

Is Hollywood on the Clyde a foolish idea? And if so, what kind of cinema should a country such as Scotland support? Colin McArthur offers some solutions

“...to ensure the development of a viable, vigorous, and substantial Scottish film industry designed to attract and deploy the talents of Scottish film-makers and to enable them to make films in their own country...” (From the 1991 Annual Report, Scottish Film Production Fund.)

This, of course, is a fantasy which has beguiled the Scottish Film Production Fund (SFPF) and its parent body, the Scottish Film Council (SFC), since its inception in 1982. As, in these post-Marxist days, babies are being thrown out with the bathwater all over Europe, many indispensable concepts are being jettisoned. One such concept, *uneven development*, describes perfectly Scotland's relationship with diverse sectors of the UK economy, not least film production. To put it bluntly, Scotland is, on the film-making front, a third world country - but this is tragically misrecognised by those holding the purse strings north of the border. There have always been signs that the SFPF and SFC were on a collision course with reality. One of the earliest officers of the fund talked about discovering “the next generation of Bill Forsyths” and senior officers of the SFC, at their most delirious, have been heard to speak of “Hollywood on the Clyde”.

When the stated policy is compared with the reality of the fund's most recent investment, *Prague*, the gulf is stark. Apart from the fact that producer Christopher Young, producer/director Ian Sellar and one of the principal actors, Alan Cumming, are Scots, *Prague* has nothing to do with Scotland and could not be remotely construed to fulfil what might be assumed to be a central impulse of a new national cinema - the exploration of the contradictions of the society from which it comes.

Individual film-makers should not be blamed for using whatever production mechanisms are available, but the Scots involved in

Prague were the figleaf which allowed the project to absorb a massive proportion of the SFPF and decorated the Euro-pudding the film was to become. During the period when *Prague* was in development and production, the SFPF stood at about £250,000 per annum. Over two financial years it invested no less than £130,000 in *Prague*, having in previous years put an equally generous £100,000 into an earlier film, *Venus Peter* (1989), by the same production/direction team. This tendency to put available eggs into a small number of baskets is reminiscent of central Scotland's costly dependence on a few heavy industries earlier in the century.

The precise details of the discussions between Young/Sellar and the SFPF will probably never be known, but what is clear is that Young himself would like to be making considerably cheaper films than *Prague*, at £1.95 million, turned out to be. Did the SFPF actively steer *Prague* towards inflationary mechanisms like the BBC's Screen Two, which put up about £500,000 of the budget?

There are cultural as well as economic questions to be asked. For example, it seems that Young, in the letter which accompanied his original script submission, indicated that the central character might be American (rather than, as in the realised film, Scottish). Despite the fact that this would further distance the already tenuous connection of the project with Scotland, the SFPF did not regard it as in any way problematic. While the fund's annual report makes much of the fact that the great bulk of *Venus Peter's* budget entered the economy of the film's location, the Orkneys, it is silent about the destination of the budget for *Prague*, which entered economies far distant from Scotland's. A major insertion of French money brought *Prague's* budget up to nearly £2 million and the project was designated a British/French co-production. In recompense, the French required that some 45 per cent of the budget be spent in France, a condition realised primarily by having the film processed at a French lab. As far as I am aware, none of *Prague's* budget was spent in Scotland.

The main impulse of the SFPF is towards projects which will attract finance from diverse sources and consequently compete for attention on the world stage. A largely unrecognised contradiction here is that the larger the project, the less Scottish it becomes. It might be

argued that the fund's most successful area of operation has been in springboarding a handful of Scottish film-makers into international production. It has been the fund's practice to subsidise the graduation films of Scots students at the National Film and Television School in Beaconsfield. One such was Michael Caton-Jones' *The Riveter* (1986). Caton-Jones is now comfortably ensconced in Los Angeles. In an interview in *The Observer Magazine* in 1991, he remarked: “In a way I had no roots. I had left Scotland at 18 and drifted to the London area. Leaving for Los Angeles was no great wrench... doubt if I'll go back to Britain.” So much for the policy “to enable [Scottish film-makers] to make films in their own country.” Caton-Jones is currently listed as director of the forthcoming *Roy Roy* (producer Peter Broughan, writer Alan Sharp), which is already in receipt of development finance from the fund.

Commitment to the mainstream

This springboarding of individual careers is joined by a complete misconception of what might constitute an appropriate production policy for Scotland's economic and cultural circumstances. There is one statistic which should be branded on the foreheads of those who call the shots in the SFPF and the SFC: of the eight feature films analysed in the 1993 *BFI Film and Television Handbook*, the average budget was £1.1 million, and the average net revenue only £0.5 million. Presumably data of this order was available to the SFPF when it became involved with *Prague*.

