



FILM, TV & GAMES CONFERENCE 2015

Sponsored by

TimeWarner

April 2015
at The Royal Institution

Session 8: Ben Roberts, Director, BFI Film Fund *interviewed by* Marc Samuelson, Deputy Chairman, BSAC

Marc Samuelson interviewed Ben Roberts. They discussed the BFI's strategic priorities and the support that it gave to the sector, the appeal of non-mainstream cinema and whether the BFI was achieving its intended goals.

*Summaries of other sessions from the day and a complete report
of the Conference are available from www.bsac.uk.com*

CONTENTS

<i>About BSAC</i>	3
<i>Ben Roberts, Director, BFI Film Fund</i> interviewed by Marc Samuelson	4

ABOUT BSAC

The British Screen Advisory Council (BSAC) is an independent, industry funded membership body for the audiovisual sector.

We uniquely bring together the widest possible range of interests, knowledge and contacts to exchange ideas and information about business and policy issues. Our Members are invited to join on the basis of their personal qualities, experience and expertise, and are drawn from the major TV broadcasters, independent film and TV producers, distributors, exhibitors, US studios with major operations in the UK, trade associations, trades unions, training providers and new media companies, such as Google and Spotify.

Many of our activities take place privately, which enables business leaders to freely discuss the fast changing nature of the industry.

On policy, we provide opportunities for industry and policy makers to hear a breadth of viewpoints and, wherever possible, for the sector to speak with a single and authoritative voice. Over the years we have worked closely with the Treasury, HMRC, DCMS, BIS, IPO, the European Commission, WTO, and WIPO.

We also enjoy the support of Associate Members, which are businesses with a particular interest in the sector. These include legal firms, accountancy practices and investment management firms, and are an important port of call for obtaining views and expertise.

We commission and generate research and reports to underpin our work.

We host a series of events that are open to a broader invited audience. These include an annual Film, TV and Games Conference, an Interview Series and occasional seminars. These provide high quality debates and networking opportunities.

More information can be found at www.bsac.uk.com

BEN ROBERTS, DIRECTOR, BFI FILM FUND INTERVIEWED BY MARC SAMUELSON

Marc Samuelson introduced Ben Roberts, who had now been Director of the Film Fund at the BFI for the last three years. He asked Ben what, over this time, had gone well or badly, and if there was anything that he had particularly wanted to achieve that he had not been able to.



Ben Roberts had joined the BFI at a point when quite a lot of integration between BFI and Film Council activities had been incoming, so a big part of his job had been to increase the interactivity between the different parts of the organisation and to build bridges between the different departments. At that point, the BFI had just been asked to take on a new industrial role, so there had been a considerable need for confidence building and creating links with a whole range of new people across the sector. This was an area where he felt real progress had been made.

For his first two years, the BFI had probably not had a single week when they had not been being reviewed by somebody, which had been quite a time consuming process. However, it had also been quite gratifying to hear, at the end of the BFI's triannual review, that they were generally doing a good job in their industrial capacity as well as in their cultural role.

He hoped that people did not find the BFI a horrible organisation to work with. He had brought all of the lottery function for audience development into the Film Fund, to help make the conversion from development through to audiences, and he had also recently recruited Ben Luxford to the post of Head of UK Audiences – Ben had been a brilliant addition to the team in terms of really getting under the skin of the content that they were funding and, as part of their editorial conversations, challenging them. He now was happy to run a well-coordinated team which was pushing hard on a number of areas.

Marc Samuelson asked Ben what his disappointments had been so far.

Ben Roberts said that the BFI was still struggling to achieve increased diversity and were not receiving the volume of applications that they might like from a broader range of film makers. In particular, they received far fewer applications from female film makers than they might hope; also, film makers from outside London and the South East were underrepresented – and much of the production activities that they did support in the regions involved people and production companies travelling from London to do the actual work.

In terms of ethnicity, the BFI still had a long way to go, and were very focussed on addressing this.

Marc Samuelson observed that many of the films that the BFI invested in seemed geared towards an audience that was, to put it politely, over 30 and living in London.

Ben Roberts said that the BFI had considered this carefully, and one of his biggest concerns was that he did not want cinema to follow a similar trajectory to the Church of England in catering only for an aging and already converted demographic.

