

How the Movie Brats Took Over Edinburgh

By Matthew Lloyd



In his 1990 essay 'The Rises and Falls of the Edinburgh International Film Festival', Colin McArthur proposed that by 1989 Edinburgh had become 'the kind of festival which offers "something to everyone" and which [offers] ... traditional public discourse about the cinema, a festival, in fact, like all the others.' He went on to suggest that 'in making this choice the EIFF will certainly have created a responsible operation which, once a year, will bring considerable pleasure to Edinburgh.' Eighteen years later, the staging of an annual film festival has become the civic aspiration of any town with a population over 50,000. Edinburgh's citizens should therefore celebrate proudly EIFF's confident move out of the shadow of the August festivals into a new June slot, and the recently announced award of £1.88 million in National Lottery funding, as signs of triumph in a highly competitive market. But in truth, Edinburgh has never been 'like all the others'. At its best, the festival has batted aside expectations of big name glitz to challenge the establishment view of a film festival's purpose, and to steer and develop film culture in Britain and internationally.

In this, a critical point in the Festival's development, an examination of an earlier period of its 62-year history might be instructive. The 1970s saw the Edinburgh International Film Festival's international reputation grow as its critical contribution to film culture became more focused. This was a period in which increasing professionalism was balanced by the independence afforded by financial paucity, a time in which the Festival was prepared to question itself, and give a platform to those who would question it. It was a period that has been largely forgotten by critical discourse on the international film festival phenomenon, yet during the 1970s Edinburgh was considered one of the six most important festivals worldwide and the inspiration and model for such a contemporary giant as Toronto.

Edinburgh Film Guild members Norman Wilson and Forsyth Hardy staged the first Festival in 1947, effectively as an act of protest against the new International Arts Festival, which had chosen to exclude cinema. The focus was on documentary, primarily because, through the work of John Grierson, founder of the British documentary movement, it had been Scotland's main contribution to international film culture to date. Hardy has since spoken of a widespread 'tremendous hunger' in the post-war period to learn about the current state of other countries.¹ To feed that hunger, the Festival presented a diet of socially transformative films, visions of a future dedicated to public need. International delegates screened a selection of their national product to solemn young men in a small Hill Street preview cinema and post-film discussion stimulated the assembled company to consider



'what their own contribution in the future might be', as co-founder Edgar Anstey put it.

Conferences, publications of critical writings, and screenings of Rossellini, Flaherty and even Jacques Tati titles served to develop or challenge this rather austere notion of documentary, but press reaction and public support, which had been overwhelmingly positive in the first five years, gradually waned as tastes changed. The Festival became a decidedly half-hearted black tie event in the fifties, with appearances by the likes of Terry Thomas and Gene Kelly. The Festival of the sixties remained largely constrained by a distinction in film culture between art and commerce, with the latter considered unworthy of consideration; whilst retrospectives were staged of Hollywood directors King Vidor and Fred Zinnemann, their work was contextualised within a bourgeois art cinema canon that also included Ingmar Bergman, Andrzej Munk and Carol Reed.

In 1968, the Celebrity Lecture at the Festival was delivered by a 70-year-old John Grierson. Whilst ostensibly an argument for greater state funding of film production, his text seems remarkably out of touch with the political debates of the time. He called on a benevolent centralised authority to take responsibility for 'national inspiration', declaring that it has an 'age old stake ... in the imaginative life of the people.'² Dismissing the apparent emptiness and sex-obsession of contemporary experimental cinema, he even quoted General de Gaulle, a figure unlikely to inspire the younger members of the audience. Three months earlier Godard, Truffaut, et al. had brought the Cannes Film Festival to a premature halt in solidarity with the French workers and students protesting against de Gaulle's centralised, culturally stifling rule. Over the subsequent three years Cannes reorganised itself, replacing a programme of national cinemas with the personal selection of the festival director, creating sidebars of new work curated by filmmakers or critics, and arguably setting the template for festivals worldwide.

