



United Kingdom Jason Wood

Following the shock announcement in July 2010 that the UK Film Council was to be abolished, the British Film Institute (BFI) duly became the lead body for film in the UK on 1 April 2011. Most of the UK Film Council's core functions were transferred, including the distribution of National Lottery funding for the development and production of new British films, as well as audience development activity through supporting film distribution and exhibition.

The BFI also took over responsibility for the certification of UK films (which enables filmmakers to access the UK film tax relief for film production); film education; the Research and Statistics Unit; overseeing support for film in the English Regions; liaising with the National Screen Agencies in the devolved Nations; funding skills development for the film workforce in partnership with Skillset; and supporting First Light and MEDIA Desk UK. The responsibility for oversight of the BFI itself, previously held by the UK Film Council, has now transferred to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Also from 1 April, the UK Film Council's role in encouraging inward investment into the UK moved across to Film London, in a public/private partnership with Warner Bros., Pinewood Studios Group, the Production Guild, UK Screen Association and others.

To ensure a smooth transition, the BFI simultaneously announced a new transitional Lottery Film Fund to support organisations across the UK dedicated to delivering audience development activities for specialised and British film. The €2million fund will provide transitional financial support for one year, to enable bodies such as independent cinemas,

film festivals, film clubs and societies, arts centres and regional archives to continue their vital work in delivering film to audiences. At the same time, the fund is designed to give organisations stability and continuity during this year of transition; to cope not only with challenging finances, but also with structural change in public funding across film.

The Minister for the Creative Industries, Ed Vaizey, sounded a triumphant note: 'The transfer of UKFC activities has been concluded with no disruption to filmmakers. The BFI will be administering British film certification; taking over as the Lottery distributor; and overseeing a 60 per cent increased share of Lottery proceeds for British films. In retaining key industry expertise and building on the wealth of knowledge already in the BFI, the future of British film is in safe hands.'

The 1 April date could have been unfortunately prophetic, but thankfully the transfer seems to have proved painless and there are already signs of a prudent approach to the management of resources and a genuine commitment to cinema in the UK. Although the UK Film Council grant-in-aid was cut by 50 per cent before it transferred to the BFI, the agreed Lottery funding priorities for distribution and exhibition, as outlined in the UK Film Council's three-year plan until 31 March 2012, are to be honoured, with the exception of the Innovation Fund. Funding film development remains a priority, with the Film Fund and the Prints and Advertising Fund continuing to accept and assess applications for funding, with the respective Heads of the funds also continuing to green-light awards to films in development, production and distribution. Significantly, the BFI increased the Lottery

fund for film by 20 per cent, from €15million to €18million in 2011/12.

With British films such as **Wuthering Heights**, **We Need to Talk About Kevin**, **Shame** and **Two Years At Sea** delivering a strong showing at international film festivals, British film found itself firmly in the spotlight on the world's stage, precipitating the announcement of fast-tracking support for Britain's film industry internationally. In recognition of the need for immediate action whilst the industry awaits the Government's new Film Policy Review and the BFI's own Forward Plan for Film, the BFI made available funds to promote British film and talent internationally, including activity at Sundance, Berlin and Cannes. Financial support was also given to the Film London Production Market, which took place at October's BFI London Film Festival. Amanda Nevill, the CEO of the BFI commented: 'This is a powerful moment for the British film industry and I want to congratulate our British film talent who are excelling on the world's stage. Ahead of us we have major international markets and the awards seasons and it is crucially important that the BFI supports the industry now in this transitional period. Going forward we will be developing an international strategy as one of the key priorities in the BFI's five year Forward Plan for Film, which launches next year, informed by the recommendations from the Review of Film Policy. It's enormously exciting that the BFI will spearhead this new phase for British film around the world.'



