



Is the crisis in the British film industry permanent?

by Julian Friedmann

It is usual to praise anything one can find to praise about the British film industry because you don't win friends by denigrating the industry in which you work. It was good news that ten UK Film Council supported British films were selected for the Venice, London and Toronto Festivals, and even better news that Mike Leigh's film won Venice. However, our Oscar performances remain an indicator that in the global market we could do much better.

Ever since I made my first hesitant trip to the Cannes Film Festival - some twenty years ago - I have seen the British film industry appear to lurch from one crisis to the next. Or is it, in fact, the same crisis? However you spin it, I think that we need to face up to a simple reality: the film industry does, over the years, improve in parts but for the vast majority of those working in it, or wanting to, it does not improve overall.

I believe that there are a number of endemic problems that perhaps explain why British films are not performing well in the global market. But first, what right does an agent (or indeed the editor of this magazine) have to pass judgment on the hard-working writers, producers and directors in the film industry?

Agents work at the interface of art and commerce, between creativity and business, as though we were synapses sitting between the left and right lobes of the brain, passing messages and disinformation to bring about the desired result.

Agents see the strengths and failings on each side. We have a front row seat watching the performances of writer, script editor, producer and sometimes director, as they travel on an endless journey through development hell. We see how few ever emerge from the other side, how many projects lie like bodies on a medieval battlefield, bereft of energy or life.

For every film produced and distributed with reasonable theatrical exposure, literally thousands of projects never see the light of day even though some of the writers and those who work with them (agents included) may make a reasonable living from the pickings in development hell.

A good agent has been described as a marriage broker; a bad one like a pimp. Even this is a rosy tinted view of most agents. For a more realistic view it is necessary to know the truth about Hollywood in order to correct the state of denial in which most people in the British film industry exist, sentimentally clinging - as if the British Empire still covered the globe in pink - to the faded glamour of what our film industry once was.

To the many aspiring to succeed in the film industry in Britain, Hollywood seems to be a fabled place that if it didn't exist, would have to be constructed as a set for a fantasy film. One of the best descriptions of the place and its inhabitants comes from the glorious novel written by Steven Bochco, the creator of famous American television series like *Hill Street Blues*, *LA Law*, *NYPD Blue*, *Murder One* and the excellent, though unsuccessful, *Cop Rock*.

The novel, *Death by Hollywood* (Bloomsbury, 2003), is written from the point of view of an agent. I want to quote two paragraphs because he says it so much better than I can:

'In my naiveté I thought that writers and directors would be different from actors. Fat chance. They're just as loony. In fact the entertainment industry as a whole is one giant dysfunctional family. Everyone's terrified - of their own failure or of everyone else's success - and as a

general rule, you can assume that everyone lies about everything.

Have you ever looked at an actor's resume - at the bottom, under SPECIAL SKILLS? Rides horses and motorcycles. Juggling and acrobatics. The truth is, you're lucky if they can drive a fucking car.

'And agents? By and large, we're nothing more than well-paid pimps who represent our pooched-out clients as if they're beautiful young virgins, offering them up to a bunch of jaded johns who know better, but these are the only whores in town. As the saying goes, denial is not a river in Egypt. It is a river in Hollywood, and it runs deep and brown.'

So writers, in particular, need to prepare themselves for endless rejections, often by people less talented than they are. Most successful writers have had many more rejections than deals. It is the nature of the business. It is painful being rejected by people who know less than you do, who can't write as well and who sometimes clearly cannot read scripts properly.

To help all those suffering from past rejection and to help with the rejections that will surely come, here is a famous rejection letter, which was apparently sent to a writer who had submitted an article to a Chinese Economics journal:

'We have read your manuscript with boundless delight. If we were to publish your paper it would be impossible for us to publish any work of a lower standard. As it is unthinkable that in the next thousand years we shall see its equal, we are - to our regret - compelled to return your divine composition, and to beg you a thousand times to overlook our short sight and timidity.'

This is an industry in which people have widely differing ambitions. Well, not very much ambition to judge by the results; widely differing agendas might be better. It is against this background that I would like to suggest a few possible solutions to some of the endemic problems of the British film industry.

Why am I so convinced that the British film industry is in bad shape and is, in fact, becoming worse despite all the efforts of Skillset, the UK Film Council, Scottish Screen, Sgrin and the other usual suspects?



