

New Developments in Scottish Cinema

Introduction

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The idea for this special film issue of the *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen* was the result of a remarkable week in October 2013 when I was able to go to my local cinema(s) and see three Scottish feature films in the same week. Not only was this in itself remarkable, but also what struck me forcefully was how different they were. The first film I saw, *Sunshine on Leith* (2013) is, as I am sure anyone reading this knows, a feel-good musical based on a stage show developed in Dundee in 2009 from the songs of The Proclaimers. The next *Filth* (2013) is based on the novel by Irvine Welsh and therefore ties into a similar kind of kinetic, grunge counter-cultural aesthetic to Welsh's most famous text *Trainspotting* (1993, screenplay 1996). The final film, *For Those in Peril* (2013) is a more intimate drama, focussing upon the damage done to a community and to one individual as a result of a tragic fishing accident. Also intriguing was the manner in which these three films covered the distribution spectrum; *Sunshine on Leith* played only at the local multiplex, *For Those in Peril* only at the nearby art cinema, and *Filth* played in both. One final connection is that *Sunshine on Leith* and *For Those in Peril* both starred George MacKay, who also appeared the same week in *How I Live Now* (2013), a British film directed by Scottish filmmaker Kevin MacDonald.

This confluence of events led to a call for papers under the loose banner headline of 'New Developments in Scottish Cinema'. The aim was to gather together a series of pieces reflecting upon the recent boom in Scottish cinema, and the result is the issue that you are now reading. The anticipation was that the call would result in a number of proposals around the films mentioned above, on other recent Scottish productions, or focussing more broadly on the current state of the Scottish film industry. What was immediately striking about what was actually received was the diversity of the proposals that were submitted, some more historical in their approach, some focussing on one filmmaker, others looking at general trends. These indicated not only the wide range of reactions to this recent surge in the appearance of Scotland on Screen, but also that this new group of films offered an increasingly varied and

complex representation. As such the pieces chosen do not outwardly share common themes, but this in itself is both significant and illuminating, opening up rather than closing down the field of research. Yet for all their variety, at the heart of the majority of both the proposals and the pieces included here, are issues of national identity and of representation. The articles in this issue were chosen because they offer a series of distinct case studies that address notions of national identity from different perspectives; industrial and aesthetic; contemporary and historical; professional and amateur; production- and exhibition-based. Each of the articles gathered here offer insightful and thought provoking ideas and commentary but as a *collection* I see this issue as drawing upon and updating past scholarship to open up new ideas and new pathways for discussion.

The underlying theme therefore is that of looking forward by looking back. In that sense this collection fittingly reflects the history of Scottish film studies. In 2009 Jonathan Murray, Fidelma Farley and Rod Stoneman's book *Scottish Cinema Now* offered a new agenda for the study of this distinct national cinema. The result of a conference that took place in 2005 in Galway, this fascinating volume sought, as I initially thought to do, to identify the then current state of the Scottish film industry, some ten years after *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996) heralded the birth of New Scottish Cinema, and around five years after the birth of what we might call New Scottish Film Criticism. As I have discussed elsewhere (Brown 2011), by the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the explosion of New Scottish films had clearly faded. The initial dynamism of New Scottish Cinema, Danny Boyle, Andrew MacDonal and John Hodge headed off to America and then London, while other key figures, such as Peter Mullan, Lynne Ramsay and David Mackenzie despite their successes, found new projects difficult to get off the ground. Ramsay directed no features between *Morvan Callar* (2002) and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), while Mullan has a similar gap between *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and *NEDS* (2010). Mackenzie was more successful, returning to Scotland in 2007 with *Hallam Foe* and 2011 with *Perfect Sense*. I highlight these particular directors not only because they were key figures in the New Scottish Cinema, but also in the emerging critical debates about Scottish cinema between 2000 and roughly 2007.

