

The British film industry: creativity and constraint

By Sarah Barrow

With Tom Hooper's stirring period piece, *The King's Speech*, nominated for a clutch of Oscars in the forthcoming awards ceremony and its star Colin Firth basking in long deserved Hollywood glory, British cinema is once again in the spotlight.



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After a year which saw the release of a surprising number of cinematic gems, many observers have even gone so far as to argue that film made in the UK is on a high. On the one hand, films from Mike Leigh and Clio Barnard have made the Sight & Sound "best of 2010" world cinema list, while on the more commercial end of the spectrum, the Harry Potter franchise is about to receive an outstanding contribution to cinema prize from BAFTA for having drawn global attention to the range of expertise within the British craft and technical industries and for having made more than \$5.4 billion worldwide.

Nevertheless, 2010 was also the year that saw the entire UK infrastructure for film finance and support suffer a seismic shift thanks to the priorities of a new political regime, after a decade or so during which tax credits and the like had allowed a number of new initiatives to emerge and given rise to a relative golden age for screen culture.

For while British cinema has long been celebrated for its diversity of style and subject matter, in the last few years alone, the breadth and depth of work to appear, much of which has been critically acclaimed and achieved commercial success, has been quite astounding. For example, new talent Andrea Arnold has impressed critics and audiences with lyrical urban surprises such as *Red Road* and *Fish Tank*, sharing a distinctive edgy vision with Scottish filmmaker Lynne Ramsay whose best known work *Ratcatcher* was winning awards and attracting critical attention back in 2000. Meanwhile, cross-over artists such as "establishment-troubling" Steve McQueen and Sam Taylor-Wood have offered captivating portrayals of figures as diverse as IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands (in *Hunger*) and John Lennon (*Nowhere Boy*). Elsewhere, the singular voice of Shane Meadows has given us his own brand of heartbreaking yet hilarious melancholy set amidst political turmoil in working-class Britain with films such as *Room for Romeo Brass* and *This is England*.

And yet there can be no denying that the immediate future looks very uncertain for British cinema as the political changes of 2010 begin to make their mark, and in particular as the effects of the winding down of the UK Film Council are felt. Back in May 2010, on the very day after the last General Election and when the Lib-Con Coalition was still to be formed, *Guardian* journalist and blogger Danny Leigh predicted a merger between the British Film Institute and the Film Council, "with its overtones of slashed funding and uncomfortable bottom lines" and warned of the dark consequences of cutting tax credits and other support systems for film-makers. At particular threat are the newest film-makers who have yet to establish a reputation that would make them interesting to potential private funders. Having found it hard enough to make the current system work for them, these low budget independents are now faced with a total lack of central infrastructure.

In fact, there has been no merger as such. The Film Council - amongst the first wave of organisations to be cut by the new government in July 2010 - will have disappeared in less than two years and, while opinion is divided as to whether that loss will be sorely felt by all in the longer term, it has to be acknowledged that almost all of the films named so far in this piece, and a great many more (900 since the Council's creation in 2000) have been supported by a body which has invested over £160m of Lottery

funding and helped to generate over £700 million at the box office worldwide.

Arguably more serious for the nurturing of new and ambitious cinema, has been the subsequent demise of the Regional Screen Agencies which has come as quite a blow for those based away from the metropolis and who have enjoyed a wide range of support from these organisations. In their place, a new quango has emerged: Creative England - promoted by Ed Vaizey, the Minister for

Culture, Communications and Creative Industries as "a simpler, more efficient structure with an expanded remit to support the creative industries across England."

In other words, its remit is to do much more with far fewer resources. It is supposed to ensure an England-wide delivery network for film,

based around three strategic territorial hubs - North (Manchester); Central (Birmingham) and South (Bristol) - chosen for their reputations as regional centres for creative industry impact.

It is hoped that these new hubs will continue to deliver the range of services in funding, production, locations, skills, training, audience development, education and exhibition that have been provided by the regional screen agencies. On lean staffing structures, those agencies have helped to identify and develop new talent around the country and even now are bringing together new partners to set up projects such as the Kickstart internship initiative for final year media undergraduates at University of Lincoln. These students are the lucky ones, but what the future holds for those who still want to forge a career in cinema is anyone's guess. Already, the struggle to become successful in film-making in the UK is enormous - most of the directors already named in this piece were over 40 before they began to achieve recognition for their work and had already established their name in the fields of fine art, advertising or TV presenting.

What is clear is that 2011 will be a year of transition as the Regional Screen Agencies reform into Creative England, and the UK Film Council winds down. If funding streams dry up as expected, whole projects may be jeopardised and careers put on hold. On the other hand, the fresh turmoil and uncertainty might give rise to the welcome return of a more politicised independent screen culture that embraces ambition, risk-taking and experimentation, and inspires an even greater diversity of themes and styles. Meanwhile, the expertise of British film cast and crew continue to be of great interest to producers around the world.

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Interpreting an era. Film poster from Shane Meadows' acclaimed *This is England* (2006), set in the early 1980s.