

Book Review: The Rise and Fall of the UK Film Council by Gillian Doyle, Philip Schlesinger, Raymond Boyle and Lisa W. Kelly

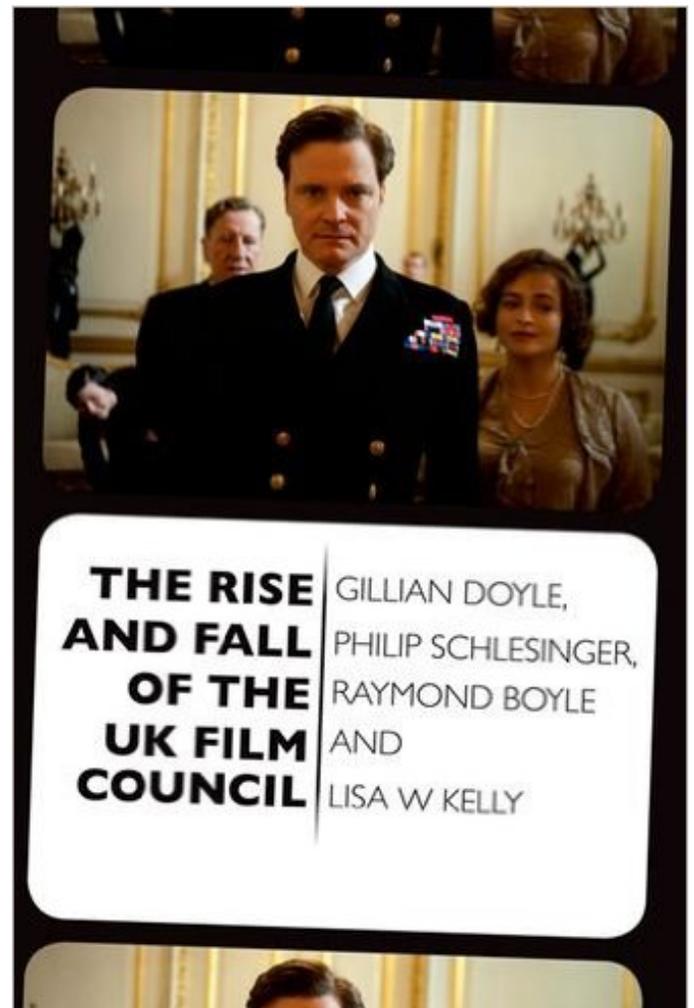
*In **The Rise and Fall of the UK Film Council**, Gillian Doyle, Philip Schlesinger, Raymond Boyle and Lisa W. Kelly explore the shifting importance given to film policy in Britain by focusing on the establishment of the UK Film Council under the Labour government that came to power in 1997. This organisational study gives a cogent and lucid account of the Film Council's aims and achievements, as well as the challenges it faced, before its eventual abolition in 2011. However, the political and economic focus leaves both audience reception and the Council's influence on cinema as an art form largely unexplored, writes **Geoffrey Nowell-Smith**.*

***The Rise and Fall of the UK Film Council*. Gillian Doyle, Philip Schlesinger, Raymond Boyle and Lisa W. Kelly. Edinburgh University Press. 2015.**

The Rise and Fall of the UK Film Council, authored by a team of researchers from the University of Glasgow, asks a rhetorical question: why does film policy matter? Having given some convincing reasons why film policy does, or should, matter, it turns to a further question: why, if film policy does matter, did successive British governments throughout the twentieth century pay such little attention to developing any form of film policy remotely adequate to the undoubted importance of cinema (or film) in national economic and cultural life? It proceeds to an in-depth study of the only period when the UK had a government for whom film policy did matter: namely, the Labour government that came to power in 1997, more than a century after cinema first emerged, and eighty years after it became a major industry, dominated worldwide by the USA.

Prior to 1997, the UK had some policy regarding the film industry, based mainly on the felt need to protect it from US competition. It also had some policy towards cinema as an art form and a force in popular cultural life. These policies were neither effective nor recognised as related, with the industrial and cultural sides coming under different ministries and agencies.

The chosen instrument for developing and enacting a coherent policy towards the British film industry and, to some extent, the culture of cinema in Britain, was a new arms-length body, the UK Film Council, formally constituted in 1999 and operational from April 2000. It was put in charge of all forms of governmental or para-governmental support for the film industry, and given the brief of welding them together into a cohesive, policy-led instrument for making the industry 'viable' (i.e. self-supporting) or, failing that, 'competitive' on the world stage. An existing body, the British Film Institute (BFI), continued to be responsible for the cultural aspects of film, but some of its functions, such as its role in small-scale film production, were taken away,



and it also had its wings clipped by being made formally responsible to the Council rather than directly to government. This meant that for the first time there would be some coordination between industrial and cultural elements. However, the organisational solution chosen was never satisfactory, and led more often to border disputes than to an erosion of the borders themselves.