Whether or not the tremors of the Cannes crisis were felt in Edinburgh at that time, during the following 12 months the Festival underwent its own transformation. The celebrity guest in 1969 was a little-known cigar-chomping American B-movie hack director called Sam Fuller, and the festival received its best press in 20 years. Of course, the transformation was not completed in a single year; nor was the transformation the result of a coherent strategy designed by a concordant festival

administration. The changes implemented by successive directors Murray Grigor (67-72) and Lynda Myles (73-80) were dogged by ongoing internal struggles, until financial concerns, largely the result of the Festival's successful expansion during this time, overtook the importance of ideological conflicts. The story of the Edinburgh International Film Festival during the 1970s constitutes the paradox of any progressive institution reinventing itself to maintain relevance whilst struggling to stay true to its founding principles. It is the story of avant-garde turned old guard, pitted against the dynamic arrogance of youth.

The story begins with a letter. On 4 September 1967, The Scotsman published a letter from two undergraduates, David Will and Lynda Myles, proclaiming the Festival 'second to none in its dullness'. Key figures at the Edinburgh University Film Society, Will and Myles complained of the Festival's selection by 'geographical distribution rather than cinematic quality', and of the preponderance of short information films made by commercial or state interests. Filmmaker Murray Grigor, presiding over the Festival for the first time that year, had attempted to energise the programme with screenings of work by Kenneth Anger and Andy Warhol, and by opening the Festival with a brazenly commercial work, Robert Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen*. But an antiquated system of selection by viewing committee held sway, relying almost entirely on submissions, or on the recommendations of committee members viewing films whilst on holiday abroad.

The Festival's executive committee consisted primarily of members of Edinburgh Film Guild, the Scottish Film Council and the Films for Scotland Committee, the latter charged with promoting the life and character of Scotland through film, and presided over by Forsyth Hardy since 1955. Established, but barely funded, by the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Films for Scotland Committee sought production finance from a variety of sponsors; Hardy quickly proved himself an adept fundraiser, whilst nurturing a new generation of filmmakers in the Griersonian tradition. The Films for Scotland Committee naturally took an interest in the comparative output of other nations, and so national cinema days, formally presented by international delegations, continued to constitute a major, indiscriminate part of the Festival programme.

Will and Myles, however, belonged to a new generation introduced, via the French *Nouvelle Vague* and the *politique des auteurs*, to the



possibility of rereading Hollywood, by assessing a filmmaker's worth on the strength of their entire body of work, and evaluating a film's mise en scène or structure rather than its subject matter. Remarkably, Grigor embraced these two young upstarts on the strength of their ideas, co-opting them into the Festival staff in the Spring of 1968, just as French students of the same age were occupying overcrowded, anachronistic universities, demanding new curricula and devolved powers.

The Festival at this time was funded by small grants from City of Edinburgh Council and the Scottish Film Council, and staffed on a largely voluntary basis. Grigor was employed by the Films for Scotland Committee, and effectively had to run the Festival in his spare time away from other responsibilities. He recognised that without the funds to compete with other festivals on their terms,

Edinburgh had to offer a unique experience to both press and audiences, therefore his role should be to give the critics something worth writing about. For the 1969 Festival, he encouraged Will to stage a complete retrospective honouring Samuel Fuller, the unashamedly anti-intellectual, sensationalist director heavily fêted by Cahiers du Cinéma, but unknown in the UK. In turn, Will enlisted

the support of a group of young intellectuals, themselves embracing new theoretical ideas emerging from France, in the first flushes of the push to have film studies taken seriously as an academic discipline. Fifteen critics and filmmakers contributed to a book of essays on Fuller, which Will edited with Peter Wollen. Greeted by bagpipes at Edinburgh airport, Fuller charmed the sceptical executive committee with his direct, unpretentious manner, forgoing an expensive hotel suite to stay instead with Grigor, who he later described as 'like a not bad looking and kind of good looking haggard Greenwich Village fifth-rate poet ... I fell in love with the son of a bitch.'

The impact of the Fuller retrospective was massive, prompting screenings in London and elsewhere, and a further two critical studies. But 1969 saw several other timely events: a smaller Jean-Luc Godard retrospective, serving to contextualise the French interest in Fuller's work, the UK premiere of Easy Rider and an extensive programme of experimental works

by the likes of Stan Brakhage, Malcolm LeGrice, Peter Kubelka and Michael Snow. When the Festival executive committee met to debrief in September, they acknowledged the outstanding publicity generated by the event, but voiced concern that Grigor



and his team had not always heeded opinions expressed in the committee viewing sessions. The notion that Grigor would circumnavigate the viewing committee and actively invite particular titles to screen was almost beyond comprehension.

