions in the U.K. have been steadily rising and reached over 142 million in 2000. While there is currently some evidence of a slowdown, there has also been a substantial growth in new cinemas, especially multiplexes, which now account for nearly two-thirds of all cinema screens in the U.K.

British film production has also increased. Since 1989 (when only thirty films were made), the number of U.K. films produced each year has often been substantial, totalling as many as 128 in 1996. The last few years have also witnessed a number of high-profile commercial successes, including *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in 1994, *Trainspotting* in 1996, *The Full Monty* in 1997, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* in 1998, *Notting Hill* and *East is East* in 1999, and *Billy Elliot* in 2000. More recently, in April 2001, *Bridget Jones's Diary* had the biggest-ever opening in the U.K. for a British film (taking nearly £6 mil-

lion in three days) and now looks set to overtake *The Full Monty* as the biggest grossing film ever in the U.K. Partly thanks to tax incentives introduced by the new Labour government in 1997, production spend in the U.K. was also at an all-time high (of £593.5 million) in 2000 and British studios, like Pinewood, Shepperton, and Leavesden, have been kept busy with Hollywood productions such as *Gladiator*, *Tomb Raider*, *The Mummy Returns*, and *Spy Game*. That many of these films also have British directors (Simon West, Ridley and Tony Scott) indicates as well the continuing contribution of British directors and actors to Hollywood production.

INDUSTRIAL STRUCTURES

Striking though these successes have been, they do, of course, tell only a part of the story. While audiences in the U.K. have been growing, it is Hollywood rather than British films that have been the biggest beneficiaries. In recent years, Hollywood films have generally accounted for over seventy percent and sometimes over eighty percent of U.K. box-office takings. This, in turn, reflects a domination of the U.K. distribution sector by subsidiaries of the Hollywood majors—UIP (which is jointly owned by MCA/Universal, MGM, and Paramount), Warner Distributors, Columbia, Buena Vista, and Fox—which collectively command around eighty percent of total U.K. box office. It is hardly a surprise, therefore, that the British films that typically do best are funded and/or distributed by the Hollywood majors. *The Full Monty*, for example, was financed by Twentieth Century-Fox, through its subsidiary Fox Searchlight. *Notting Hill*, *Billy Elliot*, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* were all handled by Universal and, in the case of *Notting Hill* and *Bridget Jones*, took the added precaution of

featuring Hollywood stars (Julia Roberts and Renée Zellweger respectively). Given the huge global power of Hollywood (based on scale of production, ownership or control of an international network of distribution and exhibition, and integration into huge entertainment conglomerates) there is a clear economic advantage to these kinds of U.S.-British partnerships. The corollary of this, however, is that the vast bulk of British films, that do not have links to the Hollywood majors, generally find it much harder to gain a foothold in the market place and secure a widespread release.

This is partly due to the absence of a unified U.K. film industry of the type that formerly existed. During the 1940s and 1950s, Britain had its own modest equivalent of the Hollywood studio system whereby two British companies, Rank and ABPC, produced films in their own studios (at Pinewood and Elstree) for distribution to their own cinemas (the Odeon and ABC chains). As cinema audiences began to decline from the 1950s onwards, the economic basis of this system—a large enough domestic audience to sustain profitability—collapsed and the two British 'majors' retreated, initially from production and then from other areas of film. Thus, when Rank, once the biggest name in British film, sold its Odeon cinema chain in early 2000, it marked a symbolic end to an era.

The net result of this is a relatively fragmented industry in which there is little integration across the various sectors. The recent exception to this model was Polygram Filmed Entertainment, which owned a stake in a number of production companies (such as Working Title) and was the biggest investor in British film in 1997. Polygram moved into film in the late 1980s and early 1990s on the back of its success in the music and video business. While it was also involved in U.S.

and European projects, Polygram made a significant contribution to British filmmaking of the 1990s through their financing or distribution of high-profile successes such as *Shallow Grave*, *Trainspotting*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Bear*, and *Notting Hill*. A key component of the company's success, in this regard, was its development of an international distribution network and adoption of a Hollywood-style attitude to promotion (especially notable in the case of *Trainspotting*). Nevertheless, the returns from film proved insufficient to prevent Polygram's parent company Philips from selling its share of the company to Seagram (the owner of Universal) in 1998. Thus, what began as an ambitious attempt to become a 'European major' in competition with Hollywood ended with a Hollywood takeover. Universal, however, has preserved the relationship with Working Title (the production company responsible for *Notting Hill*, *Elizabeth*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*) for which it continues to provide resources and distribution.

