

REPORT ON SCENARIO!: A UK-FRANCE SCREENWRITING EVENT

Cine Lumiere, Institute Francais, 6th-12th October 2003

Brian Dunnigan

Scenario! and the MA in Screenwriting at the London Film School

Scenario! was a week-long event focussing on the contrasting and complementary attitudes and practices to screenwriting in the UK and France. It combined a five-day workshop for a selected group of professional screenwriters followed by a week-end of public screenings and panel discussions.

The event was organized by Brian Dunnigan and Ben Gibson from the London Film School and Vincent Mellili from the Institute Francais in association with the CEEA (Conservatoire Europeen d'Ecriture Audiovisuel) in Paris. Scenario! was supported by the UK Film Council, the SACD (Societe des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques) and media partner Screen International.

The idea for Scenario! grew out of debates and discussions over the development of an MA in Screenwriting at the London Film School – due to be launched in September 2004.

Highlights of the week included Stephen Fry talking about the screenplay for his new film *Bright Young Things* and writer-director Richard Jobson revealing the influences behind his first feature *16 Years of Alcohol*. Hanif Keshi discussed his relationship with Patrice Chereau the director of *Intimacy* and his own career as a screenwriter, and there were previews of two new French features presented by writer-director teams: *Since Otar Left* (dir. Julie Bertucelli, scr. Bernard Rennuci) and *From Heaven* (dir. Eric Guirado, scr. Pierre Schoeller).

The Workshop

Tutors: Roger Hyams, Richard Kwietniowski (UK), Pascale Rey and Michael Raeburn (France). Co-ordinator Brian Dunnigan.

The workshop involved five new writers from the UK and France and four professional writing tutors from both countries. The primary aim was to help develop the individual feature projects while also engaging with differences and similarities in approach to script development. The programme for the week included four cross-cultural tutorial groups with one tutor from each of the participating countries. The afternoons were free for one-to-one mentoring sessions with individual tutors while every evening there was an optional but complementary programme of screenings and discussions.

Both the writers and the tutors responded positively to the encounter finding the range of backgrounds and approaches stimulating and challenging. The key differences between the scripts centred around theme and genre with the French unafraid of big ideas and existential narratives while the Brits seemed more concerned with structure and class issues. This clearly reflected differing cultural traditions and gave rise to useful debate about not only what stories we tell but how stories can be told, the relationship between writing and directing and what makes a narrative cinematic. The Anglo-French combination proved fruitful not only in intensifying communication but also in dissipating the teacher/taught division and increasing the variety of motives, goals and methods under discussion. There was added value too, in raising the writers' awareness of the international nature of cinema production and consumption. The evening screening programme of classic French and UK films reflected this although it also revealed the lack of a broader, historical knowledge of cinema amongst many of the younger writers.

Key words of the workshop were diversity and variety where a range of options and approaches liberated everyone from the reduction of scriptwriting to industrially-based formulae. The participants also remarked on the similarity of the problems and challenges facing all the writers especially the tension between the personal and the generic. Most of the writers found it difficult to define the distance between their script and their own life; often fearing being too personal and consequently

erring on the side of alienating their audience. At its best however the Scenario! work-shop and public screenings reminded everyone of what a film festival can be – a chance to learn from each other, bandying grandiose points of view, sharing stories, disagreeing about what stories are – and learning from each other.

Participating Writers/Projects: Scenario1 2003

UK

Wendy E. Okoi-Obuli
Mike Johnson
Jules Bishop
Peter Cleverly
Kas Graham

GAME PLAN
FROM NOWHERE TO OBLIVION
RED MIST
LONDON A-Z
B

France

Sophia Burnett
Fabrice Celeste
Romaine Compingt
Bruno Danan
Delphine Dubois

FOREIGN BODIES
IN GOD'S NAME
YOUTH
EAGER FOR LIFE
THE DAY I DIED

European and American cinemas: do they really exist?

Panel: Jonathon Romney (UK film critic), Nicholas Saada (French screenwriter and critic), Jean-Luc Ormiere (Producer/Moonstone). Chaired by Alistair Whyte.

The panel discussion that followed the workshop, clarified the *economic* and *aesthetic* debates around feature film development and production not only in the UK and France but between Europe and America.

