

STRAIGHT TO RADIO OR JOHN, PAUL, GEORGE AND QUANGO

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ABSTRACT

As a film funder, financier, producer and executive producer, I have been involved with a range of feature films and short films, and the decisions I have taken have given films the green light, or left them on the starting grid. The producer is very much the 'poacher', tussling with the funder/financier, aka the 'gamekeeper.'

Having been on both sides of the fence, this paper discusses the contrasting range of skills needed in this interplay – the developmental, creative, financial and strategic judgments you have to make. Is the script 'oven ready'? Or does it need more cooking? In what way has the director shown talent before? Are these the right actors for this type of film? Will the film reach audiences beyond these shores? Or go straight to radio, never mind DVD? And if so, is that such a problem?

How does a film fund head balance such competing demands? Do you follow the market and commission films similar to others that have performed well? Or do you aim to be ahead of the curve and in that way create a market and audience for your films?

As a film professional, I have chosen to work primarily outside the industry's metropolitan epicenter, in the creative economies of cities like Liverpool and Birmingham. How are those cities culturally defined and captured in film and does it matter that UK cinema includes the centre and the off-centre? And why do we need regional funding for the popular media? There was no John, Paul, George and QUANGO offering grants and development funds when those four lads began The Beatles!

Now, as a Professor of Film and Television at one of Liverpool's Universities, what do we hope to achieve in the Media Department there? Are we educating young people with the right kind of skills – intellectual, cultural, technical, critical – for the austerity decade that awaits them?

I put the Fab Four – well, Fab Three – names in the title for this talk because, firstly, you can't be in Liverpool without acknowledging The Beatles in some capacity. Secondly, now that Liverpool Hope University have a Masters in Beatles Studies, it would be doubly inappropriate to leave them out. And, thirdly, evoking their names at a film conference does embody some rationale.

I'm actually waiting for film courses to catch up on the significance that the Four Lads who shook the world also had on the world of movies. Not only did George Harrison via Handmade Films almost single-handedly keep the UK film industry afloat in the 1980s with financial support to the Python movies, and classic UK films such as *Mona Lisa*, *Withnail and I* and Nick Roeg's *Track 29*, but also John Lennon and his muse, Yoko Ono, reinvented the art film from the bottom up with their extensive anatomically experimental films.

As anyone, who knows me, knows, wordplay is my pride and joy. I like to hit the ground 'punning', so to speak. As a Liverpudlian it comes with the territory.

I also lay part of the blame at the feet of the Liverpool Poets, whose 'Mersey Sound' was published in 1967. As a fourteen-year-old, once I'd read Adrian Henri's brief poem – 'I'm almost at breaking point, he snapped' I knew I was caught – hook, line and synchronicity.

So, you can't be in Liverpool without experiencing the singsong of punning all around you. Before I move on to the substance of my talk – John, Paul, George and QUANGO...what am I getting at with that besides the obvious wordplay?

Well, quite simply it's to do with the fact that in the sixties The Beatles – and numerous film directors, writers, etc. – were able to claim their portion of popular culture without recourse to the support and subsidies made available by any number of Public Quangos. These observations aren't part of a 'Catherine wheel' type narrative seen of late in the speeches of Conservative Leader, David Cameron, when he called for a Bonfire of the Quangos, but a recognition that popular culture aka the creative industry does now require a soft touch and soft investment from the public purse, and it is within such quangos that I've been able to pursue a career of film education, film development, film funding, film producing and executive producing.

PRODUCING FILMS

Producing is one of those jobs shrouded in a self-perpetuating miasma of bluff and counter bluff. Is it a job, or a calling? A profession or a life sentence? Are you born into it or does it come looking for you? And what skills do you need to pursue it?