I am not making a subjective judgment; there is a very worrying statistic that was carefully researched by the European Audiovisual Observatory. Between 1989 and 1999 the audiovisual trade balance deficit between the EU and the USA went from \$2.7 billion to \$7.2 billion. For the year 2000, the European Union/United States deficit was estimated at \$8.2 billion or an increase of more than 14% from 1999.

In other words, despite the many millions of euros from the MEDIA programme since its inception fifteen years ago and all the national subsidy systems in each of the EU countries, the deficit is increasing as each year goes by. British film and television exports may increase year by year, which is highly praiseworthy, but the rate of increase is simply not enough.

We are losing out in an essentially economic marketplace. Our audiences prefer to see American films, whether on television or in the cinema. The cost-per-viewer-ratio for American shows on television suggests that it is more cost-effective for our broadcasters to schedule as much American programming as they can get away with. British movie makers, eat your hearts out! Our government intervened in the life of a foreign country recently; can they really not put appropriate pressure on our broadcasters? Maybe they don't consider that there is enough at stake.

All the training and quango effort that is going into propping up the industry with subsidies and tax breaks has failed to reverse the audio-visual balance of trade deficit.

I would like to suggest ten reasons for the failure of the British film industry to compete more effectively on the global stage. These ten points are not the only arguments or criticisms that can be made of the way the British film industry looks these days, but they'll do for a start.

1 I believe our industry's failure to understand all of the reasons why American movies are so successful is a major cause of our film industry not being profitable. Instead, there is a myopic tendency to blame the Americans for our impoverished state.

The usual knee-jerk moans heard in Soho are that the Americans dominate our cinema chains, that they have bigger budgets than we do and that theirs is a star-based movie industry and ours isn't. But why is this the case?

American movies dominate our cinemas because British audiences prefer them. Their budgets are bigger because their industry is profitable so they can invest more in developing and marketing their new products. And, of course, they have stars. The world wants to see their

movies, so their lead actors become stars.

In addition, their scripts are more accessible and more sentimental, that is, they set out to provoke emotion in the audience because this is what audiences in general want from movies. In the UK we don't do it often - although there is no reason why we cannot do so - and therefore all of us in the industry share some of the culpability for our impoverished state.

As for the unavailability of cinema screens for British movies, when we do have a British film that takes off - like *The Famous Five: 4 Weddings*, *Trainspotting*, *Billy Elliott*, *Bend it Like Beckham*, *East is East* - screens are available and British audiences flock to see them, so that complaint lacks some credibility.

What are the solutions?

If the Americans are so successful in a competitive market, what can we do to make ourselves more competitive?

Once one accepts that the story is not the same thing as how one chooses to tell it, here are four very inexpensive solutions, all to do with development.

1. Choose stories with accessible characters with whom it is easy to identify. This is not sufficiently common in British scripts. Ask yourself what the audience is really looking at when they watch a movie? It is not the screen or the actors or 24 frames per second or moving images. It is themselves. Fail to enable them to do that and the film will fail.
2. Have more upbeat (or ironical) endings. Many in the industry love to hate happy endings despite the public's clear preference for them. Our snobbishness suggests that our film-makers think they are superior to their audiences.
3. Use less dialogue. Why? To understand this you need to go back to the time that movies went from being silent to being talkies. Think about the population of America at the time, the demographic makeup. There were enormous numbers of immigrants for whom English was not their first language and there was a high proportion of illiteracy. These were serious problems for the new film studio bosses. How did they deal with the problems?

Many of the nascent studio bosses were middle European Jews who had emigrated to the New World. They were educated and cultured businessmen who first and foremost, like so many immigrants, were concerned about the welfare of their families. This meant that they saw this new-fangled business they were going into as a means of making money, not as a means of

expressing themselves or for the pleasure of making movies.

In contrast, in Europe after both World Wars, governments poured money into 'culture'; they encouraged those involved in the arts to reaffirm the cultural values of the societies in which we were living. In other words, in Europe the emphasis was on making movies as a cultural activity, not as a money making activity. Furthermore, Europe had a glorious heritage in theatre which the Americans didn't have. Our dramatists were dialogue kings so we made movies in which the use of dialogue to tell stories was dominant, whereas in the American system, where audiences had a less homogenous understanding of language, they concentrated on making moving pictures.