The BFI's Research and Statistics Unit Handbook from last year had calculated that about 50% of film audiences were under 35. If you were to look at the audience for 'Specialised Film' – the sorts of non-Hollywood, non-studio, non-overtly mainstream film that the BFI tended to invest in, and also a term that he personally hated – then it seemed that 35-40% of the population were watching them to some extent. Anecdotally, this audience might be a little London-centric, and these numbers were lower than he might like; however, the real challenge was in figuring out how to get younger audiences to engage with films in general. While there was an element of generalisation, many younger people did not have an innate cinema going loyalty, preferring instead to watch content over a multiplicity of different screens in many different ways, and also did not really feel the need to pay for content. The younger generation also seemed to be suffering from decreasing average attention spans – only around 19% of online content viewing was of full length movies, and 50% of this was devoted to pieces of content that were under ten minutes in length. Consequently, the BFI would face many challenges in moving these second-screen multi-platform device users into engaging with and paying for film.

Marc Samuelson asked if there was a contradiction in the purpose of the Film Fund in that, by funding the sort of content that would not otherwise be made in the mainstream market – content that might be artistically pushing the envelope or that reflected non-mainstream interests – the BFI was conflicting with their desire to broaden their audience and to connect with mainstream cinema goers.

Ben Roberts disagreed with this claim and affirmed that there was a young audience for challenging material. The BFI had invested in numerous films where the target audience was younger than the actual audience had turned out to be – for example, *Catch me Daddy*, *Appropriate Behaviour* or Carol Morley's recent film, *The Falling*. However, part of the problem was that most of these sorts of films were only being booked into art-house-type cinemas, which were less accessible and attracted a different audience demographic from mainstream cinemas, meaning that younger audiences were simply not able to access these films.

One other thing that he had noticed was that these films, and others, had been successful at gaining a huge amount of editorial coverage on their opening weekends. Carol Morley's film featured Maisy Williams in a starring role, who had a massive fan base from her work in *Game of Thrones*; and Daniel Wolfe, director of *Catch me Daddy*, had an established audience from his previous work making music videos. However, once these films had been through the cinemas then, short of seeking out odd screenings here and there, there would be a four month wait before anyone could engage with them again, which seemed like madness to him.

He argued that a more flexible release schedule would make it easier to respond to a sense of popularity and to capitalise upon success. While he predicted that there would be an ongoing standoff between the major circuits and the studios, he hoped that some greater flexibility might be introduced to the system.

Marc Samuelson asked Ben if he could put a time frame on this. It sounded as if he was interested in applying flexibility around windows to a much larger proportion of the films that the BFI invested in than just, as was currently the case, the occasional highly idiosyncratic project.



Ben Roberts observed that this was already starting to happen. He welcomed Curzon's work in this area, although he conceded that they were partially motivated by an element of brand development, and the BFI also operated a VOD platform that made films available on day and date.

Digital strategies needed not to be seen as the market failure route; for this to succeed they would need distributors with the support of the platforms, as well as for the exhibition sector to embrace the model much more boldly. If, for instance, it were possible for someone to read an article about Maisy Williams in *Dazed* magazine, and then immediately go on to watch *The Falling* over a VOD service, then audiences would really start to be added in an area where there currently was no supply and reach people that otherwise would not engage with this particular sort of cinema going experience.

He ultimately hoped that some sort of subscription model would evolve. The track record of this model in the music and TV industries showed that this could be a very effective model for getting audiences to pay for content in a way that they did not resent. However, the current VOD services had quite a lot of work to do before they offered properly curated and presented content – for example, the first film that currently came up under the 'British Film' category on Netflix was *Michael McIntyre Live*.

He welcomed that Joanna Hogg's new film, *Exhibition*, was available on Netflix, but observed that it seemed to have achieved one star reviews across the board, something that he suspected was because it was so different from the sort of content that the average Netflix user would have expected to view on the platform. He felt that there was definitely a need for greater engagement with these services.

Marc Samuelson observed that the US was currently experimenting with this; for example, Radius was a VOD platform that specialised in carrying indie films that had found success on the festival circuit.

Ben Roberts agreed with this, and observed that when he had been selling films to IFC he had experimented with day and date or lesser windows on a number of films. The big sell for that model had been the desire to grow an audience in areas where there had not been provision; these sorts of films were typically only distributed

through art-house cinemas, which were not particularly accessible outside of big metropolitan centres. Similarly, with the digital and online strategy, it was important to recognise that reaching people that otherwise would not be reached would grow additional audiences.

Marc Samuelson asked if, assuming that money was no object, the was BFI in a position where they had considerably more projects that they wanted to back than they really could, or were they sometimes, in order to allocate all of their budgets, forced to fund things that they did not feel were quite as good as they might be.