The skills you need to bring to bear when working as a film producer or film fund head are multiple and varied. It's a combustible cocktail of high-minded self belief lurking on the dark side of aloofness and ego mania, a critical awareness worthy of an FR Leavis, TS Eliot or Germaine Greer, a gambler's instinct for the main chance that would make a hedge fund manager blanche, the political nous of a spin meister such as Alistair Campbell and the networking repertoire of a Nancy Mitford. I doubt that it can be taught, because in many ways it's often as much to do with the accumulated set of creative experiences that any one producer brings to the table, which then defines his/her taste, the house style, their signature and aroma. And when all of that is allied to a quixotic and mercurial mind, you have the mindset of a producer. To me the highest praise a producer colleague of mine was once given was when she was compared to the Italian writer on the dark arts of influence and persuasion, Niccolo Machiavelli, author of *The Prince*. 'What's the difference between your friend and Machiavelli?' I was asked. 'You know where you are with Machiavelli' came the reply.

But of these skills the most important one – in my view – is the ability to spot potential in a script. Because the old adage is true – and it only gets truer the older it gets – the script is everything. The script is King. With a good script, you can make a great film, and with a good script you can make a bad film. But you can't make a good film from a bad script. No way. There is no script doctoring, film financing, or crew marshalling alchemy that can turn that base metal into gold.

Working on a script – either on your own or with a script executive – is what a producer most likes to do; above all else, it's the foundation on which to build, and taking the script through its paces from draft to draft is where the producer's art comes into its own. The screenwriter has one vision, but the producer's task is to refract that vision through a spectrum of opportunity.

An example of all of this is the film *Lawless Heart*. The co-writers and co-directors, Neil Hunter and Tom Hunsinger, developed the film with me while I was at the BFI on a joint slate with BBC Films. We got to the point where at the BFI we knew that the film was 'oven ready' – the script was finely nuanced, the humour balanced just right, the three stories interlaced elegantly and the layering of the three different perspectives worked a treat. In our view at the BFI all the ingredients were there and via rehearsed readings we had a cast falling in love with the script and its constituent characters. But the BBC prevaricated and weren't sure that for them the script was developed enough; and when push came to shove, they decided to back away and off the project. What the Head of BBC Films argued to us was the following – 'That BFI film you did last year, the one selected for Cannes, *Love is the Devil* about the painter Frances Bacon, that's the type of film we'd like from you – and if you can come up with six of those with us, that's what we want...'

Now, that's the problem – in a nutshell of perfect proportions – with that kind of BBC thinking, and that type of Film Fund thinking – 'Chase the market – follow what someone else is doing – watch where the curve is going and follow it.' Unadventurous, unoriginal, unchallenging and underwhelming. Such an approach stifles creativity.

Exactly the same problem arose with the arrival of Lottery funds into the film industry. The Film Funding Committee for the Lottery at the Arts Council, on which I sat, during the first phase of the Blair administration backed a rush of UK movies that slavishly aped Guy Ritchie's success with his East End set *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*.

What seemed to be at fault was an over reliance on genres that are not considered to be part of the DNA of UK film; and produced on budgets too low to enable the UK producers to compete on anything like equal terms with their American and studio financed counterparts.

This Lottery fuelled 'bonanza of the mediocre' is captured in some research I undertook for the UK Film Council in 2002.

It was very quickly apparent that although a high number of filmmakers had made their debut film, enabled by the Lottery glut, very few of them progressed to a second film. The lack of distinctive cultural qualities (as perhaps recognised by Film Festivals) and low commercial returns (as evident in poor box office at home and abroad) told their own stories. Only one in five directors got to make their second film. Returning to *Lawless Heart*, we got the film made without the BBC backing the film; it was a great critical success and yielded a modest box office. So much so, that the film acquisitions side of the BBC – having seen the film at the Berlin Film Festival – then pursued

a deal to purchase the UK TV rights for what in the end was a far, far bigger sum than if they had acted on their option in the first place. But that's what you get when you chase the market.

OUTSIDE THE METROPOLIS

If the place of the British film industry as witnessed by the clustering of companies is London, then the place of British film as symbolically registered in the majority of UK movies is also London. The days of the London Red Bus as the cinematic signifier of the capital have almost now gone, although it could be argued that they've been replaced by Hugh Grant's foppish fringe in movies like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Love Actually* and the *Bridget Jones* franchise, for example.