America is a comic-book culture and it has stood their film industry in good stead. See the interview with Alex Garland in this issue and the article on animation by Paul Wells.

This is one of several reasons why American movies often make sense even with the sound turned off! It also makes them far more accessible to far wider audiences, in almost any culture, since culture is embedded more in language than in visual images.

American movies have on average about two-thirds the dialogue of European movies. Films with less dialogue travel better both domestically and internationally: they do not rely on higher levels of literacy or education. Visual storytelling also has a greater impact on audiences for a strangely obvious reason: we believe what we see not what we hear, so a film made with less dialogue will impact on a wider audience with greater intensity. Less dialogue also leaves more room for music, a powerful emotional stimulant.

4. The fourth point concerns shorter scenes. American movie scenes are on average (this is a generalisation but nonetheless significant) much shorter than European movie scenes. More scenes mean faster pacing and more engaging storytelling because gaps are left which are filled in by the audience. This makes the audience feel good about watching a film. It moves the audience from being passive observers of a film into being active participants. So insist on less dialogue and shorter scenes and - all other things being equal - the films will be more successful.

Even if your chosen story is a good story - or a good story idea - this does not mean that it will be successful. That depends to a great extent on how you choose to tell the story. So, why is it that we don't make more movies using successful

will continue to make underdeveloped films and television programmes.

3. Individual producers must be more ambitious and more determined to invest sensibly in development. Writers do not necessarily need more money; they need more rational money, which I will come to in a moment.
4. In the States, producers are blatantly ambitious about making money by reaching audiences. Being difficult to be understood doesn't make you an artist. In the UK we have an oddly puritanical attitude. Populist genre films, such as audience-pleasing B-movies, are often looked down on by critics, wannabee film-makers and by some film-funders (the exception is the UKFC 25 Words or Less competition - see issue 20 of *ScriptWriter*), as though identification with the audience is distasteful, and as if what distinguishes film-makers from the great unwashed public is superiority in taste and judgment. It seems to be a case of 'We know what They should watch. After all, we are the creators. They are the recipients of our superior knowledge and talent.' The ego is a very dangerous influence, especially in producers making creative decisions.

I have a cartoon in my office from *The Spectator*, which shows a corpulent, pin-stripe suited Hollywood-like movie mogul, fat cigar in one hand, telephone in the other. He is saying 'Well, at least we are only morally bankrupt!'

4 This leads me on to directors, the second in the holy trinity of producer/director/writer.

The British film industry loves writer-directors. Of the 43 British films released between January and August 2004, more than half - 24 - were written by writer-directors, 14 were not, four were documentaries and one was a re-release.

The fact is that few directors can write really well yet many of them persist in writing even though they often end up directing bad scripts. I am approached by enormous numbers of young writer-directors and my response is that if they are any good as writers, they should want someone who is a better director than they are to direct their work; if they are any good as directors, they should have the ambition to direct better scripts than they can write.

Until the industry, the subsidy funds, journalists and critics moderate their love affair with directors, we won't have the best scripts coming through. I believe the Film Council's own statistics show that the majority of first-time British



directors never direct another feature.

What are the solutions?

Only much more ambitious, script-literate and tough producers will resolve this mess in which directors who can't write well enough write, and writers who can't direct well enough direct. Until we have more producers who can read, directors will pull the wool over their eyes.

There is too much trust and respect paid to neophyte directors, too little paid to talented writers, and not enough industry training of everyone to read so that the films that are shot are better written. The Script Factory course on how to read a script and write a report should be obligatory for everyone in the industry, particularly for the more senior execs.

5 So what about writers, those lovely people who get you to work on an egg?

The problem isn't so much with writers per se as with the encouragement that is given to anyone who thinks that writing is a good career move. Everyone knows that being a scriptwriter in LA - where there is lots of work - really means waiting tables. Yet our film industry, Skillset and the many academics who are unable to earn a living working in the industry, are all offering more and more writing courses.

As the doyenne of film critics, Pauline Kael, said: 'Hollywood is the only place you can die from encouragement.' Well it is now possible in the UK and the rest of Europe too.

