



# '... and now, it's over?'

## The problem with Scottish Cinema

Mark Cousins

A Scottish themed film, *Red Road* by Andrea Arnold, is in the Official Selection in Cannes this year. *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, written by Scot Paul Laverty, is also there. One of the sections of the compendium film *Paris Je T'aime*, that opens the festival's Un Certain Regard sidebar, was made by Sylvain Chomet, the world-class film animator who has moved his production facility to Scotland. Chomet's feature film *The Illusionist*, written by Jacques Tati and set substantially in Scotland, has just got its final go-ahead. Oscar winning Scottish director Kevin Macdonald is, as I write, completing the dub on his feature fiction debut *The Last King of Scotland*. David Mackenzie is shooting his new feature *Hallam Foe*. Scot Saul Metzstein is shooting his first feature documentary. Irvine Welsh is preparing his directing debut *The Man Who Walks*.

The list could go on. Artistically, things are happening in Scottish film. There are things to look forward to. Each of the above is a cinephile. If they and others manage to express their passion for cinema in their work then perhaps Scotland could begin to feel like a country that loves the movies.

Perhaps. I have lived in Scotland for 20 years now and have always felt that the country is, to use an awkward word, pre-cinephilic, just like hopeful Marxists think that certain countries are pre-revolutionary. But am I likewise being hopeful in implying that we could be on the brink of becoming a nation of movie lovers? Or perhaps we've already had a movie golden age in Scotland, and now it's over?

We certainly have a back-story to be proud of. The films of Bill Douglas and Norman McLaren are world class; those of Bill Forsyth are amongst the great works of poetic entertainment; and the ideas of John Grierson are central to the moral seriousness of post-World War 2 cinema. And we also seem to go to movies in decent numbers. We bought 15 million movie tickets last year, the second highest per capita in the UK after London. But just 500,000 of these were bought in Scotland's excellent network of cultural cinemas, just 3.3 percent of the total, a figure that compares unfavourably with other countries.

The question of whether we are passionate about movies is in the air not only because of the Scottish presence in Cannes but because Scottish Screen's new boss Ken Hay has finally unveiled the agency's long awaited re-think. The gist is that he will fold the Scottish Film Archive into the National Library; double its education spend over the next two years, to more than £200,000 (out of a total budget of £3.2m) in 2007-08; and delegate their training responsibility to Skillset, through whom they will invest over £800,000. From the start Hay has talked about Screen industries rather than cinema in particular. The Scottish Screen website now carries few references to the latter. There has been a definite shift in rhetoric and thinking, away from the idea of a funding body towards an advisory and audience development one. In the press Hay has rightly noted the proliferation of screens in our lives – on our phones, on flights and in taxis. When he took up his job he asked many in the film world what they thought his priorities should be. My answer to him was three words – Get Them Hooked. Get kids at school to fall in love with cinema so much so that you don't have to force it on them in later life. They will find it because they need it. As a critic and broadcaster I have always felt that I 'deal' in cinema just like a dealer deals in drugs.

It is far from clear what effect Hay's plans will have in the short and medium term. The announcements have already started a debate. An anonymous post in response to them on the AllMediaScotland website recently said: 'All this tosh about making feature films in Scotland. It's as if we ever had



a “golden age”. We never did.’ The writer argues that we shouldn’t even be trying to make our own films about our own nation but that, instead we should ‘provide a good experience for filmmakers considering Scotland as a possible place to film – not least, hassle-free use of locations and qualified staff available for hire’. This is true in as far as it goes, but its defeatism is breathtaking. The poster claimed that he was pro-Hay’s changes, judging them to be a move away from production. Filmmaker May Miles Thomas countered: ‘I didn’t hear Ken Hay say he’s going to build a studio, a film lab capable of creating a digital interneg, a proper master grading facility or a Dolby studio. What I hear is more handouts to TV, no seed fund for talent (not that there’s been any for a few years), no development funding, film production being abolished and Skillset filling their boots when they’re already sitting on a 50 million pound pot. We may not have had a golden age – and now we never will, if this is the state of play.’

I’ve heard others respond similarly in recent days, but perhaps they’re not brave enough to speak out. Though I find the language in which the new Scottish Screen plans is expressed rather difficult to understand, it is clear that Hay and his team certainly seem to want ‘more’ screen activity just as I’d like to see more love for cinema.

