

## From Cannes to Berlin: Examining the importance of film festivals in promoting Channel 4 films in Europe.

Channel 4 has long had a productive relationship with Europe through its film sponsorship practices. In creating the Film on Four strand, the channel's Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs was very much influenced by European examples of broadcasters funding films for television and theatrical release, while the channel also entered into many co-productions involving European producers and broadcasters throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The channel also quickly established a firm presence in Europe through participation in film festivals. Many Channel 4 films consistently gained awards at high-profile festivals like Cannes, Venice and Berlin, while in 1987 the channel received public recognition of the value of its film funding policies when David Rose, the Commissioning Editor responsible for Film on Four, was awarded the Rossellini award for 'Services to Cinema.' Participation in festival competitions brought a valuable element of cultural prestige to the channel (a fact which was continually emphasised in the channel's own annual reports and press publications), but it also provided an important means of exhibition and exposure for Channel 4-funded films. Due to the Hollywood dominance of the UK distribution circuit, many low budget British films often failed to gain distribution deals, and where theatrical releases were secured, exhibition tended to be restricted to a few independent cinemas with limited scope and appeal. A festival could transform a made-for-television film into a mainstream hit – Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* was made as a film for television, but gained widespread critical acclaim and international distribution deals following its screening at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1985.

Channel 4 also arguably succeeded in raising the profile of British film in Europe through the frequency of the participation of Films on Four in prestigious European festivals – for example, in 1993, a quarter of the entries in competition at Cannes were films funded or co-funded by the channel. However, this paper will argue that this relationship was symbiotic, in that the success of these films on the festival circuit not only widened appeal of British film to a European audience, but also gained greater recognition for and changed perceptions of British film at home.

Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's concept of Cultural Capital and utilizing the work of Thomas Elsaesser and Marijke de Valck on the 'value adding process' inherent in the international film festival circuit, this paper will offer a case study of Ken Loach's *Riff Raff*, a low-budget made-for-television film which secured distribution in the UK only after it had won the FILPRESCI prize at Cannes in 1991.

<sup>1</sup> This paper will examine how cultural consecration through 'value addition' changed perspectives towards *Riff Raff* at home and abroad, charting the transformation of a small-scale film for television into a widely acclaimed arthouse hit, while also analysing the ways in which that transformation highlighted serious inefficiencies in the British film industry. The lack of initial success of *Riff Raff* at home and its subsequent acclaim at Cannes also had implications for the policy and direction of Channel 4 films, and this paper will also touch upon this. Lastly, this paper will look more broadly at the performance of Loach's films in Europe, and will argue that the festival circuit has been essential to the international success of his productions, and of Channel 4 films in general.

Film festivals are not insular – they operate within a complex global network which is hierarchically divided. The influence of a festival depends on its status - there are 'A', or top rated, festivals (Cannes, Venice, Berlin) and 'B', second rated festivals (this is policed by the Paris-based organization, the International Federation of Film Producers Associations, or FIAPF).<sup>2</sup> Festivals compete with each other for key dates, films and audiences, but they also compete along the same axes – they resemble each other in their internal organisation, while differentiating themselves in terms of their programming and the image they seek to present. They must also ensure that each festival sequentially follows the other in the festival calendar, allowing filmmakers and journalists to travel the circuit.<sup>3</sup> This paper cannot attempt to do justice to the complexities of the international film festival network and the subtle hierarchies within it, but these studies have been comprehensively undertaken elsewhere by Daniel Dayan, Marijke Valck and Julian Stringer, among others. Rather, for the purposes of this study, it is important to note the role that film festivals play in consecrating elements such as authorship, production, distribution, exhibition and cultural prestige. Elsaesser argues that one of their key functions is to [quote] 'categorize, classify, sort and sift the world's annual film-production . . . supporting, selecting, celebrating and rewarding – in short, (by) adding value and cultural

capital.<sup>4</sup> [unquote] They can also operate as an alternative exhibition network for films which might not be seen elsewhere. Most European countries suffer the same problem as the UK, namely, Hollywood domination of national distribution. But festivals serve as exhibition outlets and launch pads for new talent.<sup>5</sup> They also facilitate relationships between film financiers and filmmakers, and, because of the international dimension, they can attract international investors, leading to co-productions.<sup>6</sup> The festival network is thus a key power-grid in the global film industry, affecting production, distribution, exhibition and tastes.

