

WORLD CINEMA IN WALES

Stirringly combining ambition and alliteration, “World Cinema in Wales” was an inspiring subject to be invited to talk about at the School of European Studies ‘New Screenings’ seminar series. Seeking to distil my enthusiasm into something approaching a coherent presentation, I started to wonder whether I should be considering the business of screening of global cinema in Wales, or the possibility of Wales itself developing a world-class film industry. I came to the conclusion that, since a healthy Welsh exhibition scene is inextricably linked with both these areas, I was justified in speaking about both.

My engagement with the Welsh film industry, and with the presentation of world cinema in Wales, began in 1997. Early that year I moved here from England to take up the post of Cinema Programmer at Chapter in Cardiff, one of the UK’s longest established independent subsidized cinemas. Among the useful items sent to me when I was invited for interview was an article from a recent *Guardian*, with a headline that read ‘Newport was the new Seattle. So is Splott the new Hollywood?’. At the time it was at least a semi-serious question. Reporter Brian Logan was indeed in the Splott area of Cardiff, covering the filming of *Cameleon* (1997), a World War One drama directed by Ceri Sherlock, which was described as ‘the first Welsh language film intended for international distribution – thanks to S4C’. It came hot on the heels of two other Welsh films, both in the English language: *Twin Town* (1997), directed by Kevin Allen, which was described as a ‘Welsh *Trainspotting*’, and *House of America* (1997), directed by Marc Evans, of whom more later, and adapted by Edward Thomas from his own play. So there did seem to be the makings of a boom in the Welsh industry.

The boom, however, never really boomed. In the event, *Twin Town* wasn’t the new *Trainspotting* (although to be fair, the film itself didn’t set out to be; it just had the same distributor, which knew a good publicity slogan when it saw one). *Cameleon* went down well enough in Wales, where venues like Chapter booked it direct from S4C, but was little seen in the rest of the UK, perhaps not surprisingly given the continuing antipathy towards subtitles still felt by large sections of the British cinema audiences. According to the Internet Movie Database, it didn’t get a full-scale release anywhere, despite screenings (and a couple of awards) at festivals in France, Portugal, Germany and San Francisco. *House of America* also played at festivals, often enlivened by spirited on-stage interviews with Evans and Thomas, and did get a UK release, but

performed poorly outside Wales. So the renaissance didn't happen. Nor has there really been a comparable period since, when more than one film came along at any one time to suggest that the boom would finally happen. Nearly a decade on, Splott still isn't the new Hollywood.

The only Welsh feature in the intervening years to have anything like the same success was Justin Kerrigan's *Human Traffic* (1999), a portrait of a group of five young friends in Cardiff. Stuck in dead-end jobs, they look forward to a weekend of sex, drugs and clubbing, and they come down painfully from all these various highs as they contemplate Monday morning and the return to work. What I hope this suggests about the film is that the subject matter is pretty universal. You don't have to be into the club scene, or ecstasy, or even know Cardiff at all, to identify with the feeling of waiting for Friday night and the start of the weekend and then coming down again on Sunday night as you get ready to return to work the next day. Of course, if you do know Cardiff, and especially the Cardiff club scene, there's a lot of fun to be had location-spotting. But *Human Traffic* has a resonance far beyond that, and is thus the only Welsh film of the last few years to have achieved one of the qualities of other British successes – that of being very much of its location, but also universal.

The Full Monty (1997) and *Brassed Off* (1996), for example, are very specific to their locations in the north of England, just as *Trainspotting* (1996) was very specifically Scottish, but they speak to all of us. I think we're still waiting for a film that uses the riches of Welsh locations and Welsh talent in the same way, while showcasing universally recognisable stories and themes. I'd say that, up to a point, Amma Asante's *A Way of Life* (2004) came close to achieving this, although the extremity of its bleak vision (unrelieved by the resilient humour found, for instance, in the best of Ken Loach's work) probably puts it on the very edge of universality. Nevertheless, and despite being written and directed by an English woman, it did showcase Welsh locations and young acting talent to good effect. (The image it projected of areas of South Wales is possibly another, more controversial, matter.)