There is a difference between the two, of course. I personally do not want any more screens in my life. There are currently eight in my home. When I recently asked a taxi driver if he could turn off the adverts playing on the monitor in the back of the cab, he did so and said: ‘Nearly everyone complains about them.’ Like many culture agencies around the world, Scottish Screen talks about ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy’ – a developed form of what used to be called Cineliteracy – ambiguously. Rightly so. If we are to have screens everywhere then, for the sake of democracy, we much teach our populations to read them wisely, seems to be the view. There’s a certain scepticism buried in this position, which is fine. In parallel, however, is an economic analysis. There’s money to be made out of the proliferation of screens in modern life and Scotland should be at the forefront of this. The figures are interesting in this regard. Scotland represents 5% of the UK’s total spend across all the screen industries, as opposed to less than 2% of the spend on cinema. In other words, we are performing far less well in movies compared to other screen sectors such as games, TV, DVD, etc.

‘Let’s understand screens in modern life and make money out of them’ is a decent twin-track approach, that of the liberal pragmatist. Will it hasten on the golden age I dream of? Will it make Scotland’s contribution to world cinema, TV, the games industry, or the convergence of telephonic, photographic and computer technology distinctive in any way?

The country that has most revolutionised the way it makes cinema in recent years is, of all places, Iran. Like Scotland, it was never a major movie production centre. Like Scotland it could never compete with India or America. The civic societies of the two are incomparable, yet in the last generation Iran has been the single most distinctive screen voice on the international stage. It has won more awards, innovated with digital imagery more than anyone else, rethought low-budget production and, crucially, made films which usually turn profits, which cannot be said for us.

I spent two weeks in Tehran last year and was thrilled by the debate about screen imagery there. Filmmakers in Iran have a vision, voice that vision, meet colleagues who disagree, and argue the point. I now believe that the passion felt by Tehran’s directors for imagery explains these achievements. Iran’s society is complex and Iranians aspire to a better future, so the country’s filmmakers have much to say. But Scotland is complex and changing too. That’s why I like it here. Why does our cinema not vibrate with modernity as Iran’s does? Dip your toe in the film scene in Copenhagen in the 1990s and you feel the same things as in Iran: a fervent of ideas, exchanged and contested; a determination to be distinctive, a maverick impulse for the discrepant.

I don’t feel this in Scotland. Maybe it’s the people I hang out with, but I don’t think so. Innovation, bolshiness, R + D, call it what you will, these things are not in the texture of the Scottish screen world. Filmmakers aren’t in love with the new. Often, they don’t even know what’s new. They don’t clamour to be different. They are happy to be in the film boat, so don’t rock it. They’re not really even interested in boats. In particular, I’d say, that after 15 years of being part of the Scottish film world, I can remember no more than a handful of discussions with my colleagues about *form*. The shape and mode in which we tell our stories. In fact, I’d go further. I am utterly sick of film people saying: ‘I just want to tell a good story’ – as if cinema is just a vehicle for narrative. Did the great films of Scorsese, Bill Douglas, Alfred Hitchcock, Andrei Tarkovsky, Abbas Kiarostami, Busby Berkeley, Nicholas Ray, Yasujiro Ozu or Djibril Diop Mambety simply set out to tell ‘good stories’? Like fuck they did.

Jean Cocteau said ‘Etonnez Nous’ – Astonish Us – and that’s what these directors did. When did a Scottish film last astonish you? What’s the prospect of one doing so in the future?

The fault – if you agree with me that there is a fault – is not ours alone. We are the victims of our Celtic roots. Just as in Ireland – my home country – Wales and Scotland have punched above their weight in music and literature – the abstract arts, you could call them, or the symbolic arts – yet have under-achieved in the iconic arts, in visuals. It’s hard, in fact, to think of a single indelible *image* produced by Celtic culture in the last 100 years. In terms of cinema, Gregory covering his nipples in the changing room in *Gregory’s Girl* is fantastic. Nearly everything of Bill Douglas is memorable – wee Jamie’s face in the Bill Douglas *Trilogy*, the coldness of the house in which he lives with his granny, the landscape of Newcraighall. The most powerful image-maker in Irish cinema is Neil Jordan. Like Forsyth and Douglas he seems to be in love with imagery, its eloquence and beauty and lightness and concreteness and emotion. But there aren’t many like him.

Here, then, is my intuition: Scotland is not one of the great film cultures and might not ever be, and the reasons for this are



four-fold: (1) We love words too much. They pump through our veins. We think that words are honest and modest whereas images are showy, surface things, akin to display and distraction. In other words, our novels are too good. The country of *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, of *Sunset Song*, of Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh is too seduced by the verbal to produce really great cinema. Isn't this why Iran, which, crucially, has no novel tradition but a great poetic one, has such poetic filmmakers?