An important aspect of the circuit is 'value addition' – a film can gain cultural value in the form of awards at a festival, and this can translate into economic value in the form of distribution deals. Films can gain further cultural capital as they travel along the circuit, achieving something like a 'snowball' effect. Valck argues that the value adding process at a festival is characterised through three phases – selection, awards and mediation. Films are selected for the festival by the festival director and/or a committee, judged according to aesthetics, quality and subject and placed within the festival programme. Some films compete with each other for awards, and the winners are selected by a jury, whose decisions will naturally be subject to the 'buzz' and press attention created around that film during the festival. The third phase of value addition involves the cultural prestige bestowed on a film at a festival entering media discourse around the world – thus festival value is translated into media value, and this in turn can potentially be translated into economic value through distribution deals, video and DVD deals and cult following. At film festivals, then, films accumulate cultural capital in the form of publicity, prizes and attention which can lead to widespread media awareness and economic gain, and this, as Elsaesser puts it, is 'life and death' to a film.<sup>7</sup>

*Riff Raff* won a prestigious award at an 'A' festival, Cannes, and this brought considerable value which, I will argue, generated media attention, awards and distribution deals that might otherwise have been difficult to obtain. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Loach had difficulty attracting finance for his projects, with the exception of his 1986 film *Fatherland*, an international production set both in Germany and the UK and co-funded by Channel 4. However, his career really took off in the 1990s with the international success of films like *Hidden Agenda* (1990), *Riff Raff* (1991), *Raining Stones* (1993) *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994) and *Land and*

*Freedom* (1995). This success was in large part due to the forging of new relationships with writers like Jim Allen and Bill Jesse and a productive and ongoing partnership with producers Sally Hibbin and Rebecca O'Brien of Parallax Pictures.<sup>8</sup> *Riff Raff* was a collaboration between Loach and writer Bill Jesse which had started life at David Puttnam's Columbia but later moved to Channel 4, who agreed to fully fund the film provided it was made as a film for television, and shot on 16mm in 4:3 format.<sup>9</sup> The film follows the story of Stevie, a Glaswegian construction worker, and his experiences working on a construction site in London building a block of luxury flats. In true Loach style, the film relies partly on dramatic realism, partly on improvisation, and critiques the worst excesses of Thatcherism while also lamenting the lack of political mobilisation within the British working classes. Following the films' completion, it was refused by every UK distributor but given a short run at the National Film Theatre, where it opened to favourable reviews. Anthony Hayward argues that it was producer Sally Hibbin who made an international success of the film after this disappointing start:

We showed it to British distributors and had quite a bad reception. One of them stomped out and said he had had enough of British realism. Then we were invited to the Directors Fortnight at the 1991 Cannes film festival. Channel 4 said they could not afford to send us there because they believed it wouldn't sell. So I told their head of drama, David Aukin, that we had some money left in the budget and asked if we could spend it on getting to Cannes. He said yes, we went and the film received the most extraordinary standing ovation.<sup>10</sup>

At the festival the film took the International Critics' Prize. Following this award, *Riff Raff* gained subsequent accolades at smaller festivals and eventually won Best Film at the European Film Awards of that year, gradually accumulating significant cultural capital which resulted in distribution deals in countries like France, Germany, Sweden and Finland.<sup>11</sup> After it sold around Europe, the NFT planned to make 35mm prints and release it more widely,<sup>12</sup> and Palace Pictures, the UK company that had initially turned the film down, decided to release it, although it was perhaps too late by this point for the film to achieve its full potential.<sup>13</sup>

The 'buzz' surrounding the film at Cannes in May 1991 generated debate among the media at home. Press discourse predominantly expressed bafflement at the lack of recognition for *Riff Raff* in the UK and saw the attention the film garnered in Europe as indicative of problems within the British film industry. Simon Hattenstone of The Guardian stated on May 30:

Ken Loach must be a confused man. His Channel 4 comedy Riff-Raff was shown at the National Film Theatre, but no distributor was interested in giving it a wider cinema release. Too small-scale, they said. Why pay to watch a story about exploitation of working-class builders when you could be wallowing in another EM Forster adaptation? Who would understand all those strange dialects anyway? Well, much of the world, it turns out. Off it went to Cannes, won itself an award and was snapped up by the Germans, Spanish, Italians, French, Israelis and Australians. Astonishingly, even the British have now decided it's worth showing - Riff-Raff has been picked up by Palace Pictures for a national release. But why did we have to wait till now? <sup>14</sup>

Shortly after receiving the European Film Award, *Riff Raff* was showing in 30 cinemas in Germany, and 17 in France, while there were only 3 prints available in the whole of the UK before Palace decided to release it in the light of its European success. This was evidence, as one commentator noted, 'that it's now well-nigh impossible to find a place in the UK market for even a very good British film.'<sup>15</sup> Lack of appreciation for indigenous film at home was a frequent lament of film critics, but this intensified as a result of the international attention surrounding the film. Other critics noted a natural prejudice towards low-budget features on the part of UK distributors. On April 18th Derek Malcolm reported that *Riff Raff* would shortly be shown at Cannes, where [quote] 'there isn't much doubt that it will *be treated as film rather than jumped-up television*.'<sup>16</sup> [unquote] After entry into the festival, *Riff Raff* arguably lost its baggage as a realist drama funded by a television broadcaster – by dint of its very selection at the festival gates it automatically became a film by a director already considered an *auteur* in France. Interestingly, in this transformation from television film to feature film, aesthetic considerations were not taken into

account – it was festival exhibition and reception that determined *Riff Raff's* cinematic status, not style.