Working Title's relationship with Universal, however, is the exception rather than the norm. Given the absence of vertically integrated companies, British film production is more commonly carried out by relatively small independent production companies on an irregular or one-off basis. Typically, this involves piecing together finance from a patchwork of sources including international presales, funding by government-backed agencies and by television (especially Channel 4 but also the BBC and ITV companies). Channel 4, in particular, has been especially important for British filmmaking. Launched as the fourth terrestrial U.K. television channel in 1982, the channel borrowed from the example of German and Italian television by funding feature films intended for a release in cinemas prior to their television transmission. At a time when both private and public finance for British film was scarce, the channel provided the British film industry with an important lifeline and was involved in many of the most successful or critically acclaimed films of the 1980s and 1990s, including *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985), *Letter to Brezhnev* (Chris Bernard, 1985), *Comrades* (Bill Douglas, 1986), *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986), *The Passion of Remembrance* (Isaac Julien, 1986), *Drowning by Numbers* (Peter Greenaway, 1988), *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988), *Life is Sweet* (Mike Leigh, 1990), *Riff-Raff* (Ken Loach, 1990), *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha, 1993), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994),

Trainspotting (Danny Boyle, 1996), *Secrets & Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996), *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998), and *East is East* (Damien O'Donnell, 1999).

The cultural cachet and international profile which attached to Channel 4 because of its filmmaking policy also encouraged other U.K. television companies, including the BBC, to follow. The BBC did, of course, have a distinguished history of shooting drama on film employing major directors such as Ken Loach, Mike Leigh, and Stephen Frears. Although these were films in all but name, they were shown only on television and it was not until the early 1990s that the BBC began to invest specifically in films for theatrical release with productions such as *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (Anthony Minghella, 1990), *Edward II* (Derek Jarman, 1991), and *Enchanted April* (Mike Newell, 1991). It subsequently established BBC Films, which has since maintained a steady involvement in film production through investment in films such as *Mrs. Brown* (John Madden, 1997), *Robinson in Space* (Patrick Keiller, 1997), *Wonderland* (Michael Winterbottom, 1999), *Ratcatcher* (Lynne Ramsay, 1999), *Love, Honour and Obey* (Dominic Anciano and Ray Burdis, 1999), *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000), and *Last Resort* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2000).

The BBC and Channel 4 are both public-service broadcasters and their involvement in film production has been partly premised on a willingness to 'subsidize' film production through the licence fee (in the case of the BBC) or advertising revenues (in the case of Channel 4). With the growth of cable, satellite, and digital services during the 1990s, however, there has been an intensification of competition for television audiences, which has encouraged a greater emphasis on commercial returns. The most significant changes have occurred at Channel 4, which launched a pay-television channel FilmFour (in November 1998) and reorganized the channel's film activities into a 'commercial subsidiary,' FilmFour Ltd., under a new Head of

Film, Paul Webster. FilmFour Ltd. has brought together the channel's existing film operations—including production, sales, and distribution—into what is intended to operate as a 'ministudio' involved in all aspects of the filmmaking process, from development through release. The parent channel has provided FilmFour with extra funds (currently around £40 million per annum) and has encouraged a shift towards more commercial projects and bigger budgets, reflected in the coproduction deal FilmFour struck with Warner Bros. in 2000. The first fruit of this arrangement will be *Charlotte Gray* which, at a reported cost of over £13 million, will be FilmFour's most expensive film to date.

At the same time, the company is seeking to maintain its reputation (and, indeed, contractual obligation) for risk and innovation through the FilmFour Lab, launched in 1999, which is responsible for funding low-budget features and shorts, including a series of one-minute digital shorts for premiere on the *filmfour.com* website. It is this twin strategy of increasing and lowering film budgets that FilmFour regards as necessary to achieve both commercial viability and cultural innovation. So while, in line with British cinema more generally, there has been a shift in its production policy towards more genre material (particularly comedy and crime) and an increasing emphasis upon the youth audience, the company continues to be a key (if not the key) player in British cinema in terms of both the number and range of British films it supports. In recent years these have included *The War Zone* (Tim Roth, 1998), *Solomon and Gaenor* (Paul Morrison, 1998), *The Filth and the Fury* (Julien Temple, 1999), *The Debt Collector* (Anthony Neilson, 1999), *Purely Belter* (Mark Herman, 2000), *Sexy Beast* (Jonathan Glazer, 2000), *Gangster No. 1* (Paul McGuigan, 2000), *The House of Mirth* (Terence Davies, 2000), *The Low Down* (Jamie Thraves, 2000), *Late Night Shopping* (Saul Metzstein, 2000), *Bread and Roses* (Ken Loach, 2000), and *Very Annie-Mary* (Sara Sugarman, 2000).