The root cause of the SFPF's and SFC's failure to articulate a meaningful production policy lies in their surrender to an industrial mode rather than in posing the question in terms of cultural need. The fund's commitment to film as a commodity is evident from the projects into which it puts the bulk of its funds and from the backgrounds of those who have recently served as part of the group which makes the funding decisions, including Roger Crittenden (NTFS); Bill Forsyth (director); Charles Gormley (director); Mamoun Hassan (producer); Liz Lochead (writer); Bernard MacLavery (writer); Lynn Myles (producer); Bill Paterson (actor); Ian Smith (producer) and Archie Tait (producer).

Individually these are all bright and able people, but collectively, with the exception of Liz Lochead, the orthodoxy of their recent back-

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grounds and their commitment to mainstream and therefore expensive aesthetic forms are overwhelming. A costing of the projects in which they have been involved within recent years would be hardly likely to dip beneath the average of £1.8 million cited above and would most likely be considerably above it. The most glaring absence from the list is of any figure who could bring in a feature film (such as Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein*) for around £300,000. The absence is not accidental. Like the SFC, the SFPF has from the outset set its face firmly against the aesthetic tradition of such films. One of the most unfortunate results of their freezing out of alternative voices is that public funders and potential private investors in Scotland are kept in the dark about film production practices which are not only more commercially viable, but more culturally necessary than the practices currently funded.

Institutions are rarely monolithic, and the current Director of the SFPF, Kate Swan, was herself the producer of *Play Me Something* (1989), an excellent film by Timothy Neat which managed, on a budget of £375,000 and in a way Prague did not, to be both Scottish and European (and a great deal more) simultaneously. To underline the lack of monolithicism, the SFPF put a small amount of money into *Play Me Something*. But the promising track record of the fund's current Director and its own occasional backing of the right horse must be set against the orthodoxy of those making the funding decisions and where they have put the vast bulk of available monies.

The present board gives even less comfort to those looking for a low-budget cinematic aesthetic: Allan Shiach (Chairman); David Aukin (Head of Drama, Channel 4); Colin Cameron (Head of Television, BBC Scotland); Paddy Higson (independent producer); Sandy Johnson (independent television director); Margaret Matheson (independent film producer for television); Scott Meek (independent film producer for television); George Mitchell (Controller of Programmes, Grampian TV); Colin Young (former Director of the National Film and Television School). There is one figure in the above line-up who has recently become a key player. Under the name Allan Shiach he is a rich and prominent businessman (Chairman of the Macallan-Glenlivet whisky operation); under the name Allan Scott he is a successful Holly-

wood screenwriter, most notably in his collaborations with Nicolas Roeg. He is now chairman of both the SFC and the SFPF.

It is possibly not accidental that following Shiach/Scott's entry to the Scottish film scene there should emerge *Movie Makers*, an event designed to explore the craft of classic Hollywood screenwriting which brought William Goldman to Scotland. The discourse about classic Hollywood screenwriting is immensely interesting and has achieved considerable prominence in recent years through manuals such as Syd Field's *Screenplay* and *The Screenwriter's Workbook* and through Robert McKee's *Screen Structure Course*. But one of its effects is to fetishise the classic two-hour Hollywood script and forbid entry to other ways of thinking and making cinema. As such, it dovetails perfectly with the dominant ideology of film production in Scotland.

One other recently created mechanism has given the final impetus to Scotland's headlong rush towards an industrial conception of film-making - the Glasgow Film Fund. It currently stands at £150,000 per annum, made up of contributions from the Glasgow Development Agency, Strathclyde Business Development, Glasgow City Council and the European Regional Development Fund, and will be administered by the SFPF, concentrating nearly all public funding of film-making in Scotland within a tight group of individuals working to highly exclusive policy criteria. The GFF's terms of reference are frankly commercial, designed to stimulate film-making in the Glasgow conurbation and to pull money into the local economy. Only feature film projects with a budget of at least £500,000 are said to be eligible to apply.

Staggering banality

It is perhaps understandable, given the career profiles of those who serve on its board, that the SFPF should lock on to an industrial model of film-making. It is more surprising that an ostensibly cultural body like the SFC should espouse the same values. It recently produced *The Charter for the Moving Image in Scotland*, a document of staggering banality, which, when it is not whining about inequity of public funding of the moving image in Scotland in relation to the rest of the UK, proposes utopian structures of truly megalomaniac proportions such as a

Scottish Screen Agency which would subsume all existing film mechanisms and concentrate funding powers in even fewer hands. Symptomatically, during the period when the resounding phrases of the charter were being sculpted, Scotland's only independent film studio and lab facility closed down.