There are, admittedly, critical obstacles to be overcome. Take a film like Sara Sugarman's *Very Annie Mary* (2001). This was a pleasant, well-made, if unremarkable comedy, but was somewhat pigeon-holed as a 'Welsh comedy' ('a rural-Welsh quirkfest', said *The Village Voice* with excessive succinctness), and again under-performed outside Wales. Matters were not helped by those critics who harped on about Sugarman's previous feature film — her first — which was a not-very-successful adaptation of Kathy Lette's *Mad Cows* (1999). Even when, five years later,

Sugarman had a huge hit in America with *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen*, *Guardian* critic Peter Bradshaw heralded its British release by starting his review: ‘The spangliest, sparkliest, girliest film of the week comes from Sara Sugarman, who many of us have still not forgiven for her 1999 Kathy Lette adaptation *Mad Cows*’. No one could deny that *Mad Cows* had flopped, as did the admittedly-awful *Rancid Aluminium*. But gleefully invoking these titles as something to be held against the Welsh industry achieves nothing beyond the scoring of cheap critical points.

Of course, who cares what critics say? Many movies succeed in spite of appalling reviews; the *Carry On* films did so for two decades. But the implication that a Welsh film can’t be any good because a couple of previous ones haven’t been, or is only of interest to Welsh audiences even if it is good, is damaging. Here’s an example of the kind of problem that can afflict the wider British industry (and in this case just happened to affect a film by a Welsh director). In 2003 I tried to book *That Girl from Rio* (2001), a likeable comedy starring Hugh Laurie and directed by Christopher Monger, a graduate of Chapter’s Film Workshop. The distributor had repeatedly moved the release date, but that’s not uncommon. If it’s announced that a big, attention-grabbing movie is to be released on the date you’d ear-marked for a film that needs a bit of help in the publicity stakes, it makes sense to change. In this case, however, when a release date was announced and I requested the film for Chapter, the distributor — much to my surprise — seemed reluctant.

They didn’t really see it playing anywhere else but London, I was told. I pointed out that it could hardly not play in Cardiff: Chris Monger was, and is, a great friend of Chapter, fiercely loyal to the venue that gave him much of his education as a viewer as well as a filmmaker. We knew he was happy to come along and support the screening with an opening night appearance. His previous comedy, *The Englishman Who Went Up The Hill But Came Down a Mountain*, was very popular here when it was released in 1995, and still gets very respectable audiences whenever we bring it back. None of this made any difference. Well, not much. They did eventually allow me to book the film, but informed me that they couldn’t supply any posters, stills, trailer or other publicity material. Short of an actual instruction to sign the Official Secrets Act, it’s hard to imagine more difficult circumstances to promote a film. We did what we could, and quite a few people turned up and seemed to enjoy the film, especially those who were there on the night of Chris’s on-stage interview.

The *Englishman Who...* got a fairly well-received national release and turns up regularly on TV in close-to-peak-time slots. Even if that's largely on the strength of Hugh Grant being the star, you might have thought it was sufficiently popular to make the next film by the same director worth a punt. Despite its title, *Englishman* didn't overplay its Welshness so as to alienate audiences elsewhere — certainly no more than the Scottishness is used in the 1949 classic *Whisky Galore*, with which it has a lot in common. I don't think anyone would argue that *Englishman* is a comic masterpiece, but I'd certainly contend that it's the kind of perfectly good, enjoyable and amusing film that the British industry used to be able to turn out once a month. *That Girl from Rio* seemed to continue remaking the Ealing comedies by being a variation on *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and that too was no more nor less than a well-made, engaging comedy, which should have had the chance to succeed or fail on these terms. A lack of enthusiasm effectively buried it. For anyone wondering why the distributor bought it in the first place, I would speculate — and I do stress that I'm only guessing — that the London release was some kind of contractual obligation. I don't recall seeing a DVD release, so maybe it came as part of a job-lot and thus secured some other title for UK distribution?

So what are the reasons to be cheerful? It has to be said that Wales's recent track record in short filmmaking has been extremely encouraging. Sgrŷn, S4C, BBC Wales, HTV, the UK Film Council, Welsh Arts Council and Welsh Development Agency have all invested in giving young and emergent directors and writers the chance to hone their craft. The International Film School of Wales in Newport has consistently turned out some significant talent, and its partnership with the University of Glamorgan's Film Academy, under the Skillset banner, gives real cause for hope that such opportunities will continue to be available — especially if the newly formed Film Agency for Wales is able to deliver on its potential. And there remains a remarkably strong and diverse animation industry here; again, its achievements mainly lie in the field of shorts, although a couple of reasonably high-profile Cartwn Cymru/S4C co-productions, *The Miracle Maker* (2000) and *Y Mabinogi* (2003), should not be forgotten.

