Film Policy and Soft Power: Learning from Others

Submission to the Select Committee on ‘Soft Power and the UK’s Influence’ from the Centre for World Cinemas, University of Leeds and B: Film: The Birmingham Centre for Film Studies

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For further information please contact:

Professor Paul Cooke
Centenary Chair in World Cinemas
Leeds Humanities Research Institute
29-31 Clarendon Place
University of Leeds
Leeds
LS2 9JT
tel: +44 (0)113 3433507
e-mail: p.cooke@leeds.ac.uk

1. This submission is informed by two projects currently being led by the Centre for World Cinemas at the University of Leeds: ‘Film Policy, Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power’ (funded by the Worldwide Universities Network) and ‘Screening European Heritage: History on Film, the Heritage Industry and Cultural Policy’ (funded by the AHRC and run in collaboration with B-Film: The Birmingham Centre for Film Studies). Both projects examine the way film and film policy around the world supports the use of the visual media as a vehicle for the communication of national identity and historical understanding at home and abroad. This process of communication plays a key role in the generation of a nation’s soft power. For the UK, film is particularly important in this regard, with film policy being crucial to ensuring that the soft power of the nation’s visual culture is fully leveraged.

2. We welcome the committee’s return to Joseph Nye’s foundational definition of soft power in its introductory comments. In recent years there has been a significant increase in discussion of this term. Soft power is a complex idea, defined by, and related to, a whole host of policy areas (economic policy, public diplomacy, foreign policy etc). However, it also has a distinct role within this landscape which is often ignored, particularly in popular discussions of the term where it is frequently conflated with discussions of economic imperialism and/or cultural propaganda. At the heart of our understanding of soft power is the imperative to gain international influence and promote domestic economic growth through the attractiveness of one’s culture and values, effectively communicated to external audiences.

3. The cultural industries in general, and the media in particular, have long been understood to play a key role in the generation of soft power and are considered to be central to the UK’s current position as the leading nation in the IFG-Monocle Soft Power Index. The nation’s success in this year’s survey is viewed by many commentators to be the result of events such as the
filmmaker Danny Boyle’s Olympic opening ceremony as well as the international impact of certain British historical dramas from *The King’s Speech* (2010) to *Downton Abbey* (2010-).

4. We particularly welcome the committee’s intention to ‘learn from others’ in its deliberations. The relationship between soft power *avant la lettre* and film policy is long and there are numerous examples of where it has failed to be generated. Here one might mention US foreign cultural policy in Germany in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, where Hollywood imports were used as a straightforward ‘re-education’ tool. While the ethos of, for example, John Ford’s westerns was perceived by the US authorities as a perfect vehicle to explain the advantages of Western democracy, their often racist presentation of native Americans was instead viewed by many German audiences as reflecting an ideology reminiscent of National Socialism (for further discussion see the work of Jennifer Fay 2008). Or, we might mention the European film-funding schemes MEDIA and Eurimages. While the main aim of these schemes is to support the development of a sustainable European film industry, they are also rooted in the creation of a common, if loosely defined, understanding of European identity which can both help cement cultural links across the region and enable European cultural productions to have a global impact. Unfortunately, a large percentage of the films produced by these schemes fail to find any substantial audience, either at home or abroad. Such films are often condemned as ‘europuddings’ which, as the scholar Randall Halle notes, invariably have to appeal to the ‘lowest common denominator’ in their search of a common understanding of Europeanness, and in the process fail to connect with the public (Halle 2008).

Equally problematic were the efforts in the 1980s by the Basque authorities to produce a series of historical epics that attempted to dictate a wholly affirmative understanding of Basque citizenship, all of which failed to connect with spectators. Finally, one might note the disaster that was *Confucius* (2010), a large-budget Chinese historical fantasy film which was the product of a policy intended to showcase to the world the potential of the Chinese film industry. The film famously flopped, even at home, being unable to compete with James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2010), despite the Hollywood film receiving only very limited distribution within China.