Again, as I argued in 2011, these debates came to be generally defined through the prism of international influence; first the American influenced

Trainspotting/Shallow Grave, then the European art cinema influenced *Orphans* (1999), and *Ratcatcher* (1999). Looking back over the ground covered since 2000, Sarah Neely argued in 2008 that the impact of these influences on the critical discussions were potentially as reductive as the Marxist critiques of Scottish identity which permeated the landmark Scottish cinema project *Scotch Reels* (1982). This was itself an approach to which much of the new Scottish film criticism looked back, and against which it largely rebelled. Neely suggested this at a time when Scottish film production was, as noted above, experiencing something of a slump, certainly in comparison to the explosion of creative energy that defined New Scottish Cinema in the mid- to late 1990s. As a 2014 report into the state of the Scottish film industry points out, initiatives taken in the 1990s led to ‘a rise in Scottish feature film production from an average of two per year in the early 1990s to around six in the early 2000s.’ However, this early promise was not fulfilled as this is where the level of production ‘has remained since’ (2014a, p. 2). Films that prompted significant critical commentary like *Trainspotting* and *Ratcatcher* gave way to more mainstream products such as *Dear Frankie* and *On a Clear Day* (both 2005), which inspired less in the way of academic discussion. These were mainstream-inflected films heavily influenced by the utopian optimism of *The Fully Monty* (1997) and were an uncomfortable fit with the American Indie/European Art Cinema divide which categorised Scottish film criticism, and suffered therefore in comparison for example with the ongoing Ken Loach/Paul Laverty Scottish collaborations of *My Name is Joe* (1998), *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) and *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004). Neely argued against Scottish cinema being defined by a series of influences, and instead suggested seeing Scottish film as part of a broader international cinematic community, linked by style, by distribution methods and both conceptually and economically as a ‘small nation cinema’. Her call was that the diversity of Scottish film be embraced, leading in part to a new discursive thread around transnationalism, picked up in 2009 in *Scottish Cinema Now* by Sarah Street, and since followed up by others, myself included.

Although looking back, lurking beneath the discussions in *Scottish Cinema Now* was an anxiety for the future; an awareness of the impending demise of Scottish Screen, the national body for film in Scotland since 1997, and its replacement with Creative Scotland in 2010. It is not my intention here to explore the impact of Creative Scotland, except on a most superficial level, which is to say that regardless

of their involvement, the period since 2010 has seen a gradual but visible upsurge in film production in Scotland, which peaked between 2012 and 2014. In addition to attracting such high profile films as *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *Prometheus* (2012), *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Skyfall* (2012) and *World War Z* (2013) using Scotland as locations, 2012-14 has seen a number of films specifically set in Scotland and dealing, to a lesser or greater extent, with Scottish issues. Ken Loach and Paul Laverty's *The Angels' Share* (2012) was followed by *Sunshine on Leith* and *Filth*, between them showing very different yet nevertheless crowd-pleasing images of Edinburgh. January 2014 saw the release of Scottish-born Eric Lomax's autobiographical story *The Railway Man*, starring Colin Firth and Nicole Kidman, which although a high profile studio production, offered a similar sombre tone to *For Those in Peril*. This latter low-budget film, lacking the studio backing of the majority of the titles mentioned above, clearly shows that for all the major productions shot in or linked to Scotland, there is still a thriving independent sector. Alongside *For Those in Peril* we might add Jonathan Glazer's extraordinary *Under the Skin* (2013), in which Scarlett Johansson plays an alien 'vampire' trolling the streets of Glasgow looking for men upon which to feed. Featuring a genuine Hollywood movie star and coming from the director of cult hit *Sexy Beast* (2000), this difficult and challenging film is nevertheless independent filmmaking at its core. To this roster of productions can be added a number of micro-budget films, including *Shell* (2013), and documentaries including Anthony Baxter's *You've Been Trumped* (2012) *Fire in the Night* (2013) and *Kiss the Water* (2013). In terms of animation, the delightful Scottish-French co-production *The Illusionist* (2010) is a notable entry, alongside the Scottish/Viking mash up of *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) and Disney's entertainingly kitsch Scottish epic *Brave* (2012).

These films offer clear indication that on the surface at least the last two to three years have been a period of sustained success for the Scottish film industry, boosting both the production and exhibition sectors. This is reflected in the interview with Alice Black, Head of Cinema at the Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA), which is the forum piece in this issue. Black reflects upon how Scottish cinema audiences have responded to this surge in Scottish films. What emerges from this discussion are two key points. The first is that Scottish audiences genuinely hunger for Scottish films. The second is that their definition of what constitutes a Scottish film is very different

from that which either academics or legislators might define. For audiences the key element is that of a local connection. It matters little whether the film is set in Scotland or has a clear, definable Scottish story – for example *Sunshine on Leith* – or if the film was shot in Scotland but set elsewhere, as for example *World War Z* and even *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). What matters, most of all, is that sense of a local connection, so as long as a film has Scottish links, at least a section of Scottish audiences will embrace it, and this overrides other considerations such as style, genre and content. While there is inevitably some variation, cinemagoers at the DCA are just as willing to embrace the thoughtful and melancholic story of *For Those in Peril* as the kinetic, mainstream debauchery of Irvine Welsh's *Filth*.