Ben Roberts said that the filter lay in making subjective decisions about what they wanted to invest in, and this was always contentious. Interestingly, the year before last had seen an embarrassment of riches and he had not been able to make the BFI's money go far enough, and had been a little concerned over how thinly the BFI could spread itself; in contrast, last year they had seen the opposite, and there had been a lack of exciting material.

This was partly due to their having been brought a lower volume of material, but was also a consequence of changes to financing rules, which meant that some projects had struggled to raise sufficient funds to get off the ground before the end of the financial year. In order to deal with the latter he had changed the BFI's approach towards their treatment of budgets, so that they were able to offer some flexibility to projects that had not gotten down to zero by midnight on 31st March – which was the BFI's cut-off date. However, even with this there had been times when he had had to go further than he would have liked in order to ensure that the financing on a film was closed and that the project would not fall over.

Marc Samuelson offered an interesting statistic, that 75% of the films that the BFI had backed at over a million pounds also had a broadcaster, or some other source of public money, in their financing mix, dropping to about 50% if you went below this line. He asked if it was a desirable and healthy situation that three sources of public funding – the BFI, BBC Films and Film4 – were having a massive impact on the market and seeing considerable crossover in the projects that they backed.

Ben Roberts felt that this was perfectly fine as long as the films were good. The concept of a sustainable film industry could be a bit of an oxymoron at times: if you wanted to make the sort of cultural films that would not otherwise be made then you would always be reliant on public money. By distributing good cause money, the BFI was always backing risky projects that had essentially market-failed before they had even been made, because if they had been able to secure sufficient private or commercial investment to be made then they would not have needed to seek public money.

Nevertheless, the BFI was always under the dual tensions of needing to meet the requirements of their funding while also wanting to see their projects go on to achieve a high level of popular success.

In answer to the question, he would not find this situation to be unhealthy if the resulting films were punching above their weight, finding an audience, finding a level of critical success and fundamentally doing something for the careers of everybody involved in them.

He provided a statistic of his own, which was that 60-70% of the films that the BFI invested in were first, second or third features, so there was an incredible amount of opportunity generation happening as a result of their work that otherwise would not have been provided by the private or commercial sector.

Marc Samuelson observed that about 80% of directors that had made a British film in the last ten years had never gone on to make a second film.

Ben Roberts did not believe that this was entirely accurate because it did not mean that none of these people ever had a subsequent career. In particular, it did not capture people that went on to work in TV or other fields, or who moved to work in other countries, or people like Gareth Edwards – who had directed *Monsters* before moving into specialising in VFX.



In terms of progression, the BFI were aware of the lack of opportunities for people seeking to move from their first to their second film, and were measuring this when they looked at projects and compiled data.

Marc Samuelson asked Ben if there was a shortage of talent, or if there was a lot of talent just seeking to burst through.

Ben Roberts explained that the BFI had just launched a talent development agency, called The Network, which would move about £3.5m of their lottery funds out of their immediate hands to a network of partners nationally, including Creative England, Film London and Creative Scotland. This was earmarked for finding the next generation of talent.

Initial feedback indicated that there were an incredible number of writers and directors, but not enough producers to work with them and turn what they were doing into viable, fundable and makeable projects. Most of the BFI's enquires came from writers or directors seeking funding; however, the BFI typically would turn these down because they would only allocate funds to producers or to the production company, because they would be the person with responsibility for pulling the finance plan together. To him, this said that there was not a shortage of talent, but definitely a shortage of producers.

It was sometimes the case that the BFI would prefer certain projects to spend another 12-18 months developing their material – although he recognised that the film makers were also under pressure to get their project into production so that they could start earning their fees. However, there were definitely projects that were being delayed, particularly outside London, due to a lack of producers who were readily available and eager to engage with the sort of talent that the BFI was attracting through The Network.

Marc Samuelson asked Ben about the 'Three Ticks' scheme.

Ben Roberts explained that these were guidelines that the BFI attached to lottery funding that imposed obligations upon recipients to consider the diversity of their production, including crewing, casting, creating entry level opportunities and a range of other factors. Once the BFI had chosen to invest in projects they would ask the producer to explain how they were planning to meet the minimum level of requirements in these guidelines. There were numerous different ways that people could fulfil these and they were intended, not as quotas, but rather a framework for people to look at and consider whether there was anything that they could do to improve their levels of diversity – he considered that deficiencies in this area were due more to thoughtlessness than anything else. The declarations from the producer would then be run through the BFI's certification unit, who would score the cultural test and carry that declaration to the Lottery Finance Committee, who would then confirm the compliance of the project before releasing any funds.