FILM POLICY

One of the reasons that television came to play such a substantial role in British film during the 1980s and 1990s was the general reluctance of government during this period to offer support. The Conservatives, under Margaret Thatcher, came to power in 1979 and sought to remove all restrictions on 'free trade' (even when this contributed to a narrowing of market choice). They abolished the quota (whereby British cinemas were required to show a certain proportion of British films), ended the Eady levy (whereby a small percentage of exhibitors' earnings



Left to right, Spud (Ewen Bremner), Renton (Ewan McGregor) and Begbie (Robert Carlyle) in Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

was returned to film producers), and abolished the tax incentives which had helped to fuel the short-lived 'renaissance' of British filmmaking in the early 1980s. The Conservatives also 'privatized' the National Film Finance Corporation which—as British Screen—remained virtually the only source of public finance for film production during the 1980s and early 1990s, helping to support important British films such as Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993), Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995), and Michael Winterbottom's *Butterfly Kiss* (1994).

This situation changed in 1995, however, when John Major's Conservative government, partly in response to mounting criticism of the government's lack of support for film, agreed to allocate a share of National Lottery revenues to film funds administered by the Arts Councils of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. As these funds are proportional to population, the Arts Council of England (ACE) possessed the largest sums and, in its first four years, provided awards (totalling £85 million) to ninety-five feature films and sixty-one shorts. This included support for three film franchises—The Film Consortium, Pathé Pictures, and DNA Films—which, as a response to the fragmented character of the British film industry, were intended to develop as vertically-integrated companies by funding development, building slates of films, and sustaining links with distributors.

ACE's use of lottery funds had mixed results. Although some of the films supported by ACE (or the franchises)—such as *Billy Elliot* and *An Ideal Husband* (Oliver Parker, 1999)—were substantial commercial successes, many Lottery films performed poorly at the box office and there was a correspondingly low level of return to the Arts Council. Although this was not public funding raised through taxation, there was still considerable grumbling in the press about the 'waste' involved. A part of the problem here stemmed from the fact that the lottery guidelines required lottery funds to support projects which might not otherwise be made and, accordingly, those projects that could be expected to be most commercially risky. Moreover, whereas critics of the lottery scheme generally took only commercial performance into account, the fund was also, quite rightly, under an obligation to support work of 'cultural merit'.

There can be little doubt that, in certain cases, ACE backed projects that were not only poor commercial prospects but also artistically unadventurous. However, they also supported a substantial number of films—such as Isaac Julien's *Frantz Fanon* (1996), Andrew Kotting's *Gallivant* (1997), Julian Henriques's *Babymother* (1998), Udayan Prasad's *My Son the Fanatic* (1997), John Maybury's *Love is the*

Devil (1998), Tony Harrison's *Prometheus* (1998), Shane Meadows's *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999), Simon Beaufoy and Bille Eltringham's *The Darkest Light* (1999), Ben Hopkins's *Simon Magus* (1999), Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999), and Amber's *Like Father* (2001)—which may not have taken the multiplexes by storm but which did successfully contribute to the artistic range and cultural diversity of British films.

Nevertheless, given the public concern about lottery funding, it is not surprising that there should have been some changes to policy. In the case of English lottery funding these have been implemented by a new 'superbody,' the Film Council, established in 2000. Following the election of a new Labour government in 1997, the then Minister for Culture, Media, and Sport, Chris Smith, established a working party to produce an agenda for action in support of British film. The Film Policy Review Group's report, *A Bigger Picture*, was published in 1998 and recommend-

implementation of regional strategies for production, education, exhibition, and archives.