However, although the number of films either set or shot in Scotland, and the audiences' enthusiasm for these projects which provide vital box office revenues to support the broader industry, strongly indicate that on the surface Scottish cinema seems to be booming, there are still significant problems facing the future of the industry. A review of the film industry in Scotland published in January 2014 noted that with the departure of Scottish Screen in favour of Creative Scotland, a body responsible for promoting all arts, the Scottish film sector 'keenly felt the loss of its sector specific agency' and despite funding film to the tune of £5m in 2011/12 and £6m in 2012/13, 'a period of stability in policy, strategy, approach and resource would be welcomed from across the sector' (2014a, p. 53). The review goes on to say that '[t]here is an acceptance [...] that Scotland would benefit from a fully developed screen policy. Such a policy is essential to achieve sustainable success' (2014a, p. 55). The development of this policy lies in the hands of Natalie Usher, newly appointed as Creative Scotland's first dedicated Director of Film after a long and difficult search. At the time of writing in July 2014 a draft version of the policy is currently available on Creative Scotland's website and is open for consultation until September, when the final version will be published. (creativescotland.com 2014) The main thrust of the document is to develop sustainable funding sources including looking outside of government and the National Lottery, and to develop a studio to encourage filmmakers to come to Scotland.

One of the other areas flagged up in the draft document is to develop 'a small number of targeted programmes focused on delivering shared strategic goals with partners' (2014b, p. 7). This is not a new strategy, and it is interesting to consider this

proposal going forward in the light of the achievements of past similar attempts. In this issue Linda Hutcheson expands on her work on the Advance Party Initiative to look in detail at the unsuccessful Advance Party II Project launched in 2009. Like Advance Party, II was a collaborative initiative between Sigma Films in Scotland and the Danish Zentropa Company, responsible for the Dogma 95 movement, but this time also including the Irish company Subotica. Hutcheson explores how the rules for Advance Party, adapted from the spirit of Dogma as a set of directives designed to both regulate and foster innovation, ultimately proved to be impractical, leading to the overall breakdown of the project. However, in revising the guiding structures for Advance Party II, what was developed was a set of regulations that were far more problematic and ultimately stalled the entire initiative. While both iterations of Advance Party were targeted programmes designed to both stimulate production and international co-operation, and to foster new talent, ultimately only two films emerged, only one of which, Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* (2006) achieved any significant international success. This leads Hutcheson to question the usefulness of such focussed projects in creating a long-term sustainable future for Scottish film, either through offering opportunities for new talent or through simply making films that people see.

Although there is much to be learned by looking at the current state of Scottish films and the film industry, and projecting those ideas forward into the future, it is important therefore not to underestimate the potential for discovery that comes from looking back. As previously mentioned, this is not a new phenomenon and the rise in scholarship around Scottish cinema that has taken place since 2000 has often referred back to the important *Scotch Reels* project of 1982, as indeed do a number of the essays in this volume. Setting out a strong oppositional stance to the seemingly ubiquitous Scottish representational myths of Kailyard, Tartanry and Clydesideism, Colin McArthur's legendary polemic has since been widely critiqued and is now seen, as Duncan Petrie pointed out, largely as 'an invaluable starting point to thinking systematically about the dominant cinematic representations that have defined a certain national image' (2000, p. 5).

John Marmysz addresses the original representational myths, forged by the *Scotch Reels* project, of Tartanry, Kailyard and Clydesideism, and transnationalism by identifying a new mythical representation of Scotland emerging from recent

productions, in his paper 'The Myth of Scotland as Nowhere in Particular'. Here he focuses on two different types of films that he argues represent this new myth in an incomplete and completed form. These films, such as *Prometheus*, *Perfect Sense* and *Under the Skin*, that represent the incomplete form, and *The Dark Knight Rises*, *World War Z* and *Cloud Atlas* are set, or partly set, or not at all set, in Scotland and use the location not to tell a specifically Scottish story but rather as a place in which to tell a universal story, stripping Scotland of its traditional regional identity and reimagining it as a place which exists within a wider global community in which human, rather than Scottish, truths can be enacted.