These box-office successes originate from companies such as Working Title, a company owned by Universal, a Hollywood film studio. These films are often written and directed by British talent, but the industry muscle behind them (for distribution and marketing) is American. It's no accident that Working Title's films are already half way across the Atlantic in terms of their version of a UK that is palatable in the cinema malls of Middle America.

In these comments, I'm not having an easy pop at the USA. I'm only too aware of the scale of the contribution to the UK film industry of such films, and of Working Title, who also make films with the Coen Brothers and Paul Greengrass' *United 93*.

But the risk here is that, firstly, the narrative of the UK, its storyline, its look and its culture is adapted in a particular way to optimise international box offices.

And, secondly, there is a gnawing feeling that the actual outcome here is a kind of Back Lot UK, whereby the UK film industry functions as an arm of the Hollywood studios, tooling up our studios, actors, writers directors and technicians to easily accommodate the inward investing American films.

What seems to me to be the lifeblood of UK cinema and the thing that international audiences want to be transfused with are films with the slightest of ties to the capital. These are films that offer visually and creatively a sense of place, a regional viewpoint, and a take on a social world we're unfamiliar with.

By regional viewpoint I don't mean a naïve or narrow re-working of regional life, I mean more like, where a filmmaker creates with a sense of place taking us into a world that on the surface we may think we know, but ultimately it's a new journey for us into a world that in the end we don't know.

This can be a social setting presented anew to us or offering a fresh take on that experience or it may be a regional setting, whereby the specificities of that regional culture are highlighted and celebrated. I would single out the following filmmakers who are currently working like this in the UK – Michael Winterbottom, whose *24 Party People* got under the skin of Manchester, Shane Meadows, who has put the East Midlands on the cinema map, Lynne Ramsey, whose Glasgow set *Ratcatcher* richly visualised that city, Paul Williams, whose debut film *London to Brighton* blisteringly captured the social detritus of night time King's Cross, Andrea Arnold, whose *Red Road* shot Glasgow through the lens of surveillance cameras, Debbie Isitt, whose *Confetti* gave us an unforgettable take on weddings. Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, who are collectively the godfathers of this vein of filmmaking, Pawel Pawlikowski, who adapted *My Summer of Love*, Helen Cross' debut novel in woozy psychedelic colours, Frank Cottrell Boyce, who in his prolifically written scripts has made Liverpool one of the most filmed cities in the UK. His most recent was set on an allotment, *Grow Your Own*.

Another example is the Digital Departures initiative in Liverpool backed by North West Vision, the regional screen agency, and the Capital of Culture Fund for 2008. Terence Davies' poetic eulogy to, and elegy of the city of his youth, *Of Time and the City*, was the first; followed by *Kicks* and *Salvage*, both widely praised at this June's Edinburgh International Film Festival.

The film *Under the Skin* was also set in Liverpool. It was made in 1995 with finance from the Merseyside Film Production Fund at MIDA that I headed up. The film won major awards at the Toronto, Sundance and Edinburgh Film Festivals. Carine Adler directed the film in 1995 and has not made a film since.

ARE PLATFORMS FOR ANORAKS?

I want to mull over some issues to do with the digitalisation of the screen, the proliferation of platforms, and the place of film within all this.

The current mantra in the media industries is the following

'Content on demand – when you want it, where you want it, and how you want it.'

In so far as we can still expect films to be viewed by audiences in the future, British film will also be on this array of screens, including hand-held devices.

I was thinking of this whilst recently watching *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* – on the vast screen at Cineworld in Birmingham. At *wits end*, more like, given the complicated intertwining of the narrative. What would we see of *pirates* on a hand-held cinema screen – a pirate sloop the size of a twig, splashes of oceanic blue, a skull flashing by, crossed bones clattering away, Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom dueling like flies in a glass pot...