The Film Council was basically the brainchild of Chris (now Lord) Smith, appointed by Tony Blair as Culture Secretary on 1 May 1997. Convinced of the need for a proactive policy towards Britain's creative industries, particularly film, Smith acted quickly. Within weeks of his appointment, he gave a rousing speech at the Cannes Film Festival outlining his intentions, followed by another in Los Angeles in October. Negotiations with major stakeholders followed – essential because stakeholders were many and various, with often conflicting interests. By the time the Council came into being, it was at least understood what the conflicts were and how, in principle, the divergent interests of large and small producers and of the three sectors of production, distribution and exhibition could be harmonised.



Image Credit: BFI Southbank (MaryG90)

In 1997, Smith controversially appointed film director and producer Alan Parker as chairman of the BFI. Parker chose John Woodward, formerly head of the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT), to be his Chief Executive. The Parker-Woodward duo moved in 1999 to the new Council, with Woodward remaining as CEO until the Council was abruptly targeted for abolition by the Coalition government that came to power in 2010. Deputy chairman was Stewart Till, who led a policy review group in the run-up to the creation of the Council and whose background was in distribution. Till took over as chairman in 2004 and was succeeded in 2009 by independent producer Tim Bevan. This was a strong team under which the Council had, on balance, more successes than failures. It certainly left the British film industry in a stronger state than it had been in 1997. Ironically, the formal abolition of the Council on 1 April 2011 came immediately after one of its most successful films, *The King's Speech*, won seven Oscars at the Academy Awards in Los Angeles, including Best Picture.

Throughout its ten-year life the Film Council faced many problems, of which the biggest – the 'elephant in the room' as David Puttnam described it – was Hollywood. Not only were US films dominant in the marketplace, but also the major Hollywood companies had a significant presence in Britain in production, distribution and exhibition. A competitive British film industry would compete with Hollywood, but it also needed to cooperate. Many technically British big-budget films – the Harry Potter franchise, for example – are the product of 'inward investment' by US

companies, such as Warner Bros. They provide valuable work for British studios, but the profits return to the USA and they can also be eligible for tax breaks. As well as arbitrating between the demands of big and small producers, the Film Council also had to balance industrial interests against those of its paymaster, the UK government and behind that, the UK taxpayer. In the case of tax breaks, it stood firm in favour of the taxpayer.

Somewhat smaller than an elephant and not actually in the room but always on the threshold and threatening to break in, was the question of film culture. What kept it out of the room was the uncomfortable split between the Film Council and the BFI. Although the Council recognised some responsibility towards cinema in Britain, its main brief was industrial. It left the question of the cinemagoing public out of the reckoning except in so far as it concerned the UK industry. It did not ask, or invite the BFI to ask, many questions relating to what this variegated public wanted, and how its multiple needs could be satisfied

In this respect, *The Rise and Fall of the UK Film Council* follows the Council's priorities. Essentially a politico-economic organisational study, it gives a cogent, lucid account of what the Film Council achieved in its short life, how it did it, under what constraints and its relations with other bodies such as the BFI, backed up with appropriate financial data. It gives a crisp summary of the fraught negotiations that took place in 2009 and early 2010 in anticipation of a possible Conservative election victory, when moves were afoot to make a token sacrifice of a quango by merging the Film Council and the BFI into a single body. These negotiations stalled over the question of which quango should be merged into which – a question decided (if not solved) when the incoming Coalition government simply wielded the axe and abolished the Council, leaving the BFI to pick up the debris.

But the organisational focus of the study leaves a gap, which is the film audience. The book says how much Council-backed films earned, but not who watched them and in what way their lives were enriched by the experience. In other words, what was it all for?

The book also contains one tiny but significant error. It attributes the direction of the 2004 film *My Summer of Love* to its producer, Tanya Seghatchian (later a successful Film Council executive). In fact, the director was the Polish-born Pawel Pawlikowski, regarded by many, myself included, as the finest talent to emerge in British cinema in the past twenty years. Telling the story of the UK Film Council without turning occasionally to look at what the Council did for cinema as an art form is a bit like telling the story of the grocery trade without saying what the food tastes like.

With the remnants of the Film Council absorbed into the BFI there is now a single 'lead body' for both the film industry and film culture in Britain. Whether we are in fact any nearer the Holy Grail of a concerted film policy, only time will tell.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith is an Honorary Professorial Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London, and co-author (with Christophe Dupin) of *The British Film Institute, the Government and Film Culture, 1933-2000* (Manchester University Press, 2012).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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