Jean-Luc Ormiere argued for the importance of supporting the multiple voices coming out of Europe as against the one big American voice. We have different economic and philosophical approaches; the entertainment industry is the second biggest exporter in the US and completely in thrall to a short-term, market-driven capitalism. It also controls much of the European distribution network. A key question is therefore how best to support the European industry in a way that would allow us to compete with the Americans.

Nicholas Saada shifted the ground to a discussion of *aesthetics*. Talent is not culturally specific and the boundaries between Europe and America have become blurred over many years. He also detected hypocrisy in an anti-Americanism that ignored the quality and range of American cinema, and in the French public derision of formulaic movies while privately (and mistakenly) trying to emulate the scale and ambition of Hollywood.

Jonathon Romney agreed that you can't equate American film with Hollywood but echoed JO in arguing that talent only makes sense in a culture that produces it and allows it to exist; culture is too important to be left to the market. At the same time while American culture can appear to be monolithic and rapacious, it also allows exceptions to exist – and these exceptional American independent films are often more interesting than the routinely exceptional European art film. When thinking about UK cinema we should not just be looking at France, Finland, Spain but also this energetic, new American cinema. However as Ben Gibson reminded us there is a serious political issue that will not go away; the question of distribution remains the key to the possibility of diverse voices being represented - not just for European but also World cinema.

Can you teach screenwriting?

Rob Ritchie (NFTS), Pascale Borenstein (Synopsis), Jean-Luc Ormiere (Moonstone) Brian Dunnigan (LFS), Michael Raeburn (writer/director). Chaired by Brock Norman Brock (UK Film Council).

Rob Ritchie opened the discussion by suggesting that there are too many screenwriting courses in the UK – the talent pool is too shallow and talent is something that can't be taught - you wouldn't try to teach someone to sing who was tone deaf. A related question was why there were so many screenwriting courses offering a professional training and holding out the unrealistic prospect of a professional screenwriting career. At the NFTS they only take six writers a year and maybe two or three will make it into the industry. Pascale Borenstein pointed out that there was over 1000 students on the cinema course at NYU – she thought the important point was to be clear about the aim of any course whether it was aiming to get writers into the professional world or whether to offer a protective space where they are guided and supported through the development of a screenplay - workshops are about the development of *projects* but a screenwriting course develops *people*.

Everyone agreed that the important thing for any writer is having something to say – then a practice-based course can help develop that writer's voice. The limitations of the McKee workshops and the "How to" books is that they teach the craft skills but cannot teach what to write about. Writing programmes need to pursue more creatively the importance of content over structure. As a producer and as artistic director of the Moonstone workshop, Jean-Luc Ormiere believed that the prior question to ask any writer is "why write?" and "why write this?" Once the answers to these questions have been clarified then you can begin to teach craft skills.

Brock Norman Brock wondered why despite so many courses there is still a dearth of good screenwriters in the UK. He also thought it might be fruitful to look at the *role* of the screenwriter in the filmmaking process – perhaps there is too much emphasis in the UK on the writer as the primary creative force; is the writer not just a member of a creative team and not always the most important one? In which case maybe you can teach that kind of a writer in a more didactic and technical way. PB suggested this would infuriate French writers who are made to feel undervalued in a filmmaking culture that valorises the director; that's why so many French screenwriters want to become directors themselves. NS however, said that the resentment comes from a misunderstanding of the writers' role. The writer is not the key creator in the making of the film but only part of that process; collaboration with the director can be exciting and enriching. As a writer/director with experience in both UK and France MR re-emphasised the collaborative nature of screenwriting - you have to open the door, bring other people in – you learn from this.

NS shifted the focus onto producing. He told us that in the US many writers are becoming producers and learning producing skills and any good screenwriting course should teach these skills.

RR warned of the danger of over-emphasising the marketing side – if you spend too much time on pitching or the market you deflect from what the writer should really be focussing on – what they know about not what the audience wants to hear.

BB insisted that writers ought to know about the business side of filmmaking whereas

RR pointed out that you have to be careful about imitating the market. The point is in a two year MA you have to let them know about the market place but it's more vital to devote time to what they in particular have to say – that's how you survive – you'll never survive if you just have the craft skills.