Andrea Arnold's **Wuthering Heights**



Tom Hooper's **The King's Speech**

Audience figures would also suggest that on home soil British cinema is indeed in rude health and that there is cause for industry optimism. Statistics for UK Box Office results are not published until after this edition of the IFG will have gone to press but the half-year report from the BFI's Research and Statistics Unit offers encouraging reading. UK cinema admissions for the first six months of 2011 were 80.7million, up 0.7 per cent on the first half of 2010. This represents the second-highest first half admissions of the last five years. The year began with the release of Tom Hooper's multi-Academy Award-winning **The King's Speech** (mentioned in the 2010 overview), which topped the box office charts for three weeks and remained in the top ten for almost three months. Grossing over €45million at the UK box office, a record for an independent UK film, this rousing if rather predictable royal drama helped lift admissions by almost 16 per cent in February. Ticket sales in March and April were down almost 24 per cent on the same period in 2010, but June admissions saw a marked increase on the equivalent month last year, when the World Cup had a major impact on release schedules and box office. Average weekly admissions were three million in June, up from two million in 2010. In terms of predicting the remainder of the year, admissions at the end of October were up one per cent on the previous year and November looks set to better it too. According to Sean Perkins, Acting Head of Research and Statistics Unit at the British Film Institute, 'I'd be very surprised if it didn't conform to the

David Yates' *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2*

"plateau" we've seen since 2002 – in other words just one or two per cent up or down on the previous year'.

There were numerous other box-office behemoths. The concluding part of the *Harry Potter* franchise, a cash cow Warners Bros. will find difficult to replace (a loss not cushioned by Christopher Nolan's imminent sign-off from Batman with **The Dark Knight Rises**), David Yates' 3D **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2** pleased critics and Potterites alike. There has been much recent debate about a perceived audience loss of appetite for the 3D format (though this year interestingly saw the release of three of the most interesting exponents of the format yet: *TT3D Closer to the Edge*, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* and *Pina*), but Yates' final showdown between Potter and the evil Lord Voldemort grossed a staggering €73million. Perhaps more of a bolt from the blue was the popularity of the big screen spin-off of **The Inbetweeners**.

Ben Palmer's *The Inbetweeners*

Taking its four naïve suburban heroes on a Mediterranean jaunt in search of sexual fulfilment (with a few sharp observations about Brits abroad offsetting some of the more bawdy moments), the film doesn't stray far from the small-screen version, a move which saw an impressive box-office haul of just under €45million (a smidgeon behind *The King's Speech*); never did the adage 'if it ain't broke don't fix it' seem so apt. Though directed by a Swede, **Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy** has been warmly embraced as a British success. An intricate, classy and immaculately designed adaptation of John Le Carré's much loved espionage thriller, Tomas Alfredson marshals an impressive cast including Colin Firth, John Hurt, Mark Strong and Benedict Cumberbatch. Returning to a leading man role, Gary Oldman excels as George Smiley, the British intelligence officer brought out of forced retirement to hunt down a Soviet mole. The film's current box office stands at over €13million. The commercial success of the other Brit spy film **Johnny English Reborn** was altogether more predictable and dispiriting.

Tomas Alfredson's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*

Following up a phenomenon like *Slumdog Millionaire* was always going to be a tall order, but Danny Boyle went about it with quiet assurance with **127 Hours**. Featuring a sensational performance from James Franco as Aron Ralston, the hiker forced to amputate his arm to free it from a trapped boulder, the film sustains an impressive tension despite awareness of the outcome. Another veteran director returning to the filmmaking

fray this year, Ken Loach's **Route Irish** was a characteristically committed and abrasive affair that nonetheless left a slight feeling of disappointment. The tale of private security contractors working in the Middle East, the film felt a little didactic. Thankfully, the Digital reissue of *Kes* was on hand to remind us of Loach's greatness. Other reissue highlights included *The Great White Silence*, *Deep End* and *Whiskey Galore*.