Grigor and Will pushed the experiment further the following year, with a programme of titles by the prolific exploitation movie king, Roger Corman. The retrospective was accompanied once again by a collection of essays, this time edited by Will with Paul Willemen. But

Corman, or his films, failed to charm as Fuller had done and a row blew up with the City Council over six uncensored titles, notably the Shelly Winters crime spree picture *Bloody Mama*, which several city magistrates had condemned unseen. With the Festival team putting all their energy into battling for permission to go ahead with the screenings, marketing was neglected and ticket sales suffered dramatically. The resultant financial crisis almost shelved the 1971 Festival, and gave the committee cause to express a range of fears about the way the programme was heading. Criticisms were voiced of the lack of geographical spread, and the absence of national cinema days. Yet the scandal served to attract international press attention to Edinburgh, and in subsequent years, as the concurrent Venice Film Festival deteriorated in quality, greater numbers of critics converged on Edinburgh.

The Festival in 1971 was a comparatively low-key event, designed with the intention of avoiding any further debts or controversy. In November, Hardy and two other key committee members,



having steered the Festival back into the black, intimated their intention of resigning. Hardy 'no longer felt in accord with the kinds of enthusiasms being expressed in sections of the cinema.' But they were persuaded to phase out their departures, to avoid the appearance of a mark of no confidence. The Chairman and the Honorary Treasurer left office shortly after. Hardy, however, chose instead to retain his seat on the committee well into the 1980s. Increasingly disenfranchised, he was to fight a rearguard action against these 'enthusiasms'.

Grigor grabbed the opportunity of the departures to introduce Colin Young to the committee. A pioneer of observational documentary, Young left Scotland in the early sixties to take up a post at the University of California, and had recently been appointed to set up the National Film and Television School at Beaconsfield. Significantly, on his return to the UK in 1970, he had publicly spoken in Edinburgh on the limitations of 'worshipping' Grierson, suggesting that the Festival needed to promote new forms of local production. Taking the committee Chairmanship, Young became a powerful ally of first Grigor, then Lynda Myles, seeing his role as 'running protection' for them, against the more conservative elements of the committee.

1972 was a significant year for Myles' involvement. Alongside the Festival's main Douglas Sirk retrospective, she staged possibly the first international event devoted to female directors, working closely with theoreticians Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston. Mulvey has since acknowledged this conference as a landmark in feminist film studies, describing the experience of critics and filmmakers working together as 'opening the floodgates of questions, questioning everything; questioning relations of power around the cinema, women as spectacle, the dominance of Hollywood ...' When a BBC crew came to cover the event, the female delegates insisted on shooting the film themselves. The international impact of the programme clearly inspired Myles to further academic ambition; after Grigor passed the directorship



to her the following year, she took the courageous step of introducing a series of rigorous theoretical conferences. Inevitably, their impact in terms of ticket sales or mainstream press was slight, and she received considerable press criticism for the po-faced jargonistic posturing with which the Festival apparently became associated. Similarly, the exhaustive 1974 Raoul Walsh retrospective of 40 titles pushed mainstream patience with the auteurist experiment to the limit; even Barry Norman took the trouble to discredit the accompanying publication on primetime television. However, the long-term impact on film culture was immeasurable; the conference papers and publications were widely circulated in universities across America and Europe.

Myles' proposals for 1975 – a Brecht and Cinema conference, a Jacques Tourneur retrospective, Japanese and avant-garde events, and a sidebar retrospective of a young American director called Martin Scorsese – were met with wariness by the committee. Hardy requested another meeting before selection was finalised 'so that there would be an opportunity to consider the programme further'. This further meeting never occurred, and the resulting Festival attracted an unprecedented 275 press, delegates and filmmaker guests. The high spend on hospitality led to considerable outstanding debts, and Colin Young raised the suggestion of applying to the British Film Institute for funding, reasoning that the London Film Festival, directly funded by the BFI, had been taking its lead from Edinburgh's programme for several years. Murray Grigor had recommended a similar course of action five years earlier, and had been roundly rebuffed by the committee. This refusal can be explained by a combination of nationalistic feeling within elements of the Scottish Film Council, a belief in the virtues of independent enthusiastic amateurism, and a fear of the changes, comparative to those of the Festival,

being fought over by factions within the BFI at this time.