The experience of a cinema viewing however is one of submission, being mastered by the image, rather than the 'lean in' culture of the tinier screens.

Of course, the backdrop to these changes is the comprehensive spread of digital across all parts of the film industry, the business model which for now is in constant flux with experimental initiatives popping up all the time. Film creativity, allied to the frontier spirit of the internet, mixed with digital is likely to be the formula for film in the future. One such example is the American project of Mark Cuban, the eBay dot com billionaire who with director Stephen Soderbergh and actor George Clooney is financing six low budget films, which will be released simultaneously on a movie screen, on the TV screen, and on DVD, thereby making films outside the traditional studio system. Once freed from the big studios' obsession with the opening weekend box office, independent movies have an opportunity of finding their audience in new ways.

In the UK, Revolution Films released simultaneously on UK theatrical, DVD, and on the internet Michael Winterbottom's *The Road to Guantanamo*, the £1.5m drama based on the true story of the Black Country Muslims who journey to a wedding in Pakistan after September 11 and end up banged up as detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Winterbottom's film was broadcast on Channel 4 and the following day, the film opened theatrically on 20-30 screens, including many of the UK Film Council's Digital Screen Network, and was available on DVD for sale in shops or online.

These examples signal how the digital revolution is radically challenging the film industry's conventional value chain, introducing fresh ways of developing product and kicking off new patterns of commercially engaging with audiences, often by adapting to the social networking possibilities of the internet.

And directors now armed with the lightest of digital downloads rather than with the weight of cans of film are beginning to short circuit the time worn conventions of the traditional film industry – the distributor, the sales agent etc. – and beginning to devise new business models of direct online peer to peer marketing and distribution of their movies.

However, it's likely that the public arena of the cinema will remain as the prime venue for film's consumption. There is a new term in the film industry – 'premium content'. This refers to the exhibition of the film in a cinema before it begins to be exploited and made available on other platforms.

Of course, the time gap between the cinema release and the DVD release has closed exponentially in recent years, and the gap will close even more. The cinema release and the concomitant press and advertising position the film within the marketplace and establish the attractors for driving DVD sales.

The cinema experience will change midst the digital transformation, becoming in my view more akin to a preview or premiere occasion, something out of the ordinary and increasingly complemented by additional values, like the capacity of special effects to increasingly optimise the vastness of the screen, the appearance of more and more film-related people at screenings (writers, directors etc.), a greater comfort provided and the availability of more high end catering. User-friendly cinemas will become the norm with greater interpretation and educational activities to add to the experience. This seems to be the way that multiplexes in the States are already going. And this all must spell out good prospects for the future for such enterprising initiatives as Film Education.

But what intrigues me is the following. In recent years the viewing of moving images has also become a private experience – and in fact with an ipod or iphone and headphones, film has become closer to the experience of reading a book. Whether this phenomenon is proper cinema or not, it is likely to increase rather than decrease, and in doing so will help determine the future of film. Because few filmmakers have so far begun to think how their work will look on the tiny screens of hand-held devices, the call is now out for the 'third aesthetic,' a third way for cinema. After film and after television. One view I have come across argues that what works very well on the tiny screens are the movie-making techniques of the past – stylised design, harsh lighting, montage etc. Some of the tricks in the silent cinema cabinet and toolbox. Another ingredient might be the absence of a shared experience, and the impact of an interior conversation – like reading a book intimately achieves – rather than the externality of a performance.

I hope you had an excellent time at the Film Education Conference at Liverpool Hope University. Thank you.