The Film Council also reconfigured the support for film that it provides through the lottery. In line with the recommendations of the Film Policy Review Group, it has launched new funds for training and development (the largest in Europe) as well as a new scheme, 'First Movies,' that provides children with an opportunity to make short films. It is also exploring how best to address the issue of distribution and ensure a wider exhibition of British (and world) films. Two new production funds—the £10 million Premiere Production Fund and the £5 million New Cinema Fund—have also been launched. The Premiere Fund is headed up by Robert Jones (the producer of *The Usual Suspects*) and is deliberately intended to support bigger-budget films with commercial appeal. The New Cinema Fund, under Paul Trijbits (whose production credits include work with Richard Stanley), is planned to help new talent, encourage the use of new technologies, and 'innovation in form and content' through support for low-budget features and shorts. As these funds only went 'live' in October 2000, the first films to be made under these schemes have yet to be completed. Some indication of the direction, however, in which they are headed is provided by the first projects to be announced. The Premiere Fund is supporting *Gosford Park*, an English murder-mystery directed by Robert Altman, a football 'mockumentary' *Mike Bassett: England Manager*, directed by Steve Barron, and a 'romantic comedy thriller,' *Miranda*, co-funded with FilmFour. The first features to be funded by the New Cinema Fund include Alex Cox's *Revenagers Tragedy*, a contemporary version of Thomas Middleton's play; Paul Greengrass's



Gina McKee stars in Michael Winterbottom's *Wonderland* (2000) (photo by Marcus Robinson, courtesy of Photofest).

ed, among other things, the rationalization of the various public bodies supporting film. This led to the establishment of the Film Council as the strategic body responsible for the development of both 'a sustainable U.K. film industry' and support of U.K. 'film culture.'

Under this new arrangement, the Film Council replaced the Arts Council of England as the distributor of lottery funds for film production as well as taking over British Screen and the British Film Commission (the body responsible for promoting Britain as a film location and attracting inward investment). Given its charitable status, the British Film Institute (BFI)—the body primarily concerned with the cultural and educational aspects of film—retained its independence but is now funded by the Film Council. The BFI's production and regional divisions did, however, transfer to the Film Council, which launched a £6 million Regional Investment Fund for England in 2001 in support of the creation of regional film agencies and the

dramatization of events in Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1972, *Bloody Sunday*; and *This is Not a Love Song*, a thriller set in Yorkshire written by Simon Beaufoy and shot on digital video. While it is too early to assess the impact of the Film Council's measures, they will have to be judged by their success in encouraging not only films that are commercially viable but also ones that culturally matter.

Although the Film Council has a U.K.-wide remit, there are separate lottery funds for film in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales that have been used to bolster local production activities. Thus, in recent years, virtually all the major films in these countries—ranging from *Orphans* (Peter Mullan, 1999) and *This Year's Love* (David Kane, 1999) in Scotland to *Divorcing Jack* (David Caffrey, 1998) and *Wild About Harry* (Declan Lowney, 2000) in Northern Ireland and *House of America* (Marc Evans, 1996) and *Very Annie-Mary* (Sara Sugarman, 2000) in Wales—have received lottery support. While a number of these films have encountered

some of the same distribution problems as their English counterparts (and there have been some tiffs, especially in Scotland, about which filmmakers have received money), there has been much less public concern about the principle of using lottery funds to support film production. This is undoubtedly because of the important economic role these films have played in attracting inward investment and developing local infrastructures, as well as in giving voice to national and local experiences that have traditionally been absent from the cinema screen. Thus, in Northern Ireland, there has been an unprecedented upsurge in features shot in the area as a result of the availability of lottery funding (as well as other forms of local support). While none of these films have been substantial commercial successes, the economic benefits that have accrued to Northern Ireland in terms of employment and spend have outweighed the lack of return on individual films. Moreover, in a part of the U.K. with no sustained tradition of filmmaking and where violent conflicts have been a characteristic of social life for so long, the economic costs of public support for film production must necessarily be weighed against the cultural value of nurturing creative talent and promoting new and challenging forms of cultural expression.

Such initiatives have received additional momentum from the creation of new integrated agencies for film and the onset of political devolution. Scottish Screen, the Northern Ireland Film Commission, and Sgrin (in Wales) were all established in 1997, following the merger or expansion of preexisting bodies, and have responsibilities for a range of film activities. Scottish Screen also assumed responsibility for Scottish lottery funding in 2000 and the NIFC is set to follow. Following referenda in Scotland and Wales (in 1979) and a vote on the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland (in 1998), a new Scottish parliament and assemblies in Northern Ireland and Wales have also been established. As the responsibilities of these assemblies include the arts and culture, this will inevitably consolidate the move towards 'devolved' film policies and production within the U.K. (and beyond).

