Introduction

The following submission is comprised of two entries on the Grouse Beater website: Our Mythical Film Industry and An open letter to Donalda MacKinnon, Director of BBC Scotland on the first anniversary of her tenure.

1. Our Mythical Film Industry

What? No drama?

An alert reader noticed a comment from (I think) a BBC spokesperson apologising for the absence of any drama about, produced, and made in, Scotland since 2014.

Actually, it’s earlier than that. It takes over two years from green lighting a project to the finished article, longer if waiting for transmission, or cinema release. This is why we are startled to see our favourite actor grey haired at interview. He made the drama years back. (Maybe he was grey then but dyed it for the role.)

One reason for the situation is ventured by a BBC executive, “There isn’t the talent in Scotland.” If I identify him it will only cause him acute embarrassment, but he deserves to be named and shamed. Then again, all he’s doing is signify we are a colonised country.

He is not the messiah

The story of Scotland’s cinematic output is one of still birth, followed by a new messiah who is lured to London, and then to Hollywood, get’s praised by Scotland’s media, and then gets fired from a big budget film. Scotland leaches talent to another’s culture.

Though master filmmakers encounter Hollywood at some time in their career only to get ripped off, they tend to remain with their homeland because that’s where inspiration springs eternal: Satyajit Ray in Bengal, Kurosawa in Japan, Sergei Eisenstein in Soviet Russia, Truffaut in France, Bergman in Sweden, Pedro Almodóvar in Spain, too many to list in Latin America. Scotland’s directors go abroad, and usually stay there.

Television pays upfront, movies rely on box office

If you decide to stay in Scotland and want to be a filmmaker you compromise – television drama, documentaries, and commercials – if you can get them. Mostly, you can’t. Scotland’s oft cited industry is really a smattering of projects for film and television. There isn’t the quantity of commissions for a filmmaker to specialise.

1 https://grousebeater.wordpress.com
A justified reaction to the article’s title, therefore, might be, what film industry?

**A cottage industry**

We have a cottage industry of sorts, the equivalent of one-and-a-half resident film crew, very few producers, and even fewer directors. For the most part Scotland is a backdrop to a foreign filmmaker’s project.

We are a service industry. We locate for other people’s films. We supply the catering. What self-generated productions exist, exist against the odds.

Resident practitioners appear and disappear each decade as people move to London, or just give up on the profession. If you want to make film the money is in London. The power is in London. Distribution is in London.

**Last in is a sissy**

The discrepancy is partly the fault of Scotland’s broadcasting companies, their misguided commissioning procedure. For example, an English-based producer can pitch a project to BBC Scotland, and conversely, a Scottish-based producer can pitch to BBC London. Scottish producers not part of the fashionable metropolis have little chance of winning what is an elimination contest. It doesn’t help, of course, that BBC Scotland reduced the post of head of drama to commissioning editor, under the direction of BBC London.

Channel Four, once the saviour of the English film industry with a solid policy to encourage new filmmakers, (I was one) hardly participates in Scottish drama. STV made endless series of *Taggart*, eventually in modern dress. It did that because the ITV network guaranteed to buy them and transmit them. STV tried making movies on the C4 model. It employed one of David Puttnam’s best production disciples to generate films. His first project was not only English made in England, but a gigantic turkey. He lost his job—production staff are not the most erudite in spotting a fine screenplay—and Scotland lost a decent chance at a continuous line of productions.

Try being a Scottish-based producer, one able to bear the costly expense of London travel and meetings, but up against a hoard of experienced London-based companies well networked, and see how far you get with your Celtic subject matter. There’s the barrier to surmount of English disinterest in anything of a Scottish character.

Conversely, English producers have little competition in Scotland. BBC’s cliché of a ‘level playing field’ is hogwash.

**Build it and they will come**

Resident companies in Scotland make the same claim on public finance as they did when I decided to close down in Edinburgh and set up shop in Los Angeles: we need a film studio.

It’s a recurring plea. Every few years somebody announces an intention to build one. Even Sean Connery tried his hand with Sony, but that too evaporated in a stream of conjecture, and criticism over grabbing green belt for its location. (The
Royal Bank of Scotland somehow got the land!) Studios have catches attached, like the extra land needed for a hotel, and houses. Creative Scotland is, as they say, actively looking into the matter.

In the age of storytelling expressed through the moving image all nation states need film and a film studio. Ireland has its Ardmore studios, England has Pinewood, Norway has three studios.