Ken Loach's **Route Irish**

Hanna, the fourth feature from Joe Wright, was a total misfire. The account of a feral teenage assassin (Saoirse Ronan) being tracked down by a ruthless intelligence operative (Cate Blanchett), it was slick, shallow and instantly forgettable. Other directors entering the more established period of their careers fared better. Returning to the screen after a prolonged absence and production difficulties on *The Lovely Bones* (which was eventually directed by Peter Jackson), Lynne Ramsey teamed up with Tilda Swinton and novelist Lionel Shriver to compelling effect with *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Swinton is Eva, a mother coping with a tragic event that has torn her family apart. Through a series of flashbacks, Eva questions her suitability as a mother, wondering if her parenting skills were the reason for the disaffected relationship she had with her son and how much responsibility she should shoulder for his actions.

With only her third feature Andrea Arnold has established herself as one of the brightest (and loudest) voices in contemporary British



Cary Fukunaga's **Jane Eyre**

filmmaking. A radical treatment of Emily Brönte's novel, *Wuthering Heights* uses mostly non-professional actors and a black Heathcliff to capture the spirit of life on the Yorkshire moors and the dangers of illicit romance. The film is beautifully shot by Robbie Ryan who makes the most of the harsh climate and misty landscape. A refreshing take on a familiar story, Arnold's vision is poles apart from Cary Fukunaga's more traditional tilt at Charlotte Brönte's **Jane Eyre**.

Though only the second feature from Joanna Hogg, **Archipelago** establishes her as a filmmaker of the highest order. Adored by critics – though it precipitated a furious debate on the web pages of the *Guardian* following Peter Bradshaw's five star review – the film follows the gathering of a dysfunctional upper-class family on a remote British island for an increasingly strained vacation. A devastating portrait of emotional crisis that gradually brings anxiety and torpor into sharp focus, the film is immaculately constructed with Hogg's painterly eye.



Lynne Ramsay's **We Need to Talk About Kevin**



Terence Davies' *The Deep Blue Sea*

2011 saw the welcome return to the screen of perhaps Britain's greatest living filmmaker, Terence Davies. An exquisite adaptation of Terence Rattigan's play, **The Deep Blue Sea** offers a richly rewarding evocation of life in 1950s London, which provides the backdrop to an illicit love affair between Hester Collyer (Rachel Weisz) and battle-scarred RAF pilot Freddie Page (Tom Hiddleston). Influenced by Vermeer and featuring a characteristic use of popular 1950s tunes, this affectionate homage to the melodramas of the era is also an astute depiction of raw passion and sincere love that cannot be reciprocated.



Asif Kapadia's *Senna*

In a world blighted by economic crisis, war and the imminent destruction of the planet, British documentaries provided both commentary and escape. By far the most visible documentary of the year, Asif Kapadia's **Senna**, was also the most successful (it's three million-plus box office puts it in the top five most successful documentaries of all time in this country).

Senna began its run by winning the Best Documentary award at Sundance. A pulsating and poignant celebration of the physical and spiritual achievements of Ayrton Senna, the film is comprised entirely of archive footage.

Another film about sport that turns out to not really be very much about sport at all, Stevan Riley's **Fire in Babylon** is a remarkable account of how the West Indies cricket team triumphed over England to become one of the most successful sporting teams in history. Narrated by members of the legendary team, the film contextualises their achievements and highlights the players' role in confronting racism and undermining stereotypes.

Over the last five years an independent record shop has closed in the UK every three days. **Sound it Out** looks at the very last surviving vinyl record shop in Teesside, North East England. A cultural haven in one of the most deprived areas in the UK, director Jeanie Finlay, who grew up three miles from the shop, documents a place that is thriving against the odds and the local community that keeps it alive. This is a distinctive, funny and intimate film about men, the North and the irreplaceable role music plays in our lives. Also music related, Paul Kelly's **Lawrence of Belgravia** offered a revealing portrait of former Felt front-man Lawrence as he seeks to get his life and musical career back on track. The film enjoyed three sell-out performances at the London Film Festival, the last under the excellent tenure of departing Artistic Director Sandra Hebron. Her replacement is Claire Stewart. Edinburgh also gets a new Artistic



Jeanie Finlay's *Sound It Out*

Director in Chris Fujiwara. Let's hope he can revive the festival's flagging fortunes.