That the committee was prepared to consider such a proposal five years later is perhaps an indication of their appreciation of the growing international impact of the Festival. However,



a substantial row was brewing. Bolstered by the favourable press following the 1976 Festival, Myles proposed a raft of measures to professionalise EIFF, requesting a larger permanent staff and greater hospitality budget. But she reckoned without Forsyth Hardy and other key members of the committee, whose patience had finally snapped. They objected to jargon-heavy conferences on psychoanalysis and the avant-garde, and to the accompanying publication, edited not by Myles' team, but by a group of academics who appeared to challenge the Festival's own programme choices. They resented the cost of Brian de Palma's attendance at the Festival; his one sentence introduction to a public screening of *Obsession* sharply contrasted with the memory of the garrulous Sam Fuller's visit. In a vitriolic report submitted to the committee, Hardy declared that: 'I attended 16 of the festival performances and, on this sample, would give the 1976 Festival a 40% rating.' He argued that the Festival was in no position financially to overhaul staffing or expenditure, reminded Myles that she had yet to be formally approved as director for the following year and went so far as to accuse the committee of failing to fulfil the terms of the Festival's constitution, calling for the reinstatement of practices that had widely been accepted to be obsolete, such as holding regular meetings of a selection committee.

The attack appears extreme but should be seen in the context of spiralling costs at a time when the Festival and other film bodies were in negotiations concerning the creation of the new Filmhouse, in the shell of a derelict church on Lothian Road. It is indicative also of a lack of understanding of the burgeoning film festival circuit, the competition for titles and the lavish hospitality on offer to filmmakers and journalists elsewhere. Hardy could not understand why the honour of a screening at Edinburgh was no longer enough to attract a director, or why the Festival could not rely on a largely voluntary workforce. Paradoxically, Hardy seemed to resent both Myles' aspiration to the well-funded professionalism of other festivals and the unique events with which Edinburgh made its mark. A conference on psychoanalysis and cinema might appear incomprehensible and overly serious to the majority of the Festival's audience, as to the mainstream press, but at that time it represented Edinburgh's singular challenge to the orthodox role of a film festival. Staging events of this nature was surely the best way in which an impoverished, non-competitive festival might continue to attract the work of the most interesting filmmakers.

Hardy was suspicious of the worth of Myles' trips to other international festivals, and requested that she deliver reports to the committee on her return. She gladly agreed to do so, her report on Toronto that year taking delight in the new Canadian festival's self-confessed debt to Edinburgh's recent programming. The Toronto programmers identified Edinburgh as one of the world's six leading festivals, alongside Cannes, Karlovy-Vary, Berlin, Taormina and Los Angeles: 'The influence of Edinburgh on the programme selection and structure was strongly marked in comparison to the other festivals. It appeared that the EIFF had been selected for three reasons: 1) Its focus on special events, and its strong record on retrospectives 2) Its policy of publications 3) Its commitment to young American directors.' One can't help but think this last point was intended as a snub to Hardy, whose grumbles concerning 'the Festival's preoccupation with American B movies' were a regular feature of executive committee meetings.

With the news in May 1977 that the BFI had agreed to cover the Festival's current deficit, with the promise of further funding to come, relative peace reigned. Hardy and Myles found common ground in drawing up a policy statement. They could agree that the Festival was 'committed to a serious approach to film culture', a guiding principle that 'immediately and consistently distinguishes the EIFF from the vast majority of other film festivals which appear to be governed exclusively or predominately by considerations of commerce and tourism'. Hardy was invited to contribute ideas towards that year's conference, entitled *History/Production/Memory*, and there were signs of compromise in the accompanying publication, which offered a more approachable, if less focused range of critical essays.