Jamie Chambers' discussion of the use of comedy in Ken Loach's *The Angels' Share* also draws upon the traditional Scottish representational myths, considering how the film engages with such images as kilts, the Highlands, tartan and whisky. Comparing the appearance of these Scottish icons with the realist aspects of the film which have more in common with previous entries in Loach and Paul Laverty's Scottish project (including *My Name is Joe* and *Sweet Sixteen*) Chambers questions to what extent these icons are employed in a self-reflexive manner, and to what extent the film simply embraces them. In doing so he contextualises this discussion within the broader framework of an analysis of Loach's changing narrative and aesthetic style and his links with the aesthetics and ideologies of Italian neo-realism, and draws upon the twin influences of realism and myth in determining the fate of the characters in *The Angels' Share*.

Many of the ideas in *Scotch Reels*, although long since challenged, nevertheless clearly have a long reach, and while the project did offer a discussion of a relatively wide-ranging cross section of films, the focus was, not surprisingly, on representation in works of fiction. Often these were works that were created, financed, and indeed shot far away from Scotland, most notably *Brigadoon* (1954), which managed to represent Scotland without ever leaving the confines of MGM studios in California. Delving into a past resplendent with *Brigadoon*, *Bonnie Prince Charlie* (1948), *Braveheart* (1995) and *Whisky Galore!* (1949) the representational issues are evident, and this has been offset in part by the depiction of Scottish-ness in the films of the British Documentary movement, an obvious place to look given that the father of British documentary, John Grierson, was himself Scottish. As Petrie has pointed out, the films of the British documentary movement largely reflected a unionist

agenda and presented a view of Scotland as seen from Central London, but in the late 1930s films produced under the auspices of the Films of Scotland Committee offered a slightly more balanced view, albeit heavily informed stylistically by the work of the Movement at the GPO and offering a modern but relatively optimistic view of Scottish life (2000, pp. 97-122). Later documentaries in the 1950s and 1960s focussed on Scotland as a tourist destination, the promotion of Scottish culture and the celebration of Scottish industry but these again were largely sponsored productions and therefore served to ‘consolidate and extend the repertoire of familiar images’ (Petrie 2000, p. 109). An opportunity to break away from this traditional repertoire, or at least to perhaps shed new light upon it, lies within the as yet largely unexplored historical representation within amateur film. To this end Ryan Shand offers a piece which compares the history and aesthetics of two amateur films taken in the Highland town of Wick, one by the Wick Amateur Cine Club in the 1930s and one in the 1970s as a kind of modern reworking of that original film. Shand’s discussion considers the alternative heritage offered by amateur filmmaking, a heritage far removed from the oppressive shadows of Tartanry and debates around transnational identities.

The New Scottish Cinema of the mid-1990s led to a swell of critical reappraisal of both Scottish cinema and Scottish film criticism. In 2014 we find ourselves in a very similar situation. The preceding two years have provided a raft of new films, new generic models, and new issues to discuss, and this in turn has led once more to a revived sense of immediacy within the academic community, as evidenced firstly by this volume and second by a conference in Edinburgh in August 2014, organised by Queen Margaret University, entitled *Becoming Scotland: Screen Cultures in a Small Nation*. In the introduction to *Scottish Cinema Now* in 2009, Jonny Murray concluded by saying that ‘the expansion of Scottish cinema over the last decade and a half has resulted not just in many more films from and/or about Scotland, but in the emergence of an ever wider range of questions to be posed about the country’s relationship to the moving image’ (2009, p. xii). Five years on we stand in the face of a referendum on Scottish independence, a consultation about the best way to provide a sustainable future for Scottish filmmaking and the tail of an extraordinary and concentrated period of creative filmmaking from which have emerged new genres, new directors and new stars. What have also emerged, arguably, are new contexts and themes to be fed into the ongoing debates around the nature of

Scottish representation on screen. While the future of Scottish cinema is still in flux, the future of academic discussions about it look positively rosy.

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