One problem with writers is their sheer naïveté and enthusiasm. As Chris Vogler says in a recent issue of *ScriptWriter*, just because you are film literate doesn't mean you are script literate. Where in the school syllabus is the reading of feature film scripts considered as a legitimate literary form? Final Draft, bless it, does not help you write better scripts, only better-looking scripts.

What the industry needs is not more scripts, it

is better scripts. As Dr Johnson is supposed to have said of someone's manuscript in the 18th century, 'Your work is both good and original. Unfortunately the part that is good is not original and the part that is original is not good.'

With lemming-like enthusiasm, every year tens of thousands of people in the UK declare themselves to be scriptwriters, yet few of them read the trades every week, few have read more than a handful of scripts and few have any real ambition. It is a dilettantish fantasy for most would-be writers to be feature film scriptwriters. They have no idea how difficult it is. They are encouraged by the large and rapidly growing training industry to take endless short or long courses, a small number of which are actually very good but the majority are simply inadequate. The writers never become professional because they can never earn enough money to do it full time. We may not have a sustainable film industry but we certainly have a healthy and well-sustained training industry.

Writing a script is no easier than writing an opera or a symphony but we don't encourage music lovers off the streets to do those things. We need to give stringent health warnings about scriptwriting as a career if we are to be honest and to put the interests of students before those of the teachers. Our industry will not compete globally with part-time writers providing the scripts. We must find ways of identifying and supporting those who can become full-time professionals.

What are the solutions?

1. Make the bar higher. Make it more difficult to be accepted on scriptwriting and media degree courses. Skillset has a great opportunity which I fear they will waste if the democratisation of training for all continues. Even the Academies being set up by Skillset may be too egalitarian. Call me an elitist here, but raising the bar far higher is the only way to make a difference.
2. Put scripts on the school syllabus. Let's make sure our young people understand and appreciate film and television since they are a far more potent and ubiquitous cultural influence than novels in the 21st century.
3. Ban all general media studies and film theory degree courses. Instead, make writers study abnormal psychology, how the body reacts to stimuli, and how the media really operates. Media is the cutting edge of capitalism and profit-seeking so it tries to understand its audience, which is more than many of our young writers and film makers seem to do.

Did you know that the lovely, warm feeling

derived from a feel-good film is apparently caused by the release of a particular chemical in the bloodstream? It is phenyl-ethyl-amine, which is also released when you take Speed or Ecstasy, eat chocolate or have sex. How often do writers think about causing physiological responses in their audiences?

Perhaps we could also save the British film industry by having The UK Film Council do a deal with Cadburys or set up a chocolate factory - come back Willy Wonka - and with every ticket for a British movie you receive a bar of chocolate. Sex might be a cheaper, healthier and a more ecological way if The UK Film Council is short of cash as it is an easily renewable resource, provides exercise and is not fattening.

6 The training industry is not alone to blame for uneducated producers, directors and writers, but inadequate training is a massive problem.

I have not seen a significant increase in the quality or quantity of really good scripts over the past decade, despite the vast increase in training offered to those who want to be writers and an even larger increase in the number of scripts submitted. As unemployment goes up, so does the slush-pile.

It would appear therefore that the academic, theoretical teaching of scriptwriting is failing the industry. Most would-be writers want to write features, yet there are so few made in Britain that this career choice is truly quixotic. A writer really learns to write by working on scripts that are produced, not studying how to write or studying film theory or filling up pages on their own that rarely receive feedback.

What are the solutions?

1 The film and television industry must develop and run in-house and on-the-job training courses, not leave it to academics, many of whom failed to make a full-time living in the very industry that they teach about. Most scriptwriting training and How-To books are 'structuralist': their teaching is based on the assumption that creative writing needs an understanding of structure. How did the Greek dramatists, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Chekhov and Jane Austen manage before they had Syd Field and Robert McKee to tell them how to write?

The structuralist approach appeals to people with strong left-brains - the analytical half of the brain - but fails the truly creative people with strong right brains. The implications of this are far-reaching; most of the books on scriptwriting approach the subject through structure: the three-acts, sequences, beats. Most of the

courses do the same. If you have a strong left brain this will be attractive to you. You will think 'I can do this!' If, on the other hand, you have a strong right brain and are a chaotic but creative person, you will be discouraged and go and do something else.