5. In each of these cases, policies have failed because they have attempted, at the very least, to control audiences’ understanding of a given film, at worst, the creative act of filmmaking itself. In the process, such policies have tended to produce banal films that have been dismissed as propaganda, however thinly disguised, by audiences. That said, many of these industries have clearly also enjoyed success and have wielded great influence that attests to their being instrumental in the generation of soft power. Hollywood dominates the world’s cinema screens due to the attractiveness of its product for a huge proportion of the global population. European funding, along with European distribution and exhibition networks, have been instrumental in the success of numerous films, not least *The King’s Speech* which, along with substantial support from the now disbanded UK Film Council, was also funded by MEDIA. And, of course, for many popular commentators at least, it is now seen as inevitable that China’s influence in the global media landscape is set to rise,
demonstrated most obviously in recent discussions between US studios and the state-owned distribution company, the ‘China Film Group’. However, the success of China in the generation of soft power via its film industry will be contingent on it learning from the types of failed attempts outlined in paragraph 4 above, and specifically in allowing filmmakers to produce work that can critically engage with Chinese society and history and, in so doing, connect with audiences at home and abroad.

6. With regard to the situation in the UK, we would like to support the findings of the 2012 Smith report on the British Film Industry (‘A Future for British Film’), as well as the government’s and industry’s response to it. We also welcome the British Council’s 2013 report ‘Influence and Attraction: Culture and the race for soft power in the 21st century’, in particular its emphasis on ‘mutuality’ and the need to foster genuine cross-cultural engagement and understanding for soft power to be nurtured and sustained.

7. The success of the British Film Industry as an engine for the generation of soft power lies in its ability to i) connect with audiences, both at home and abroad through the design and marketing of films that generate high earnings and critical acclaim – in short, that people wish to see; ii) coordinate available domestic funding, working closely in collaboration with the television industry and new media platforms, and maximising training opportunities in these areas iii) engage proactively with transnational funding opportunities within and beyond Europe.

8. With this in mind, we also welcome the BFI’s recently published international strategy with its emphasis on audience development activity and production. Currently, two thirds of box office returns for UK films are earned abroad. We agree with the strategy to coordinate the efforts of key cultural and film industry organisations, under the leadership of the BFI, with the aim of developing long-term relationships with international audiences. We also welcome the development of a UK film ‘brand’ and the ‘We are UK Film’ initiative. However, we also stress the need for a flexible approach to branding in order to reflect and support the great diversity of UK film production and to ensure that the identity of UK film is led by individual creativity rather than ‘top down’ prescriptive criteria.

9. There is a good deal of excellent practice internationally that we might draw on to explore further the soft power potential of film. A small country like Denmark, for instance, has managed to maintain a varied film culture and produce domestic as well as international successes through a funding policy focussed on the ‘bottom up’ nurturing of talent, and encouraging different kinds of productions for different kinds of audiences. This, in turns, offers an example of soft power as a multivalent phenomenon that can, in fact, be utilised not only internationally but also domestically. The European art-house hit *Flame and Citron* (2008), for example, offered a differentiated and nuanced account of the Danish resistance against the Nazi occupation. In the process the film not only won foreign audiences through an emotionally engaging portrayal of the past, it also showcased a positively self-critical image of Denmark’s role during the war, in turn helping to enhance the nation’s
international moral standing. By contrast, the domestic production *This Life* (2012) re-enacted more straightforwardly heroic acts of resistance for the national audience, to tremendous popular acclaim.

10. It is only through the continued nurturing of the industry’s relationship with international audiences and the focussed marketing of UK films abroad, along with a creativity-focussed approach to film development at home, that the country will be able to maintain the international impact of its film in the face of superior levels of investment in production and marketing from other parts of the world (Hollywood, China) that the UK can never hope to match.

Submission authors:
- Dr Axel Bangert, AHRC Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Leeds.
- Dr Lorraine Blakemore, Arts Engaged Fellow, University of Leeds.
- Professor Paul Cooke, Centenary Chair in World Cinemas, University of Leeds.
- Professor Rob Stone, Chair of European Film, University of Birmingham.