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NOTES

I showed clips from the following three films in my speech:

Lawless Heart (2001) – dirs. Neil Hunter, Tom Hunsinger; produced by Martin Pope; executive producer, Roger Shannon (for UK Film Council)

Under the Skin (1997) – dir. Carine Adler; produced by Kate Ogborn; Roger Shannon (executive producer for MIDA)

My Brother Tom (2001) – dir. Tom Rotheroe; produced by Carl Schonfeld; executive producer, Roger Shannon (for UK Film Council)

I referred to the following films:

Mona Lisa (1986) – dir. Neil Jordan

Withnail and I (1987) – dir. Bruce Robinson

Track 29 (1988) – dir. Nic Roeg

Shanghai Surprise (1986) – dir. Jim Goddard

Give My Regards to Broad Street (1984) – dir. Peter Webb

Rendezvous a Paris (1995) – dir. Eric Rohmer

Love is the Devil (1998) – dir. John Maybury

Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels (1998) – dir. Guy Ritchie

Rancid Aluminium (2000) – dir. Edward Thomas

Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994) – dir. Mike Newell

Notting Hill (1999) – dir. Roger Michell

Love Actually (2003) – dir. Richard Curtis

Bridget Jones' Diary (2001) – dir. Sharon Maguire

Fargo (1996) – dir. The Coen Brothers

United 93 (2006) – dir. Paul Greengrass

No Country for Old Men (2007) – dirs. Ethan Coen, Joel Coen

24 Hour Party People (2002) – dir. Michael Winterbottom

Ratcatcher (1999) – dir. Lynne Ramsay

London to Brighton (2006) – dir. Paul Andrew Williams

Confetti (2006) – dir. Debbie Isitt

My Summer of Love (2004) – dir. Pawel Pawlikowski

Grow Your Own (2007) – dir. Richard Laxton

This is England (2006) – dir. Shane Meadows

24/7 (1997) – dir. Shane Meadows

A Room for Romeo Brass (1999) – dir. Shane Meadows
Once Upon a Time in the Midlands (2002) – dir. Shane Meadows
Dead Man's Shoes (2004) – dir. Shane Meadows
Of Time and the City (2008) – dir. Terence Davies
Kicks (2008) – dir. Lindy Heymann
Salvage (2009) – dir. Lawrence Gough
Sweet and Low Down (1999) – dir. Woody Allen
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End (2007) – dir. Gore Verbinski
Road to Guantanamo (2006) – dir. Michael Winterbottom
Wasp (2003) – dir. Andrea Arnold
Red Road (2006) – dir. Andrea Arnold
Paris, Texas (1984) – dir. Wim Wenders

Roger Shannon – Born in Liverpool in 1952, Roger Shannon was schooled at Waterloo Grammar School, before taking an English degree at Teesside Polytechnic (now University), followed by a Masters in Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University (1977–79) under the inspirational Professor Stuart Hall.

His beginnings in film included both Birmingham Film/VideoWorkshop, a Channel 4 and BFI backed organisation which pioneered new ways of making films with young people, and the award-winning Birmingham International Film Festival. His work in the late 1980s helped set up the network of Regional Film Commissions and the emergence of 'Media Quarters' in cities such as Birmingham and Sheffield.

Returning to Liverpool in 1992 to head up the Moving Image Development Agency (MIDA), Roger Shannon established the first regional Film Investment Fund – the Merseyside Film Production Fund – applying ERDF support to the bustling film economy in the city, a model now adopted by most of the Regional Screen Agencies. He later pursued this robust regional approach as Head of Production at the British Film Institute (1997–1999), the UK Film Council as Head of the Production Dept (1999–2001) and as Head of Production at Scottish Screen (2004–2005).

His film work also includes a number of educational affiliations. He is Professor of Film and Television at Liverpool's Edge Hill University; visiting Honorary Professor in International Film Business at Glasgow Caledonian University and Birmingham City University's Film Fellow. He also has an attachment to the Cuban Film School, where he teaches annually on the International Producers Workshop. Roger is also a Board Member of Midlands Arts Centre and of Tindal Street Press.

Roger has been associated with over 20 UK feature films including Festival, Butterfly Kiss and Under The Skin and has worked with groundbreaking talents including Jimmy McGovern, Michael Winterbottom and Frank Cottrell Boyce. Roger's productions have won awards at International Film Festivals such as Cannes, Toronto, Sundance and Edinburgh.