JO thought you need more; a knowledge of philosophy, of psychology, of daily news and intimate affairs – an aggregate of learning, a kind of maturity from which the best writing comes. As a teacher (which he is not) his concern would be to tailor any course to the individual rather than try to impose any universal model or set of rules. RR pointed out that was possible at Moonstone and other small, selective workshops – the problem came when you were training large numbers of people – here a different McKee-style approach may be seen as more practical and cost-effective.

Concluding remarks focussed around the idea that screenwriting courses were especially useful to those writers who wanted to develop an original voice; it gave them the time and space to define their interest and particular talent. For the teachers on the panel the important thing was to help the writers get to know themselves before engaging with the market. While BB and JO argued that the market was an

intimate part of the *process* of screenwriting and that it was counter-productive to protect writers from reality.

Writers and Development: Heaven and Hell

Panel: Trevor Preston (writer), Jean-Luc Ormiere (producer), Laurence Coriat (writer). Chaired by Ben Gibson (producer/LFS).

JO asked if we mean the same thing in France and the UK when we talk about “development”? The great cinematic voices of the past were never “in development”. The notion of “development” involving public bodies and an accountable process did not exist in France until recently. Instead there was a conversation between writer and director that might include the producer – this was a kind of heaven. He described the current attitude to development in France as having two aspects: the public money available to support writers – up to £10,000 – giving them a safe space in which to develop their idea free from script editing. And project development organized through a producer: in France a project used to take 1-2 years to get into production. However that's changing and coming more in line with the UK model of 5-7 years. BG pointed out that in the UK a project is likely to involve development people who feel that they have an important and often controlling role to play in what in what they see as a collaborative process. The development process in the UK is also extremely frustrating for the writer who knows his project is unlikely to get made (the ratio of development to production in the UK is 1:20 whereas in France it's more likely 1:4). JO added that in France the decision to go into production is taken by the director/producer even when public money is involved whereas in the UK if two or three people say no, the project is unlikely to get made.

LC a French writer working in the UK, gave an account of her experience as a *writer* on two recent feature projects. The first with Michael Winterbottom where she worked closely and creatively with the director before the film was produced; the second involved the BBC, RTE and several script editors – which required her to write 22 drafts of a project that drifted away from her initial idea and was eventually never made. BG suggested that French films have less narrative allowing more room for the director's vision where in the UK there is greater expectation that a developed script should have a clear narrative at the script stage and keep trying to put more “story” in. LC agreed that this was close to what had happened with the consequence that her script had become a hybrid, finally of interest to none of the parties originally involved.

TP thought that script editors were part of the problem rather than the solution in the making of bad UK films. JO was also resistant to the idea of a “script editor” - a notion that doesn't exist in France. In his experience they soften the edges of a script and push it toward some conventional middle ground. On the development process itself, TP noted that his last feature took 12 years to make, the previous one 8 years and suggested that writers need to develop alligator skin – its the dreamers versus the schemers - unfortunately its the latter who run the industry. TP also questioned the idea of “film treatments”- usually asked for by producers. A good film screenplay was closer to music in terms of tempo, rhythm, pace; it was organic and fluid. How could you tell from a treatment if the film script would have these qualities?

Everyone agreed that in developing any project the important thing for both writers and producers was to build a team. The purpose of development was to find people you want to work with.

Hanif Kureishi had made that same point earlier in the week when talking about his work with the French director Patrice Chereau; he likes to keep the screenplay open – for others to reimagine. The writer provides material for other people but you need good readers to give you feedback. He has found you get the best feedback from directors who bring an intensity of interest to the project. In the end however every script has its own unique set of problems; the textbooks can't help you nor can watching previous films. Other people can give you helpful notes but when you are writing you are on your own. In his experience of working with a French writer and director the essential aspect of the work is not to do with any perceived cultural divide – but with the story, the *scenario* and the *collaborative* process that follows.

Summary

The high-quality of the debate and discussion at each of the panel sessions along with provocative interventions and questioning from an informed audience proved one of the highlights of Scenario! - a week of practical encounter and cultural exchange around issues of screenwriting and filmmaking in France and the UK. Many of the ideas and approaches will now go to inform the development of an MA in Screenwriting at the London Film School and there are plans to run an expanded Scenario! event in 2004.

Brian Dunnigan
November 2003