The failure to distribute the film in the UK had a significant effect on Channel 4, causing executives to re-evaluate the viability of funding films for theatrical release at a time of great uncertainty in the British broadcasting environment. In the 1980s, Films on Four were seen as important in obtaining awards and critical acclaim for the channel partly through their participation in festivals. Between 1982 and 1985, 25 of the films produced through Film on Four had received awards and been selected for festivals. According to Managing Director Justin Dukes, writing in 1985, 'all of this has greatly enhanced the Channel's public image as a responsible and creative ingredient in British broadcasting.'<sup>17</sup> Theatrical release had always been an issue, with many Films on Four receiving very limited arthouse distribution because the British industry has always been dominated, as it is in most European countries, by Hollywood. But *Riff Raff* was released at an inopportune moment for the channel. In the early 1990s the channel was moving towards selling its own advertising and moving into a more competitive environment, which necessitated an evaluation of its policies. David Aukin stated in a press interview:

We made a decent movie in Ken Loach's *Riff-Raff* but we couldn't get proper exhibition or distribution for it... so you begin to think, why bother to make films for cinemas at all? Why not make films for TV and cut out the cinemas? If we can't get our films decently distributed, the pressure on me to do so will be enormous. It would be a reversal of Film on 4 policy. But nothing is forever.<sup>18</sup>

However, after an 18-month period of probation, Aukin decided that theatrical release would remain a staple of Film on Four's output. But the fact that Channel 4 films had consistently proven that they could be more successful abroad than in the UK remained a source of frustration. The channel's Chief Executive Michael Grade spoke at the premiere of *Hear My Song* (which also had trouble gaining distribution in the UK) in 1992 and stated that the channel was [quote] 'fed up with being at the mercy of UK distributors after films are completed' [unquote] and lamented the fact that *Riff Raff* had [quote] 'been seen by more people in French cinemas than in British.'<sup>19</sup> [unquote]

However, it is worth noting that the international success and cultural consecration of *Riff Raff* in Europe did, somewhat retrospectively, become valuable to the channel, and to optimism about British film in general. Namely, *Riff Raff* was the first of a slew of Channel 4 funded films produced throughout the 1990s which were perceived to have done well internationally without compromising their local, British identity. Films like *The Crying Game* had done superbly in America (through the clever marketing of the film by Miramax) and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* was a massive hit two years later (through Polygram's clever marketing of that film). Films like *Shallow Grave*, *Brassed Off* and *Trainspotting* later followed in the same vein. Channel 4 obtained a reputation for funding films which cracked that magical formula - which retained a distinctively British sense of identity while being successful overseas, without having to compromise for commercial appeal. In 1994, Michael Grade vehemently spoke against 'Europuddings', arguing that:

Given the choice, viewers will often opt for the programme with a clear sense of national identity ...When we do make films with a clear sense of identity, they can often prove surprisingly successful abroad. Look at *The Crying Game*, *Riff Raff*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. None of them made any compromises for overseas audiences. It was the very Britishness of these films that made them work overseas.<sup>20</sup>

Whether this is the case or not (one could argue that many of these films, particularly *Four Weddings*, do compromise their national identity for an international audience) in the mid 1990s there was a sense of optimism that these films could be commercially successful, and *Riff Raff* became a part of that optimism. Indeed, James English and John Hill have stated that it is Loach's 'local' films like *Riff Raff* and *Raining Stones* that have worked best in Europe, arguing that international films like *Land and Freedom* and *Carla's Song* can tend to become confused, tourist-like, and less forceful in their political messages.<sup>21</sup> It was the success of films dealing with local concerns like *Hidden Agenda* and *Riff Raff* on the festival circuit that revived Loach's career, which was suffering badly when *Hidden Agenda* took the Jury Prize at Cannes in 1990. Following *Riff Raff*, *Raining Stones* won the Jury Prize at Cannes in 1993, while *Ladybird* won the Ecumenical Jury Prize at Berlin in 1994.