In the years that followed, work on the new building took precedence. The BFI funding honeymoon was short-lived, as by 1978 the Institute was suffering financial setbacks of its own. Hardy put considerable energy into a retrospective to mark the 50th anniversary of the Documentary Movement in 1979, an event that was to attract mutterings amongst the more radical critics of 'the manoeuvring into positions of power and influence of a latter-day Grierson gang'.³ Meanwhile Myles was working on a critical study of American cinema. *The Movie Brats*, written with Michael Pye, was the first work to develop the idea of a new cine-literate generation of directors – Scorsese, de Palma, Coppola – paving the way for Peter Biskind's better known, gossipy 1998 romp *Easy Riders*



Raging Bulls (compare the subtitles: *How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood* becomes *How the Sex 'N' Drugs 'N' Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*).

Myles left Edinburgh after the 1980 Festival, and a final glorious row with Hardy. To accompany that year's Joseph H. Lewis retrospective, Myles published a pamphlet by the theorist Paul Willemen, who had contributed to EIFF publications throughout the seventies. Willemen contextualised the Festival's interest in Lewis as a symptom of the cinephilia that had 'energized the Festival's trajectory'. Offering a distinctive reading of the Festival's history, he not only condemned the first 20 years of the festival as 'rigidly dogmatic' and 'relentlessly puritanical', but characterised Myles' reign as 'dependent on the tolerance of the very representatives of the film culture the Festival opposed':

Only a courageous festival director with the qualities of a cinephiliac schizophrenic would attempt to hold such contradictions while at the same time actively encouraging the kind of work that could only make the job of festival director more difficult: the more successful the critical policy became, the more virulently the establishment's mouthpieces attacked it and clamoured for the theoretical-cultural work to be repudiated. In spite of such intense pressures to philistinize the Festival, Lynda Myles managed to retain and develop a critical policy which succeeded in making the Festival a unique rallying point for progressive forces in British film culture.

Hardy naturally took great exception to this, and countered with a scathing *Scotsman* review of the theoretical seminars that took place that year, leading to a heated exchange at Myles' final committee meeting. Hardy did not understand these 'intense pressures' and continued to muse about what they might be in his 1992 history of the Festival, *Slightly Mad and Full of Dangers*. Undoubtedly Willemen was over-stating the case in the highly charged critical language of the time, but the upheavals of Grigor and Myles' periods in office met with significant opposition. Put in the less inflammatory words of Colin Young, they went against the grain of the 'tremendous tendency in Scotland to be respectable' in order to 'draw attention to the fact that respectability sets an agenda that is not necessarily the most interesting one'.

This year the Festival has taken the courageous risk of finally severing all links with the bloated carnival of middlebrow respectability that is Edinburgh in August. This risk has been offset by the unprecedented injection of National Lottery funds from the UK Film Council. With £1.88 million invested over three years, the 62-year-old enfant terrible of British film culture finally comes of age. Does this grant constitute co-optation by the establishment? The festival continues, rightly, to ignore regular mainstream press criticisms concerning the absence of big stars and glitzy premieres. But is this about to change?

Former EIFF director Shane Danielsen (2002-06) recently described the current international festival situation as analogous to that of the early sixties. Programmers promote and fight over the same few prestigious arthouse directors, whilst ignoring the more mainstream product playing to indigenous audiences, with the result that local film cultures are entirely misrepresented on the international circuit. The majority of festivals increasingly serve the marketing departments of distributors, showcasing the meaningless 'best of world cinema'. With a brief from the UK Film Council to 'massively expand its activities and profile on the world stage',⁴ will Edinburgh still have the independence, and the will, to go against the grain and interrogate our notions of international film culture? In their time, Grigor and Myles strong-armed a radical reassessment of discredited or ignored filmmakers and introduced discourse on challenging concepts, in the face of establishment censure. Can a UK Film Council-sponsored Edinburgh International Film Festival make the unpopular choices and sustain the spirit of anarchy necessary to truly meet



its avowed aim of becoming 'the "must attend" festival of discovery'?

(Endnotes)

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are taken from EIFF Executive Committee meeting minutes, or from transcripts of television interviews conducted in 1986, contained in the EIFF archive, National Library of Scotland.
- 2 John Grierson. 'The Motion Picture and the Political Leadership' in Hardy, ed. *John Grierson's Scotland*. Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1979.
- 3 'Edinburgh'. *Framework* Issue 13 (Autumn), 1980.
- 4 <http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/news?show=13675&page=1&step=10>