In short, we train the wrong people to learn the wrong things in the wrong way. The best training is by doing not by studying. Writers need to hear their scripts read, see them acted and directed and then edited if they are to learn to distinguish between good and bad writing on the page. I think that universities are not the best place to teach vocational skills for the film (or any other) industry. Television is the only place in Europe where enough writing is actually produced for writers to learn by doing, which leads to my next point.

7 The denigration of television by film-obsessed people is extremely damaging to the very film industry in which they wish to work.

How many of the feature film writing courses utilising public funding adequately recognise that, in career terms, it is television that is critically important? Television, Soaps especially, are seen by most would-be script writers and the majority of academics teaching scriptwriting as a poor relation to the feature film script, despite the ability of Soaps to attract and communicate with millions of viewers night after night.

Such attitudes towards television seriously damage the film industry because seeing and hearing what actors and directors and the camera do with a script is the best way to learn how to write better. Writing unproduced script after unproduced script does little to teach or develop creative skills.

What are the solutions?

1. Change attitudes towards Soaps and television drama. There is stunning drama and comedy on television if you know where to look for it. Next time someone says to you that there is nothing good on television, you should know that they are ignorant and probably snobbish too.
2. Point out that there are virtually no career prospects for students wanting to write only feature films, and that jumping ship to becoming a neophyte director isn't much better.
3. Making it more difficult to be accepted on to writing courses will have the most beneficial effect if those courses encourage writing as a craft not a lifestyle, and encourage writing for theatre, radio and television as well as film.

8 The treatment - a document that should be written before the script is written - is undervalued and widely misunderstood.

For this I blame producers for being miserly and short-sighted and that goes for writers too. Our industry pays writers far too little for the development stages of an idea before the script is written, and far too much for the first draft script.

The current PACT/Writers' Guild agreement allocates 20% of the total writer's fee to the treatment. I surveyed a number of my most experienced clients and they said - without exception - that to do the job properly they needed to spend over 50% of their total time on drafts of the treatment. But too often writers won't spend enough time on the treatment because they are paid so little, as a result of which they deliver inadequate treatments.

This means that the producer who doesn't know better than commissions the script, which is a failure. Valuable development money is therefore squandered on producing a document that has no commercial value. Everybody loses.

If the producer can read and realises that the treatment doesn't work, they often fire the writer and commission another writer, reinforcing their belief that treatments usually don't work. Hence they refuse to pay enough for treatments and the negative cycle continues.

If the correct writer were chosen in the first place, that writer should do at least two drafts of the script once the treatment has been agreed on, and the script would probably work.

How long it should take to write a script? According to Mr McKee, up to six months, but you shouldn't start writing the script itself for five and a half months. The first draft script should definitely not be the most expensive stage in the development process.

What are the solutions?

Pay reasonably for at least three or four different documents before the script:

1. a short selling document to ensure that all concerned share the same vision and are trying to make the same film,
2. detailed character biographies so that the plot is the result of who the characters are,
3. a more detailed treatment,
4. and finally a step outline.

Preferably there should be at least two drafts of each of these documents with written notes from the producer or script editor between each draft or document.

Then pay less than usual for the first draft script that will anyway take less time if there is a ▶

satisfactory step outline. The total amount paid to the writer will be the same. The results will be far better with a much higher incidence of commissions that are successfully greenlit and, I believe, a far more successful box-office.

In addition, the original writer will more frequently be credited as the sole writer of the film. This will hopefully be part of the PACT/Writers' Guild negotiations as they try to improve on the botched job they did in 1992 which is when the last agreement between the two was negotiated, in itself another indication of the state of the industry.

9 Development as a whole is undervalued and misunderstood.

The British industry has *de facto* undervalued development. This is quite obvious but nothing much is done about it. For a start, a British development person almost always has a relatively lowly status and is underpaid. Consequently no one wants to stay in development and as a result, most of them are not actually very good or experienced.

In the States, to be a script editor you have first to be a successful writer. In the UK it is understood to be the first stepping stone into the industry instead of being accepted as a vitally important role that ensures a greater chance of success for a film. In Soaps only, writers should be script executives.

It has been variously estimated that in America the total development costs are between 7% and 9% of the total budget. In the UK it is closer to 3%. Could this go some way to explaining our uncompetitiveness?