Reliance on festivals and specialised distribution in Europe have also gained Loach a reputation in Britain as being an 'art' director, even though this label has not always been reflective of the content of his work. John Hill argues that Loach's films have become 'art' cinema in the UK, not because of their aesthetics but because they have relied on prizes at European film festivals and specialised international distribution for success.<sup>22</sup> Steve Neale argues that European art cinema relies on certain conventions, its main features being a suppression of action, stress on character and 'a foregrounding of style and authorial enunciation.'<sup>23</sup> However, this is not typical of Loach's work. Rather, he tends to eschew showy stylistic techniques and has always denied that he is an 'artsy' director. Like many of his works, *Riff Raff* relies on genre elements like comedy. It was made using actors with real-life experience, shot in chronological order and semi-observational in style, using techniques partly drawn from documentary and classical modes. The *auteur* is also central to art cinema, and Loach has always been considered an *auteur* in Europe (though he frequently denies this, continually emphasising the collective nature of his work). But because of his reliance on film festivals like Cannes (which privileges the *auteur*) and distribution on European art circuits, his productions have always been marketed in Europe as 'Ken Loach films.'<sup>24</sup> Rather than aesthetic considerations, festival prestige and modes of distribution in Europe have largely determined the cultural status of Loach's films in the UK.

Loach's films have suffered from a lack of distribution in Britain, mainly because of wider problems within a Hollywood-dominated industry. However, though having limited releases, his films have usually managed to make money in the UK for two reasons – their low budgets and their international success. As difficult as it has been to penetrate the industry, European recognition through awards gained at festivals have raised the profile of the director and his films in the UK. More generally, the cultural capital accumulated through the festival network has been essential to the success of many other Channel 4 funded films. Where it has been difficult to obtain widespread distribution in the UK, film festivals have been important as an international site of exhibition, as a means of generating prestige and validation for the broadcaster's film-funding practices, and as a way of boosting the profile of British film abroad. As well as *Riff Raff*, other British films that can be characterised as 'local' such as Michael Radford's *Another Time, Another Place*



(1983), Charles Gormley's *Heavenly Pursuits* (1986), Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa* (1986), Stephen Frear's *Prick up Your Ears* (1987), David Leland's *Wish you Were Here* (1987) and Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988) have all accumulated significant cultural capital in the form of awards, at festivals from Cannes to Locarno and Bergamo to Berlin.

To conclude, Channel 4 heralded a relationship between British and European cinema, partly through participation in film festivals. The channel arguably raised the profile of British film in Europe through the medium of festivals, but this effect was also reciprocal – the profile of British film could also be raised in Britain through the value-adding process inherent in the international film festival circuit. *Riff Raff* provides an example of a film which suffered from a lack of interest at home but won substantial acclaim in Europe as a result of its participation in a high-profile festival, which in turn led to recognition at home (however limited). I have argued that *Riff Raff* achieved widespread success in Europe through the value-adding process – the FILPRESCI prize imbued the film with significant cultural capital, the first stage in a cumulative process which translated into distribution deals in countries around the world and culminated in the film winning Best Film at the European Film Awards. The success of *Riff Raff* highlighted problems inherent in the British film industry, but it also highlighted the fact that low-budget socially conscious British films, while struggling to achieve distribution in the UK, could achieve significant success abroad. For Loach's films, and for Channel 4 films in general, the festival circuit was key to that success, and throughout the 1980s and 1990s Channel 4 films also increasingly came to rely on film festivals as sites of exhibition, and to benefit from the cultural prestige associated with winning awards at European 'A' festivals like Cannes.

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<sup>1</sup> *Screen International*, 6 March 1992

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Lampel *et al*, 'Classics foretold? Contemporaneous and retrospective consecration in the UK film industry' in *Cultural Trends* Vol. 18, No. 3, September 2009, 239–248, p. 3.

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- <sup>3</sup>Thomas Elseasser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press: 2005, p. 86.
- <sup>4</sup> Lampel, 'Classics foretold?' p. 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Marijke Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007, p. 106.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- <sup>7</sup> Elseasser, *European Cinema*, p. 97.
- <sup>8</sup> Graham Fuller, ed., *Loach on Loach*, London : Faber and Faber, 1998, p. 78.
- <sup>9</sup> Anthony Hayward, *Which side are you on? Ken Loach and his films*, London : Bloomsbury, 2004, p. 211.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Guardian*, May 3 1991
- <sup>13</sup> *The Guardian*, December 3 1991
- <sup>14</sup> *The Guardian*, May 30 1991
- <sup>15</sup> *The Independent*, December 6 1991
- <sup>16</sup> *The Guardian*, April 18 1991
- <sup>17</sup> CF PAPER 312 (85) Justin Dukes, 'Film on Four'
- <sup>18</sup> *The Independent*, June 5 1991
- <sup>19</sup> *Television Week*, 5-11 March 1992
- <sup>20</sup> Anon, 'Europuddings don't make the Grade' 09/06/94
- <sup>21</sup> James F English, 'Local focus, global frame: Ken Loach and the cinema of dispossession' in Freidman, L, *Fires were started: British cinema and Thatcherism*, London : Wallflower, 2006, p. 268.
- <sup>22</sup> John Hill, *Ken Loach: the politics of film and television*, London : Wallflower, 2006, p. 168.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.