At present, it was necessary to be compliant in two out of three areas – the BFI had put nine possible points through the Lottery Finance Committee, who had confirmed that one would score in two areas and that the other eight would score in all three.

Marc Samuelson had long been a supporter of this scheme, although he noted that, as with any new scheme, it could be said to have some rough edges or lead to some unintended consequences. He asked Ben if he had ever considered extending the Three Ticks so that compliance with them would become a requirement for accessing the tax credit. He also asked him to clarify that they were legal.

Ben Roberts said that there were areas where the Three Ticks needed modification, but that he hoped that these would have become robust and implementable by September. He also confirmed that the Three Ticks were fully legal.

He, and the BFI, wanted to see the Three Ticks extended as widely as possible. They were investing about £70m a year in film production, across 25 films, and they wanted to see the most seismic change in workforce and behaviours across the piece. This would happen if they could get all of the inward investment productions to follow the same set of principles.

The BFI had spoken to DCMS about this – they being the department that were fundamentally responsible for what the cultural test looked like – and they would need to clarify what the impact upon the Treasury would be as well. It was also important to bear in mind that if the guidelines were too complex then there was a real risk that the studios might instead seek alternative places to invest.

He accepted that the current system was not fully implementable, but the BFI would be speaking to DCMS after the Election to seek to push this a bit further on. This was a conversation that was very live and had attracted widespread support. However, and as with the various green initiatives that the BFI also backed, there were concerns over whether the targets were too ambitious to achieve within the required timeframe.

Marc Samuelson asked if the BFI were prepared for the cutbacks that would doubtless come after the Election, regardless of which side won.

Ben Roberts said that this was really not his question to answer. Lottery funds would not be cut, so this would be a grant and aid conversation and would be a really serious issue for the BFI and all of the NDPB's and big cultural organisations in the UK.

Marc Samuelson invited questions from the audience.

A London Film School Student asked if Ben could talk about the recent Co-Production treaty with China, and if the BFI had any plans to work with any Chinese film companies.

Ben Roberts said that this treaty had been ratified only recently and had been a huge piece of work that probably only the BFI would have been able to make happen.



Because this was still such a new treaty, there had not yet been any opportunity for live co-production deals to form as yet. However, and unlike the relationship with the US, he did not anticipate that a huge number of Chinese studios would come and make films in the UK; instead, the real opportunity was that this might give UK films access to the massive audiences of the Chinese market, so there was a huge potential export opportunity.

Marc Samuelson asked if, bearing in mind the Chinese Government's quota on films, this might be the only way for British films to manage to get Chinese releases.

Ben Roberts said that this was one possible route, but there were also ongoing conversations with the Chinese Government over this. The relationship currently seemed strong, but this was a long term plan and was still a developing space. While no co-production projects had formed as yet, Isobel Davies from his team had already led two delegations of producers to China, so they were learning how to work together.

An Audience Member observed that the Canadian Film Board had been doing a phenomenal job in investing in cultural film making, especially for online and digital platforms. Given his previous comments about online distribution and reaching new audiences, he asked Ben if the BFI had any interest in trying to make cultural and indie films specifically for distribution over digital platforms.

Ben Roberts said that their hands were tied in this respect because one of the few stipulations around lottery funding was that any projects had to pass the cultural test to qualify for the tax relief, and this mandated that any project be intended for a theatrical release. Consequently, setting up something like this would require the BFI to completely rewrite their guidelines and change their criteria.

Even if they could, he was unsure whether this would be something that the BFI would necessarily want to pursue. As a body, the BFI was focussed on film and, while they would always be open to looking at ways of extending the reach of film, and had distribution funds that allowed them to actively promote the release of films on multiple platforms, they were not able to move into new and experimental fields at

this time. The BFI had many demands upon its resources and would struggle to fund additional commitments.

This was not due to a lack of interest or a desire to see something in this space – the BFI had spoken to the Arts Council over the possibility of co-funding a development pot, which would have been similar to the sort of thing that was happening in Canada. However, this had not progressed for a number of reasons.

Marc Samuelson thanked Ben Roberts.

*Copyright BSAC 2015. All rights reserved.
For written permission to reproduce any part of this report please contact BSAC.
This will normally be provided if BSAC is fully credited.*