Understandably, these developments have led to calls for regional assemblies in England (Yorkshire, after all, has a much larger population than Northern Ireland) as well as directly elected city mayors (a policy begun in London in 2000). For good economic reasons, filmmaking activity in the U.K. is traditionally clustered around the London area. Particularly since the 1980s, however, there has been a steady growth of film production in the English regions. Channel 4 played an important role through its support for regionally-based production and franchised

workshops (such as Amber), as did local broadcasters, which became involved in various shorts schemes and other initiatives. There has also been a growth of regionally-based agencies such as the Liverpool-based Moving Image Development Agency (which has supported films such as *Butterfly Kiss*, *Beautiful People*, and *Downtime*), the Yorkshire Media Production Agency (which helped finance *The Darkest Light* and *Among Giants*), and the Northern Production Fund in Newcastle (which has supported the work of Amber Films). Although not much commented on, lottery funds have also been used to support many of these initiatives and will continue to do so through the Film Council's Regional Investment Fund. As with Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, this activity is of crucial importance not only for the financial benefits that accrue to regional economies but also for the local forms of expression and creativity that are encouraged.



David Caffrey's satirical *Divorcing Jack* (1998), filmed in Northern Ireland, was one of numerous U.K. films to receive local lottery funding.

BRITISH CINEMAS?

Inevitably, these developments are significant for how we think of British cinema in the future. For just as there was once a unified British film industry, so it has been assumed that there was once a unified national cinema consisting of films funded from British sources, dealing with British subjects and watched by British audiences. If this ever was the case, however, it hardly corresponds to today's realities. Film funding has become increasingly international and, as has been seen, many of Britain's most commercially successful movies—such as *The Full Monty*, *Notting Hill*, and *Bridget Jones's Diary*—have depended on U.S. sources. European funding has also been crucial for many other British films (such as those of Ken Loach) and a key component of FilmFour's current financing arrangements is the deal it has struck with the German independent distributor, Senator (whereby it supplies twenty-five percent of the budget of agreed films). The British audience, moreover, is no longer sufficiently large

to sustain a British film industry on its own and returns from outside the U.K. are therefore essential to the economic viability of British filmmaking. The character of the British audience has also changed. In line with general trends, the cinemagoing audience is heavily dominated by younger age groups and this, inevitably, has had consequences for the films most likely to do well at the box office (as films such as *Shallow Grave*, *Trainspotting* and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* have successfully demonstrated).

In the process the relationship of cinema to 'Britishness' has also changed. The paradigm of British 'national cinema' is often taken to have been during the Second World War when films (such as *In Which We Serve* and *Millions Like Us*) celebrated the community pulling together to win the war. Powerful though such films are, however, their versions of the 'nation' privileged 'Englishness' (even the south of England) at the expense of other national (Scottish, Welsh, and Irish)

and regional identifications within the U.K. And while there was an acknowledgement of social differences (of class, gender, generation, region, and ethnicity) within the nation, there was a much greater emphasis upon those elements of 'national character' that were regarded as binding the community together. Thus, while some have lamented the demise of a British national cinema that no longer reflects a unified national identity or culture, it might be better to see this in terms of a growth of films prepared to engage with a more diverse and complex sense of national, regional, ethnic, social, and sexual identities within the U.K.

As such, there is no longer just one British cinema (if there ever was) but rather different kinds of 'British' cinemas often

aimed at different audiences and addressing different aspects of contemporary social and cultural life. While it is often the romantic comedies and costume dramas (such as *Working Title's*) pitched at a transatlantic market that enjoy the highest profile (and biggest commercial success), these coexist alongside the more European-oriented cinema of British auteurs such as Terence Davies, Mike Leigh, and Ken Loach, the 'new wave' of youth-oriented genre films, regional dramas from the North of England, the 'Celtic' cinemas of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, British-Asian and black British filmmaking, and a diverse culture of shorts. These are not, of course, separate trends but ones which overlap and intermingle. The films also offer very different, and sometimes contrary, versions of contemporary 'Britishness.' As the old shibboleths of British identity dissolve, under the joint pressures of globalization and devolution, the reimaginings of identity found in films from the U.K. remain an important sign of cultural vitality. ■

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