All this would be serious enough, but conversations with Scottish film-makers who have had dealings with these bodies suggest a more disturbing picture in which those projects most rooted in Scottish culture and most challenging to the dominant ideology of production are actively opposed, if not as a matter of explicit policy by these bodies, then by powerful voices within them. It might indeed be asserted that the most distinctively Scottish of recent films (*Silent Scream*; *Tickets To The Zoo*; *Blue Black Permanent*; *As An Eilean*) have been made because forces outside Scotland, particularly two English commissioning editors at Channel 4, Alan Fountain and Rod Stoneman, have been prepared to put money into projects figures in the Scottish film establishment would have preferred to see die. As a footnote to that establishment's judgment, the projects it has been most hostile to are the ones which have won awards at foreign festivals.

The absence of cultural analysis in the discourses of the SFC and the SFPF has meant that they have both been unequipped to think of alternatives to the industrial model, or to recognise the problems relating to national culture and identity that the industrial model might create. For instance, a recent article in the Scottish press indicated that research had revealed that German executives have an image of Scotland which leads them to think of it as a place to rest in rather than to invest in. In short, 'dream Scotland'. To the extent that the main impulse of Scottish films is to address a wider 'market' - a key principle of the SFPF - the dilemma they face is how to do so without recourse to regressive discourses such as 'dream Scotland'. It might be thought, given their commitment to an industrial model of film-making and their rhetoric about attracting investment into Scotland, that the SFPF and SFC would have given some thought to how the 'dream Scotland' narrative might be dislodged from the heads of German executives to be replaced by other narratives more conducive to seeing Scotland as a modern industrial

◀ nation. But there is no evidence that the SFPF and SFC are even aware of the problem.

The SFC and SFPF have had too easy a ride. Mainly because film-making grew out of the sponsored documentary tradition of Films of Scotland, there have been no substantial cadres of avant-garde independents putting pressure on them, analogous to that exercised on the BFI in England and Wales. With a few honourable exceptions, local film journalists have shown no capacity to interrogate, as opposed to simply report, the initiatives of Scottish film institutions. This environment has reinforced the sleekitiness of the SFC and SFPF and ensured that they would face no sustained pressure to articulate policy options and discuss them with their constituencies. Thus the industrial model of film-making simply 'emerged' in Scotland, rather as the leader of the Conservative Party used to, without any proper discussion of alternatives. What, then, is to be done?

Questions of national identity

When the SFC and SFPF finally face up to the fact that film-making in Scotland of a kind relevant to questions of national identity and culture must be low-budget film-making, they are going to have to educate themselves and their constituencies into a different set of aesthetic strategies and institutional arrangements. An obvious first step would be to strengthen the workshop sector in Scotland, the only sector (apart from a handful of independents) with the necessary expertise to facilitate what could be called a Poor Scottish Cinema, that is to say poor in resources and rich in imagination. The Scottish workshops ought, in effect, to become mini-studios through which grantees from the SFPF should realise their projects.

The SFPF must also begin to recruit to its board figures who have some understanding of the aesthetics and economics of Poor Cinema. One obvious such figure is James Mackay (as it happens, a Scot from Inverness), whose production credits include Ron Peck's *What Can I Do With A Male Nude?* (budget £5,000), Derek Jarman's *The Last of England* (budget under £250,000) and *The Garden* (budget £370,000), and *Man To Man* (budget £155,000). Mackay's projects have consistently used Super-8 (often blown up to 35mm for cinematic release) and, increasingly, electronic imaging. Another recruit to the SFPF ought to be the man who coined the term 'electronic imaging', Colin MacLeod, a world authority on the subject working at Napier University, Edinburgh.

The SFC and the SFPF must then lead their constituencies through a process of discussion about how imaginative and culturally relevant cinema can be achieved on meagre resources. There are good examples from within Scottish film history itself, for example the Bill Douglas trilogy, the early feature films of Bill Forsyth and certain of the films of Murray Grigor, Brian Crumlish and Mike Alexander. But examples should also be drawn from further afield: Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, which is wholly, and Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog*, which is partly, made up of still images; Jean-Luc Godard's *Les Carabiniers* and Dusan Makavejev's *The Switchboard Operator*, which make extensive use of pre-existing

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footage; Hans Jürgen Syberberg's *Ludwig: Requiem For A Virgin King*, which instead of built sets uses blown-up transparencies as background to the action; the austere cinema of Robert Bresson; the cinema of Derek Jarman and other English independents; third world cinemas, particularly those of Africa and Latin America.

