

From Porridge to Pelf: Young Adam and the Mysterious Scottish Film Industry

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It was too dark and it was too late to do anything. I looked for a trace of her for a long time but, except for the debris that was floating past, the water was evenly dark.

Alexander Trocchi, *Young Adam*, 1954

May the force be with you.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, 2002

A distressing piece of news from Edinburgh yesterday. Jenny Brown, former literature director of the Book Trust is planning to make a bid to UNESCO for Edinburgh to be given an honorary status as 'World City of Literature'. It may have had agents' faces reddening with the prospect of lining their pockets, but 'literature as heritage' is surely a criminal act, and 'literature as tourist attraction' is a capital offence. The idea—as described gleefully in the press—that the bid would be based on the Famous Five monotony of JK Rowling's Pottermania or the execrable Ian Rankin surely betrays a dead culture operating behind closed doors.

That Sir Walter Scott was also used to prop up the cadaver hardly helps the credibility gap. It all seems redolent of the words of one man you wouldn't want to focus on for any corporate bid. When a heroine-filled Trocchi laid into a whisky-fuelled MacDiarmid at the Edinburgh Writers' Conference festival in Edinburgh in 1962 he remarked: "The whole atmosphere seems to me turgid, petty, provincial, the stale-porridge, bible-class nonsense."

So no great change here. Where's the vitality? Where's the wider Scottish world outside of Edinburgh, or even—god forbid—the wider world outside Scotland? It seems such a pokey, parochial plan. Step forward Alexander Trocchi, everyone's favourite smack-head, constantly overdue for a comeback to his rightful place atop the throne of Scottish culture. Step forward the glitzy Film Festival and this year's star turn, *Young Adam* based on his 1954 novel. But, while the film itself is brilliant its production was plagued by such a trail of financial crises that half the cast are now

at war with the UK funding bodies.

Is that body floating just beneath the surface our very own 'film industry' drowned by cultural stinginess, lack of vision and a hopeless lack of aspiration?

With the Jedi Knight of Scottish film teaming up with our own literary Darth Vader, who wouldn't have put money on the UK Film Council putting a little backing behind a film, set and shot in Scotland? Instead the film—which looks like being a critical and box-office success—has been undermined by the poverty of imagination of the UK and Scottish Film bodies, which now look not just like an overly cautious and bankrupt monopoly, but as cultural-guardians denying access to anything which falls outside their own world view. Increasing numbers of film-insiders point accusing fingers at the funders, that they're the equivalent of a skint version of Berlusconi's news and media empire, only rolled up in a cushy wee film *QUANGO*.

Main Feature

There's no doubt the adaptation's a success. Set in a steamy Glasgow of the early 1950s, the book/film focuses on the increasing crisis of Joe (Ewan McGregor), an itinerant young man who finds work on a barge owned by the earthy Les (Peter Mullan—who else?!) and his enigmatic wife Ella (Tilda Swinton). One afternoon Joe and Les happen upon a corpse of a young woman floating in the water.

The unexpectedness of a tale of existential crisis set on a canal between Edinburgh and Glasgow might be shocking to the contemporary reader. So the prospect of a re-telling for a wider domestic and international audience had most of Scotland's literati salivating. Although the film itself surpasses expectations—with McGregor's return to Scotland for the first time in seven years being marked by a remarkable performance, and Byrne's score affecting the genuinely tense unfolding story—a quick glance at the film's gestation suggests it emerged *despite* not *because* of any film body.

It's enough to make you blush. Here's a rare



thing. A bona fide 20th Century Scottish literary classic with international recognition, by the Glasgow end of the SIGMA Project (other participants Bill Burroughs and Kenneth White). The music's by Dumbarton's favourite son, David Byrne. It has a promising young writer/director David Mackenzie who has written a number of award-winning shorts for the BBC and Channel Four, most recently *Marcie's Dowry*, which showed in the Critics Week at last year's Cannes Film Festival. But it twice came close to being binned for lack of support.

Surprising that McGregor, rather than the 'dangerous' Trocchi didn't secure some serious backing. Instead McGregor claims his presence put off British backers who 'won't back a film with stars'. Others claim that the story is more complicated. Although having McGregor cast eventually may have swung the film, it also denied the role to another young actor and, arguably, what should

have been 'a film adapted from a novel by Trocchi' instead became 'a film with Ewan McGregor in it.'

Despite all this it's not McGregor but his co-star Tilda Swinton who's been more vocal in articulating the problems of the British film scene. In fact the whole film has become a sort of focal point for dissatisfaction about the state of the film 'industry'. "At the 11th hour the film council contributed the ever-crucial final 12% of the modest budget," she states with mock gratitude, adding, "Given its history I think it might be understandable why those of us who saw it through those difficult tottering months might be uncomfortable with the idea of this being a 'British' film first and foremost when the bedrock of its funding was from Scotland and for so many months our project was slapped down by London."