(2) Our musical achievements again incline us to the non-visual. I teach at universities and art colleges in Scotland and again and again my students say: 'But what I really like is music.' Their minds, the way they enjoy and commune, are aural.

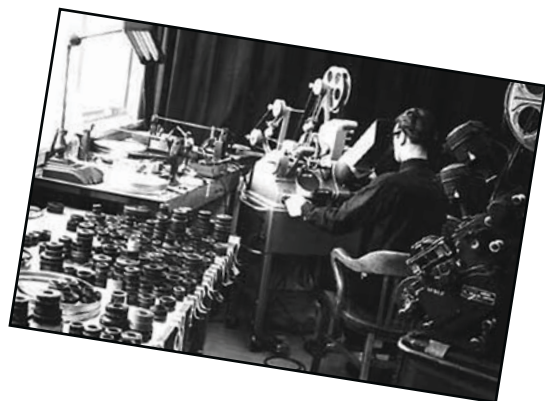
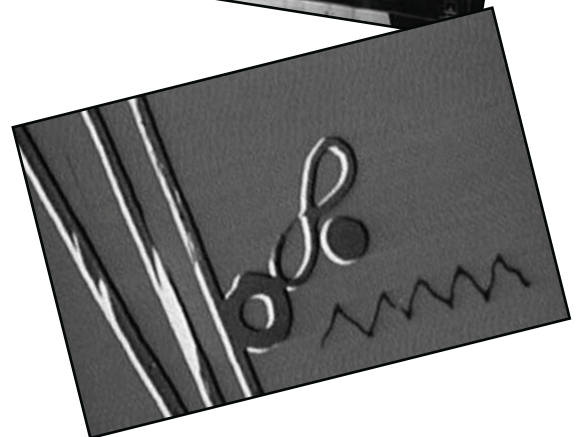
(3) There are not enough women in our film world. This thought again springs from a comparison with Iran. It is the only country in the world which has a woman – Forough Farrokhzad – as one of its founding filmmakers. And it has a far higher proportion of female directors today than Scotland, Britain or America – its films are not only less showy and more humane than those of most other countries; the characters in them don't destroy themselves as they do in ours. They don't unravel. Our national cinema has too much testosterone flowing through its veins.

(4) This point might surprise people. Usually our movies are criticised for being too realistic, gritty and depressing. In fact I think that our filmmakers have too little interest in reality. They are right, I believe, to try to depict social truth on screen but sometimes they make predictable films, when reality is unpredictable. It has to do with unexpected rapture, with sudden disorientation, emotional recall, self-loss, momentary plunges in spirit, small kernels of observation, with lying on the ground with your girlfriend beside a council estate and dancing with your arms as you imagine the earth tipping on its axis. Think of the films of Krystof Kieslowski. Reality is social and metaphysical, and our filmmakers don't always get that.

So what can be done? Are Scottish Screen's newly announced, liberal, pragmatic plans on the right track?

Firstly, just as we teach our kids reading and writing, we should teach them a respect, even a passion, for imagery: Show them how colour works in Poussin's *Seven Sacraments* in the National Gallery and the rhythm of shots in Norman McLaren's crazy animations. Especially the ones inclined to imagery. Especially the many who aren't that great at words. Teach them how an image expresses loneliness, how the light in Le Corbusier buildings work. Scottish Screen's doubling of its education spend is, therefore, to be welcomed a great deal. But this money needs to be spent on creative education, not just the dry business of screen analysis.

Our country should invent some crucial element of the emerging digital cinema and become a centre of excellence or manufacture for it. A widget. Wall-sized DVD screens. Software for turning mono sound into stereo sound or a simple, educational way in which kids can keep a nightly digital video diary. Or it could be setting up the world's best academy of cinematography in Kyle of Lochalsh or Assynt. Cinematographers photograph one thing – light – and in



which country in the world does light change and inspire more than most? Ours. And yet where do most DPs train? LA, Southern California, where the light is flatter and more predictable than almost anywhere on earth.

Scottish Screen should be more proactive and imaginative in trying to stimulate this kind of enterprise. It talks about innovation throughout its new policy paper but it should always remember that we will achieve far more if the 8,000 people employed in our screen industries think of themselves as originators of ideas rather than as a service sector for others' ideas and productions.

People working in the screen industries do not sharpen their ideas in debate enough. It is great that Scottish Screen wants to develop the Edinburgh International Film Festival more and that it backs the idea of a national film centre of some sort but in addition it should surely support a magazine or website devoted to innovation in screen aesthetics, economics and politics.

Talented people in film, games and TV need to spark off each other more. Scottish Screen has to cause that spark.

