

Developing Children's Film – Showcomotion 2007

Becky Parry

This brief report highlights the key issues raised by a discussion event held during Showcomotion Children's Media Conference 2007. It also includes some evidence from a recent focus group with young people conducted by the session producer and author of this report – Becky Parry. The aim of this report is to stimulate the debate further and to make suggestions about how to strengthen the children's film industry in the UK.

Over 60 people attended the session as well as a panel of seven representatives from different sectors of the film industry from the UK and from contrasting European countries. The overwhelming consensus of the event was that we need to create further opportunities to discuss this vital issue and ensure pragmatic steps are taken to lobby the politicians, policy makers, funders and film industry to be open to debating the question of offering further support to the production of films for young audiences.

In this session we began by addressing the question – why is the film industry in the UK for children weak? The panel agreed to work with a wide definition of film for young people to include family and youth films as well as children's films.

It was agreed that any culture that does not have the opportunity to create cultural artefacts that are of their own identity is impoverished. It was acknowledged that although some recent Blockbuster Hollywood films clearly represent, to some degree, elements of Britishness, especially those derived from our rich literary tradition, these films are not essentially British. Underlying this is an uncomfortable acceptance that what our kids see on film, the decisions made about dialogue, casting, location and the framing of our morality and culture, as expressed in film, are decisions made by another culture. It is imperative that we recognise the need to meet the needs of young audiences in the UK by ensuring children and young people have access to films which represent their own culture and society – their own identities.

Furthermore, it was agreed that if we expect young people to develop an interest in British film as adults that it is economically essential to build their interest in British films whilst they are still children. In the UK we currently invest quite sizeable amounts of money into filmmaking projects such as First Light and Media Box. Through a range of other sources there is investment in film education and the UK Curriculum for Excellence invites opportunities to study film. However, what children are studying, and being educated about is almost exclusively American culture through the study of Hollywood films. Many on the panel and in the audience work tirelessly within distribution, exhibition and education initiatives to enable children to access films from other countries extending the range of cultural experiences available to them. However, we also feel it is essential that children have the opportunity to access and study films which are of their own country. It seems that in the

UK the fact that we speak 'the same language' invites the assumption that we are not culturally distinct from American culture and that Hollywood adequately serves our children's needs.

Production

The panel suggested that putting up funding for film is risky – putting up funding for any film which deals with dramatic issues for young people is even more so and there is a lack of any economically successful precedents. Even where a popular author may be adapted for screen the issues dealt with in those books i.e. teenage pregnancy, sexuality, regular fare of children's television would almost certainly be certificated 18 in this country, and would be considered very high risk. And yet research frequently shows that children and young people seek out drama that reflects their own lives as reflected in their regular viewing of programmes such as 'Holly Oaks', 'East Enders' and 'Tracy Beaker'.

No one in Britain has the level of funding that studios have to buy the rights to very popular literature. It is inevitable that the big US studios will adapt UK popular literature such as the 'Harry Potter' series, the 'Chronicles of Narnia', or 'Lord of the Rings' and yet the huge popularity of both the literature and films proves that there is a substantial audience for the right product.

Distribution

The panel proposed that children's film distribution is very high risk, and that it is not possible to make money theatrically so that all profits rely on DVD sales. The role of parents, teachers and other– gatekeepers – was described as highly important in building cinema audiences

Exhibition

We need to educate children to watch British films – there are many rich and varied ways of doing so but practice in cinemas, schools and other venues needs to be well supported and shared.

Cross Cultural Comparisons

In Germany there is a strong film production sector for young people but a weak television sector. This provokes the question: Does the comparative strength of UK television industry explain the weakness of the film sector in UK? The panel agreed that the strength in terms of skills, talent and experience for children television could be a rich resource for film.

Attitudes to children in the different countries are influential. In some countries childhood is treated almost as an illness. In Germany in the past children

under the age of 6 were banned from going to the cinema. This was not abolished until 1982. More recently, important novels have been funded by local / regional film funding and this increased competition so that the situation began to get better.

In Sweden there is a film consultant, one of five based at the Swedish Film Institute, who has funding only for children's films. A fifth of the annual spend on film production is allocated to children's films. They are currently debating what a great children's film should be about, rather than whether there should be any Swedish children's films at all.

In Denmark a quarter of the budget is allocated to children's films. This makes an impact so that expertise develops. Buyers for example who only buy children's films develop expertise and understanding of children's films and audiences.

In the Netherlands co production enables producers to sell to 5 countries and draw on the European fund in Brussels. Their experience provoked the point that by comparison English language films should be easier to sell? As well as, where are the UK films for other territories to buy?

Israel make one children's film a year and described a situation where prior to 2000 no one came to see Israeli films but following considerable investment audiences have begun to develop. This is perceived a long-term project but it is also considered to be a crucial investment in audiences for Israeli films of the future. The challenge for Israel is to ensure that children's' films are not conceived as infantile but complex and also to move away from the emphasis on conflict to explore other issues.

Comments from a consultation with young people aged 14 and 15 from Rotherham.

- Is Mary Poppins a British film? I've seen that! Harry aged 15
- Harry Potter is British well most of the actors are? Emma aged 14
- I don't think Britain could make a film for young people because they have to be cheesy and happy at the end and British films tend to be quirky and not like that! Helena aged 15
- It would be nice to have a film which sort of dealt with ideas things that might happen to you but have not yet, like, I don't know, your first day at school or going out with someone. Faizah aged 14

Assumptions that must be challenged:

- **LANGUAGE:** that because we speak the same language as the USA that our children do not need films made for and about them.
- **EDUCATION:** Government recognises through schemes delivered by UKFC that it is important to invest in film education but we currently educate our children to watch almost exclusively US films – we can't then be surprised when as adults the same young people do not opt to watch British films.
- **AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT:** UK film can only attract adult audiences who have experiences of UK film as children – it is an economic argument.
- **CONSERVATISM:** – we are far more conservative about film content for children and young people than we are about books, and television. This limits creativity but most importantly sanitises the potential of film to explore complex and pertinent issues that will resonate with children and young people and have the impact that we see in the shelves of bookshops populated as they are by large sections especially for children and youth.
- **FAMILY:** have been the lynchpin of US success and reflect the pattern of viewing in UK where parents accompany children. What might a UK family film look like?

Further Questions:

Q How can we get to the point where we are making six children's films a year?

Q How can we ensure that these films for young audiences successfully reach their audiences?

Q What should we be doing to begin to strengthen the UK film production sector?

Q What can we learn from the experiences of other countries re building an appropriate infrastructure to support children's film?

This report will, along with that of the Film Parliament, and an earlier event 'Joining the Dots' report will hopefully act as a catalyst for further useful discussion of these and other questions leading to positive and appropriate decision-making. The report broadly represents the range of views expressed in the discussion event at Showcomotion as summarised by the author.

Comments / action suggestions are welcomed – please send to beckyparry.email@btinternet.com