In **Project Nim** James Marsh presents the moving story of a life hijacked by science. Nim was raised as a human child at Columbia University in order for those following his every action to ascertain whether chimpanzees had the skills to communicate with the complexity of humans. Featuring remarkable archive footage and interviews with everyone involved in Nim's life, Marsh offers a provocative contribution to the nature/nurture debate. Sadly, the film proved to be one of the final releases from Icon, who suffered closure in November this year. Their loss will be keenly felt.



James Marsh's **Project Nim**

Nobody noticed when 38-year-old Joyce Vincent died in her bedsit above a shopping centre in North London in 2003. When her skeleton was discovered three years later, her heating and television were still on. Newspaper reports offered few details of Joyce's life, not even a photograph. Who was Joyce Vincent? And how could this happen to someone in our day and age, the so-called age of communication? **Dreams of a Life** is Carol Morley's quest to discover who Joyce was and how she came to be so forgotten. Morley placed adverts in newspapers, on the Internet and on the side of a London taxi. As a result she discovered Joyce's former friends, lovers and colleagues. Their testimonies, together with re-imagined scenes from Joyce's life, form a haunting, multilayered portrait of Joyce, and an insight into the world she inhabited.



Carol Morley's **Dreams of a Life**

Due for release next year as part of Soda's consistently laudable New British Cinema Quarterly strand (2011's highlight being Jamie Thraves' **Treacle Jnr.**), Grant Gee's **Patience (After Sebald)** is a multi-layered essay film on landscape, art, history, life and loss. It offers a unique exploration of the life, work and influence of W. G. Sebald via a long walk through coastal East Anglia, tracing the thematic and narrative thread of his most famous book, *The Rings of Saturn*. Visually and aurally innovative, the film features contributions from Tacita Dean, Rick Moody, Andrew Motion, Chris Petit, Iain Sinclair and Marina Warner.

2011 witnessed the gratifying emergence of a high number of new voices. A follow-up to *Down Terrace*, **Kill List** saw Brighton-based Ben Wheatley cement his reputation as an incredibly original talent. Jay is an ex-soldier-turned-assassin; following a botched job in Russia, he returns home, depressed, to an assignment travelling the country, despatching



Ben Wheatley's **Kill List**

people whose names appear on a list. Assuming that they had it coming, Jay soon begins to suspect that there is a darker force at work. Evocative of *The Wicker Man*, but if anything more unnerving, the film packs a powerful punch to the gut that doesn't diminish, even with repeated viewings.



Richard Ayoade's *Submarine*

An affecting coming-of-age comedy from British TV comedy *IT Crowd* actor Richard Ayoade, **Submarine** offered one of the brightest and most cine-literate British features of the year. Adapted from Joe Dunthorne's cult novel, this tale of fifteen-year-old Swansea schoolboy Oliver Tate's obsession with losing his virginity and his desperate attempt to save his parents' marriage is a touching look at the trials of adolescence.

After playing a drippy mystic for Ayoade, actor Paddy Considine stepped behind the camera for his first feature as director with emotionally bruising **Tyrannosaur**. Influenced by Alan Clarke and Gary Oldman's *Nil By Mouth*, the film features a sensational turn by Olivia Coleman as Hannah, a woman desperately trying to find a way to escape her abusive husband James (a truly terrifying Eddie Marsan). When she meets Joseph (Peter Mullan) she finds some possibility of happiness, but he also has his own demons to deal with.

A one-night stand turns into something altogether more unexpected in Andrew Haigh's heartfelt **Weekend**. One of the most positively reviewed films of the year, this

naturalistic study of two men (excellently played by Tom Cullen and Chris New) falling in love with each other deftly depicts a new relationship unfolding whilst astutely articulating the contemporary gay experience. Aching romantic, the film achieved a sizeable following, both in Britain and in the US.