Getting budgets below £300,000 would not only make profitability more likely for individual films, but would see many more specifically Scottish features emerging, perhaps eventually reaching the critical mass of ten features a year which the SFC is fond of canvassing. What it would produce at least is a pack of cards whereby the nature of a Scottish cinema, its recurrent themes and styles, might begin to be discerned. As things stand, the possibility of a nationally specific Scottish cinema (which need not preclude influences from Hollywood and elsewhere or fail to recognise the necessary hybridity of all national cultures in the modern world) is becoming increasingly remote as Scots film-makers are forced into contortions to raise money from American and pan-European sources.

This leads naturally to the question of how critical recognition of national cinemas is generated. Festival entry and subsidy for distribution and exhibition may not (by themselves) be the most effective or economic routes. There is a historical lesson to be learned here. Italian neo-realism, French *nouvelle vague*, Brazilian *cinema novo* and so on were internationally recognised as such mainly because they were taken up and discussed in film criticism and journalism. It is not beyond the bounds of imagination that a *nouveau cinéma écossais* might be similarly constructed. As is so often the case in Scotland (as with *Gregory's Girl*), celebration abroad might facilitate recognition (and further funding) at home. It would be nice to think that a simple journal could be sent free of charge to every cinematheque, film festival, film magazine and Channel 4-type television network in the world which, without being a hype or lapdog journal, would have as its main aim to outline what is happening in Scottish cinema and to construct its diverse films as some kind of collectivity. There are several historical precedents for this, for example the journals circulated by Unifrance and Film Polski.

Tartan shorts

This essay will be read perversely on several fronts. It will be suggested that it is intrinsically hostile to classic, narrative cinema, though that can be easily discounted by the most cursory glance at the author's other critical writings. It will be suggested that the concept of Poor Cinema envisages a restricted range of aesthetic forms. Quite the reverse, as the examples cited (from the Loachian realism of *Tickets To The Zoo* to the Brechtian multi-textu-

ality of *Les Carabiniers*) indicate. Finally, it will be suggested that it trashes the entrepreneurial efforts of individual Scots film-makers. This also is not true. One can have nothing but admiration for those Scots who have fought their way through to some kind of international recognition (well, most of them) although they may have had to pay a price in terms of the relevance of their work to Scottish culture.

As this article was going to press the SFPF did two things which encapsulate all that is wrong with its policy. It issued a press release hailing the success of the first round of short films it funds jointly with BBC Scotland. Renamed 'Tartan Shorts' - appropriately, the project wraps itself in that most regressive of Scottish discourses, Tartanry - it provides for three ten-minute shorts to be funded each year at a cost of £30,000 per short. The press release is clear about the kind of films to be funded. They must be "narrative shorts" and it is envisaged that grantees will "springboard from the making of a short on to a first feature film."

* Concurrent with the press release, two young Glasgow-based film/video-makers, Douglas Aubrey and Alan Robertson, received a letter from the SFPF informing them that their request for funding to complete their feature film had been turned down. *Work, Rest and Play* is a bitter, Kerouacian road movie in five 20 minute parts, two of which have already been completed with £6,000 of Aubrey and Robertson's own money and the down time of sympathetic facilities houses, independent produce and educational institutions. It is also a technological palimpsest for our time, involving video footage shot on VHS, low- and high-band U-matic, Hi8 and Betacam SP; computer graphics realised by Quantel Paintbox, Spaceworks Matisse and Wavefront; and the deployment of sound samplers and digital storage systems. In short, it is a superb example of Poor Cinema.

It is scarcely credible, but at the very moment when it was passing up the chance to put £15,000 (the sum requested) towards the realisation of a feature-length Scottish road movie, the SFPF was trumpeting abroad the fact that it had invested £90,000 in three ten minute shorts. By a cruel irony, the director of one of these shorts is Peter Capaldi, writer of the flashily empty road movie *Soft Top, Hard Shoulder*, which has none of the 'condition Britain' bite of *Work, Rest and Play*. *

More than ever, the creeping centralisation of film funding in Scotland needs to be reversed and the following key issue addressed: what kind of cultural and economic (in that order) policies need to be adopted by Scottish film institutions to create in the first instance a culturally relevant and in the longer term economically viable Scottish cinema? To raise such an issue implies the possibility of changing those great lumbering dinosaurs of Scottish film culture, the SFC and the SFPF. Dream. *A critique of the policies of particular institutions a separate question from the personal qualities and professional competence of those institutions' official I would like to put on record my thanks to Kate Swann, director, and Ivan Mactaggart, administrator of the SFPF, who have invariably been friendly, helpful and efficient in any dealings I have had with them.*