Some questions nevertheless remain. Short films offer valuable experience – for what? Do we really have anything that could be called a Welsh production industry? Obviously S4C and others will continue making Welsh-language films, mostly for TV. Outside that necessarily limited field, however, should we worry if filmmakers who've learnt their craft and gained their experience in Wales then decide to move on? It's surely not the end of the world if Sara

Sugarman, Christopher Monger and Marc Evans make films in America or Canada — particularly when Evans keeps returning to Wales to make smaller scale projects like the John Cale collaboration *My Beautiful Mistake*, the celebration of the poetic tradition *Dal Yma Nawr (Still Here Now)* or *Caitlin*. They are, after all, only following in the tradition of the many Welsh actors who have been making an impact in the wider British and Hollywood industries since the silent days.

It's possible that Dragon Studios, the £300m development near Llantrisant that has acquired the nickname Valleywood, will improve prospects. I certainly hope it will foster the sense of a filmmaking community, creating jobs and enabling craftspeople who want to apply their skills in Wales to do so. But will it take any significant steps in the direction of a Welsh production industry? Time will tell, and I have no wish to prophesy doom and gloom. But I do suspect that, occasional exceptions notwithstanding, we will have to be content with making the Welsh-language product that isn't going to get made anywhere else, and short films that give Welsh talent the experience and the clout to move on and move out. Anything else will be a bonus.

As I hope I've made clear, the promotion of talent and the opportunities to gain experience are vital, and an equally vital function of cinemas like Chapter. Nobody makes a film intending it to sit on a shelf: getting your work seen by audiences is a vital step to getting more work. That's why Chapter regularly screens short films by local filmmakers before feature films in our public programme. Sgrîn was a vital conduit in this particular supply chain, and I sincerely hope that the new Film Agency for Wales will embrace this role with equal gusto.

On a wider level, it's equally important to support the work of feature filmmakers, no matter where in the world they come from. Think of British directors like Ken Loach, Mike Leigh, Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman, Michael Winterbottom, Gurinder Chadha, Lynn Ramsey; or world-class directors from elsewhere including Quentin Tarantino, Zhang Yimou, John Woo, Jane Campion, Pedro Almodóvar. Films by all of these directors are now routinely shown in multiplexes, but they got their first exposure in Chapter and in cine mas like it across the UK — the independent subsidised sector, whose priority is cultural or specialized programming, call it what you will (anything apart from 'art house', if at all possible) — and all of them have now successfully moved over into the mainstream. Which is absolutely right, proper, and well deserved; I'm not about to start knocking multiplexes, and nor am I suggesting that certain films

are Chapter's by right, or by virtue of precedent. What I am suggesting is that you don't build an audience for world cinema opportunistically, or overnight, or by cherry-picking sure-fire hits. It requires an investment, and the development of a relationship with one's audience.

The indie sector plugged away at promoting Chinese cinema for years until a big hit finally came along in *Farewell My Concubine* — one of the biggest foreign language films of 1993. That success didn't come out of nowhere, and nor did the current popularity of Iranian films, which the indies spent years screening to small, but steadily growing audiences until, by the late 1990s, there was a real demand. Not a demand to rival the box office takings of *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Superman Returns*, but a demand nevertheless. More recently, Latin American films have taken off in the same way, with titles like *Amores Perros*, *Y Tu Mama También*, *City of God* and *Motorcycle Diaries* enjoying real success in both multis and indies.

There is both an ever-growing recognition that mainstream Hollywood is not, after all, the only type of film production on the planet, and a real, increasing appetite for world cinema. This is exemplified by the success of the WOW! Wales One World Film Festival, which has now run for four years at Chapter, and also in Swansea and Aberystwyth, before touring around the rest of Wales. Under the direction of David Gillam, WOW specifically sets out to address gaps in UK film distribution by showcasing the cinemas of Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

An inevitable consequence of all this is that multiplexes will pick up on this success and begin to show a wider variety of films. Please believe me when I say that I can see absolutely nothing wrong with that. The aims of the UGC chain when it began opening cinemas in Britain were genuinely laudable. These cinemas followed the policies of their French parent company which are dedicatedly aimed at increasing and promoting the exhibition of a wider range of cinema. And I'm glad about this, honestly I am. Yes, it means that some of the films which would previously have played exclusively in Chapter — and helped us reach the box office targets we necessarily set ourselves — don't any more. But at the end of the day, the more people who are seeing films, the better it is for all of us.

However, we also have to recognise that in most cases this programme diversity on the part of multiplexes is by its nature opportunistic. You would have to exclude the UGC chain from that description, but even the UGC's British exhibition arm has now been sold to Cineworld who are a British-based company rather than a continental European one. We can hope — and again I genuinely do — that they will practise the same programming policies as the UGC did. Certainly,

nothing in the management style of Cardiff's Cineworld suggests any diminution of commitment or enthusiasm. But the very fact that we are asking the question 'will they?' illustrates the precariousness of leaving film culture entirely in the hands of market forces, and thus leaving it vulnerable to changes in those forces.