Our industry is not profitable so there is not enough money to invest but this is not a valid excuse for repeatedly making the same mistakes. 'Those who do not learn from their mistakes are condemned to repeat them.'

Recently Tim Bevan in *The Sunday Times* said that Working Title needed the backing of a major studio because '... we needed to be in a position where we could write off development spending without it breaking the company'.

Most production companies in the British film industry, even with The UK Film Council's help, don't have the money or the skills to develop competitively without risking breaking the company.

Every film is a new product. In any other business not doing proper research and development would be expected to result in failure. What is it about the beguiling, crazy world of the film industry that we ignore economic laws that work in all other businesses? Is it just because we are in love with the end result or are our egos

driven by the idea that we might sit next to Nicole Kidman at an industry event? Are you really a better person because you go up in a lift with Martin Scorsese? Our industry thrives on the cult of celebrity. Is it too much to expect us to be above all that?

The truth is that few people in the film industry think of it as a business. To them it is a lifestyle. They do not apply the same criteria as they would if they made rivets.

What are the solutions?

1. To achieve better development, we should demand better trained script editors who are also writers. They should be given more power and money to go with their responsibility and authority.
2. Budgeting more cash for development isn't the answer unless the development work is done by skilled and experienced specialists. Any fool can waste money as the history of the British film industry demonstrates. What money there is must be spent more carefully on the writing stages before one word of the script itself is written.
3. Properly trained senior development executives should be paid the same or more than directors are paid. A good film can't be made out of a bad script. And if the directors and producers could recognise a bad script, that would help, too.

10 Much anxiety and greed is exhibited over our ever-changing tax shelters and tax breaks. I believe that they have done significant damage to the British film industry where this much-obsessed-over aspect of film finance has resulted in our shooting ourselves in the foot.

This point is probably going to alienate those few people whom I haven't already offended, but the truth is that deal-driven films in Europe are rarely commercially successful because the agenda of those making the film and the agenda of the creative inspiration of the film are usually so different.

When did you hear a financier say that they will actually delay filming because they think the script could be better? Or when did a writer refuse payment because they were not happy with the draft they had submitted?

Throughout Europe, subsidies of various sorts have been like life-support systems keeping alive industries that need to be reborn, not maintained as ailing and unprofitable indulgences.

What are the solutions?

1. Tax breaks are fine if they complement a

healthy, profitable industry. When they dominate the financing of films - which primarily enables footballers, other very rich people and the growing ranks of financial advisors and consultants connected to them, to become even richer - don't complain when the Treasury closes abused loopholes helping the rich to become richer.

2. The loopholes, which should not have been there in the first place, should be closed. The BBC and Granada should not have access to fiscal support for the film industry.
3. Forget the democratization of access of training and development money. The gatekeepers to the cash must - as The UK Film Council has done quite effectively so far - support radical talents who are commercially ambitious. Emotionally engaging stories, highly conflicted characters, not forgetting short scenes and no superfluous dialogue, would counterbalance the bland tax-funded movies that usually make little impact.

The UK Film Council could give much more Lottery cash to the New Cinema Fund where originality, risk-taking and ambitiousness are encouraged within a healthy development support system. The future of the film industry will, I hope, come out of there rather than the Premiere Fund.

CONCLUSION

Never underestimate the strength and inherent conservatism of the *status quo*. The theory of oligarchy (Robert Michels) shows how the incumbents hold on to power by compromising their principles. Reformation in the British and European film industries is unfortunately more likely than revolution, but I believe that the film industry has been in crisis for so long that nothing short of revolution will kick-start us in the right direction to reverse the audio-visual balance of trade deficit trend that presently seems unstoppable.

We can do it. There is no reason why we cannot make films that far larger audiences will vote with their feet to see unless we continue to be too unambitious and too preoccupied with making movies rather than making money.

There are always, thankfully, individual films that are exceptions. Let's hope *Vera Drake* will be one. But do not cling on to it as if it alone will save the film industry. As Colin Welland, writer of *Chariots of Fire*, said in his Oscar acceptance speech in 1981, referring to the fact that we were emerging from the state of crisis that the film industry was in then: 'The British are coming!'

Well, we are still waiting ...