Certainly Swinton's comments are backed up by Alex Cox, (Repo-Man, Sid and Nancy and Three Businessmen amongst other great films). Liverpool-based Cox explains: "The main problem with the Film Council is that it's totally focused on London and Los Angeles. It has no regional remit. I fear this is unlikely to change and that as filmmakers we may have to look elsewhere for our funding." Robert Jones from the UKFC responded saying, "Cox should look at what we've done rather than think of good soundbites. We've done several films around the UK and several short films. To say we are Londoncentric only betrays his ignorance."

"All films are difficult to fund. The UKFC has put substantial funds into a film that is risky, and if we see it back I'll be very surprised. It's edgy. It's dangerous stuff."

Jones dismisses Swinton's comments as someone "not involved in the finance" and Alex Cox as someone who just wants "to be seen to be railing against the establishment". But how edgy can Crieff's finest be? And if having Ewan McGregor in your lead role marks the film out as "high risk"—God help us.

Film writer Jack Mottram disagrees: "There is a tendency among commentators to bemoan a perceived lack of funding, to be dewy-eyed about past successes while ignoring current accomplishments." And the ubiquitous Hannah McGill chirps: "People do tend to moan but the film culture in Scotland is in great shape." Both are understandably echoing the positive spin being put out at the time of the Edinburgh International Film Festival. Yes Alison Peebles' *Afterlife*, and *Wilbur Tries to Kill Himself* by Lone Scherfig are good strong new films at least with some Scottish backing. For sure Scottish Screen were able to bail Peter Mullan's *Magdalene Sisters* to the tune of £150,000 to stop it going to Ireland and forked out to contribute to Saul Metzstein's *Late Night Shopping*. All fine. But in film world this is small beer.

It's not enough for media-pals and warm-hearted critics to talk up an 'industry' when it's really just a small community of talented people waiting for someone to have a bit of chutzpah. While digital film making and shorts are good and innovative new schemes, you can only have so many 'schemes' before the game's a bogey. If Scottish publishers produced only comics and fanzines wouldn't somebody eventually say, "Aren't there any Scottish novels?" Nor would it be considered credible if the odd novel to be produced was made by a London publisher, who maybe employed a couple of Scottish proof-readers. It's not good enough to put down any criticism of the current situation as 'moaning'—and this from our 'critics'.

But the UK Film Council's Premiere Fund eventually invested £500,000 in *Young Adam*. So Robert Jones has a point. The film was made. It is good. Do viewers care about the boring machinations of film production? Not a wrinkle.

So what's the problem?

The problem is we don't make feature films in Scotland. Feature films are important. Occasionally other people come here and make films and employ some people. *Young Adam* should have been financed and produced here



employing local talent and injecting much needed vigour into the film community. That it spluttered into life is an ironic tragedy of Trocchian proportions. At best we're looking for the UK body to develop 'a regional remit', a chance to project our culture to the world. In 1997 we made one 'indigenous film'. In 1998 we made another one. In 1999 we made three, and in 2000 we made two.¹ It adds up to another classic Scottish example of missed opportunity, chronic lack of ambition and a remote and bloated public body with too much admin, little clout and not enough production cash. It's not their fault, and the false ceiling of £500,000 means that there's little Scottish Screen can do but chirp along with pockets of seed money.

It was a similar story for Peter Broughan's recently collapsed Graeme Obree feature, and for *Mary Queen of Scots*—which got its head chopped-off despite having some of Sean Connery's dough, Jimmy McGovern's writing talent and a classic-cut of kitschy "tragic Scottish history." Sadly for the Scottish film community what was billed as a £20m movie for general release has been downgraded to a £5m TV drama, the lead role will be played by an unknown French actress. The project is now being filmed in Romania to save money.

What Cox calls 'edgy dangerous stuff' is just what good literature should be. It's only in any way edgy next to stuff that you can use in a brochure flogging Greyfriar's Bobby paperweights or Slytherin Snowglobes. The whole experience of the commodified book-world and the self-satisfied film-world evokes Trocchi's comment that: "All great art, and today all great artlessness, must appear extreme to the mass of men, as we know them today. It springs from the anguish of great souls. From the souls of men not formed, but deformed in factories whose inspiration is pelf". It seems as true today as the "stale porridge" of yesterday.

Notes

1. Scottish Executive, Scottish Screen - A Review by the Scottish Executive, Annex B