By now, even the most casually attentive reader will be alerted to the possibility that I am making the case for continued subsidy. I admit it: yes, I am. But let me meet the accusation head on: I'm not doing so out of vested interests or a desire to protect my job or the cinema that I work in. I'm doing so — as I have been for some time, and will continue to do — because of the passionately-held beliefs that brought me into this job and this cinema in the first place. I genuinely believe that we fulfil an important role in the supply chain, one that can't just be left to the market. I've heard it argued very cogently in the following terms: if supermarkets suddenly decide it's no longer economically viable to sell organic vegetables, they have a responsibility to their shareholders to stop doing so; this is fair enough, but if the small delicatessen down the road has gone to the wall in the meantime, the public won't get their organic carrots any more.

So while the multiplexes have picked up on the new Pedro Almodóvar films (*Volver*, *Bad Education*), or Zhang Yimou (*Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*), or any of the other directors I mentioned earlier, you won't find me whinging that those films should play in Chapter first because they traditionally have done so. What I want to be doing is to get on the lookout for the *next* Almodovar, or the next Zhang Yimou, and for that matter the next Marc Evans, whose recent films *Trauma* (2004) and *Snow Cake* (2006) have been picked up by the multiplexes.

Doing that, however, does require some safeguard against the slings and arrows of the box office. I don't say this out of any lack of awareness about how the industry operates. I would dearly have loved, for example, to open Mike Leigh's film *Vera Drake* (2004) concurrently with our multiplex neighbours. Not just because I'm a huge fan of Leigh's work, but because it was clearly a great film and an important British film. But I understood exactly why the film's distributor said no. They had a limited number of prints. There are four multiplexes in Cardiff. If a multiplex doesn't open a film on its regional release date, it is unlikely to pick it up at a later date. Chapter, on the other hand, is prepared to wait when necessary. So a distributor could, conceivably, get five Cardiff bookings out of four prints, but only if Chapter is the 'off-date' booking. That's economics. That's the film industry.

So instead of screening *Vera Drake* in January 2005, Chapter screened it in February. Our programme that month also included, from the same distributor, a new print of Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. How could we turn that one down? Why would we ever want to? Yet if I have to face facts as an exhibitor, then distributors have to do the same. The facts in this case are that the more dependent Chapter becomes on box office returns, the more it needs to maximize income on films like *Vera Drake*, otherwise we won't be in a position to play *La Dolce Vita* either. And if we, the indies, don't, there is no sign of anybody else anxious to screen three-hour, black-and-white European classics from the 1960s. As the multiplexes diversify into more ambitious areas, the role of subsidy therefore becomes more important, not less.

But would it matter if Fellini disappeared from the UK's big screens, the cinematic equivalent of the organic carrots that not enough people want to buy? I believe so, as, I think, do those involved in cinema and media studies in formal education, with whom we share the responsibility of extending awareness of film history and appreciation of world cinema. The multiplexes aren't going to do it, since they have a different set of responsibilities. The broadcasters seem to have given up, although I do realize that foreign films and classics are still accessible via judicious scouring of the listings magazines, and extensive use of timer-controlled recordings. But where now is the chance to become a film enthusiast by stumbling across Fellini, Bergman, Kurosawa, Truffaut and the rest almost by accident, that is, by discovering their films in mid-evening slots on BBC2 and giving them a try? That's a process of discovery that cannot be replicated by the burgeoning DVD market.

To conclude by stating the obvious, there are a lot of great films out there, from many more places than just Hollywood. And there are substantial numbers of people who want to see them. Chapter usually screens around 300 different films a year, from between 30 and 35 different countries, and our audience numbers remain healthy, holding steady during times of general decline and increasing during periods of overall growth. If you talk to some of the directors I've already mentioned — people like Marc Evans and Chris Monger — they'll tell you that seeing the classics of world cinema at Chapter was a vital part of their film education. Later, I think we played an equally important part in getting their early work shown to audiences, along with all those other directors, from Wales, from Britain, from the rest of the world.

These are the roles that define our commitment to world cinema in Wales, and that need to be safeguarded by those responsible for defining and nurturing cinema culture in the UK. It

will require a continued belief that subsidy is not something an arts organisation gets if it's failing, but a way of successfully bucking the market. After all, some things, whether organic carrots or Fellini, and for that matter the Fellinis of the future, are too important to be left to the marketplace alone.

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