Of a more experimental bent, **Two Years At Sea** saw artist/filmmaker Ben Rivers return to the character of Jake Williams, a man first portrayed in Rivers' *This Is My Land*. Jake lives alone in a ramshackle house in the middle of the forest. He goes for walks whatever the weather and takes naps in the misty fields and woods. He builds a raft to spend time fishing in a loch and drives a beat-up old jeep to pick up supplies of wood. Seen across the seasons, surviving frugally and passing the time with strange projects, he is living the radical dream he had as a younger man, a dream he spent two years working at sea to realise. Winner of a FIPRESCI Prize at Venice, this is a beguiling, contemplative work.



Ben Rivers' *Two Years At Sea*

Evolving as a series of drawings, **This Our Still Life** offers a beguiling and expansive portrait of 'Louyre', the remote tumbledown Pyrenean hidey-hole that one-man filmmaking industry Andrew Kötting shares with his partner Leila McMillan and their daughter, Eden. A family of artists for whom creativity flows like blood, life in this part-time rural idyll is elemental, rudimentary, fun and intimate. Filmed over a twenty-year period, the film explores notions of nostalgia, memory, isolation and love, as it offers snatched insights into the minutiae of the Kötting family's everyday life.



Joe Cornish's **Attack the Block**

Ben Rivers, Andrew Kötting, Joanna Hogg, Paddy Considine, Joe Cornish (whose **Attack the Block** was tremendous fun) and Andrew Haigh are evidence of the current vitality to be found in British cinema, a vitality that prompted the Guardian's Andrew Pulver to pronounce that we are currently experiencing 'a golden age' in the medium. Pulver certainly has a point, but the next step is to ensure that audiences get to experience this vitality for despite the support across the industry from producers, distributors, exhibitors and critics, many of the less obviously commercial titles regularly fail to chime with a British public who still seem resistant to move outside of their comfort zone (*Weekend* being the one notable exception). Considine's *Tyrannosaur* is a good case in point. Rapturously received by the press and released with significant fanfare by its distributor, it met with what can best be described as mediocre success. *Kill List* suffered a similar fate, so it is imperative to ensure that if these films are getting made and are supported by the industry, then they also need to receive the backing of the British public. The films are there, but to ensure that they continue to be, people have to go and see them.

Peering ahead into the early part of 2012, a number of significant British releases stand out in terms of their likely impact on the cinematic landscape. Phyllida Lloyd's **The Iron Lady** is powered by an awards-friendly performance by Meryl Streep as Margaret Thatcher. There is no doubting Streep's astonishing transformation into one of the most iconic figures in British politics, but

the film, scripted by Abi Morgan, pulls its punches, presenting Thatcher as a befuddled geriatric pining for her dear departed Dennis (Jim Broadbent). It would no doubt have been too much to expect a more frank portrayal of Thatcher's ruinous policies, but the film's refusal to offer any kind of analysis of Tory rule is perplexing and infuriating.



Phyllida Lloyd's **The Iron Lady**

Morgan redeems herself, however, with a co-writing credit on **Shame**, Steve McQueen's stunning follow-up to *Hunger*. Featuring the ubiquitous Michael Fassbender (the hands down British actor of the year) as a successful New York broker with a debilitating sex addiction, this impeccably executed and performed drama brilliantly picks at existential angst and emotional crisis, and is adult in every sense of the word.



Steve McQueen's **Shame**

A bold directorial debut from Ralph Fiennes, **Coriolanus** is a muscular version of Shakespeare's play about power. Drawing parallels with modern-day events, Fiennes sets



Ralph Fiennes' *Coriolanus*

the action against the backdrop of a modern Balkan war zone and takes on the role of the eponymous war hero-turned-politician. Barry Ackroyd's cinematography and the visceral battle scenes are tremendous.

Sources

Sean Perkins, Acting Head of Research and Statistics Unit, British Film Institute.

Andrew Pulver, *Britain's Golden Age is Now*, The Guardian, October 13, 2011.

The year's best films

Archipelago (Joanna Hogg)

Kill List (Ben Wheatley)

Dreams of a Life (Carol Morley)

We Need to Talk About Kevin (Lynn Ramsey)

Two Years At Sea (Ben Rivers)



Joanna Hogg's *Archipelago*

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1996 Modem Festival
<http://1996modfest.blogspot.com>

to be continued

Directory

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