**What kind of film studio?**

A film studio can be a simple ‘dry wall’ building of large proportions, and soundproofed; four walls with a lighting gantry and some state of the art computers for graphics enhancement. It should be kept apart from aircraft and road noise, but close to motorway access, and near woods and a hill for cheap outdoor scenes.

Next comes the question, who pays for skeleton staff to run it, and rent it to indigenous and visiting production companies? Lastly, just as important, what tax advantages are available to encourage productions to shoot in Scotland?

When planning a film shot in Australia, (about an errant Scottish pioneer) the state film fund offered me up to three quarters of the budget, so long as two thirds of the film was shot in Australia, with a proportion of crew and actors Aussies. You are also expected to use as many local facilities as possible. However, editing can be in another country, the country where the project originated, in my case, Scotland.

The lack of bureaucracy is impressive. “You’re shocked, mate! We offered money before you made your pitch, right? We make films here, we don’t talk about the bloody things.”

There is a similar situation existing in New Mexico, USA, which attracts a lot of Californian productions, the recent excellent *Hell and High Water* (2015) shot there by director, David MacKenzie. We could offer the same here, only if tax dividends go hand-in-hand.

Setting up a studio is a comparatively easy task, one that asks only for the political will and enough finance. The hardest part of sustaining a film industry, even a small one, is who sells Scottish films when edited?

**Distribute the film but keep the talent**

Having no distributor leaves a small nation producing expensive home movies. To some degree the Norwegian model overcomes that problem. Laudably, it subsidises all its films, as many as a dozen a year, ensuring the producer gets the most from box office so he or she can invest in another film together with government grant aid. The films get distributed in Scandinavian countries. A few make it to Europe.

But generally Norwegian films don’t travel very far. Does that matter? It does, if Scotland wants to speak to other nations, not just to its self. We like to think we speak a kind of intelligible English that doesn’t require our dramas subtitled or dubbed.
Having our own distribution arm for film and television production supposes there is enough activity to justify its existence. That means subsidising production to stimulate product. Here lies temptation on capitalist lines.

Government investment has a tendency to lead to hard-nosed commercial subject matter. If not a government grant the film has to make a profit, unless, that is, the state decrees a healthy level of ‘art house’ subject matter alongside populist material, the kind concerned with mature adult issues, and not super heroes running down corridors chased by fireballs. But the state should not choose scripts. It should discipline involvement to solely backing its indigenous filmmakers.

**Broadcasters to the rescue**

To make all that work we need one terrestrial broadcaster mandated to invest in and transmit indigenous film, once cinemas show it. Any profits can be used to sustain the distributor, with a good portion reinvested in Scottish-made movies.

If a state run distribution entity doesn’t exist we have come no further than the days when STV rewarded master documentary maker, John Grierson, with a television series to show documentaries, but never once invested in his work. He ended his career early, talking about filmmakers, not making documentaries himself. That’s the Scotland I know – ever keen to praise international names, but cringes when it comes to elevating our own.

In time, if all those things come to pass, we will benefit from establishing an ‘Academy of the Moving Image’, run by and for its filmmaker ‘academicians’, existing to nurture interest in film, and honour our practitioners.

**Adult content only**

As a side issue, but one that arises from the loss of talent: we cannot keep making mostly ‘yoof’ films, one every two years, and not much else. The list is almost endless, and I contributed to it. There are so many: Bill Douglas' trilogy *My Ain Folk*; Forsyth’s *That Sinking Feeling* and *Gregory’s Girl*; *Rat Catcher, Small Faces, Restless Natives; Conquest of the South Pole, like Trainspotting* set in Edinburgh’s port of Leith, *Sunshine on Leith*, and so on, and so forth. Even the much praised television political thriller shot in Glasgow, *Brond*, my own production, contained a student as its central character.

Youth obsession arrives with monotonous regularity because it embodies happenings and adventures immediately close to the rookie filmmaker’s life experience, the graduate from film school. And they are the cheapest to fund. Young actors don’t cost as much as star actors. My own cinematic film was a little under half-a-million pounds. (The television drama was £2.2 million.) Youth orientated stories ought to be a strand of our output, not the be and end all, child-centred material too.

**A child among adults**

Child-centred films are something else. There is a distinction between that genre and youth films. They’re invariably concerned with adult issues, the behaviour of adults as perceived by the child, and as they mould the child.

**What’s the point?**

To be a mature, enlightened, liberal nation is to be free to choose your own artistic standards and subject matter, not have them imposed from outside. If all we do is copy what ‘they’re’ doing, or want they want, we restrict creativity, and block originality.

Scottish drama ought to be, and is, as universal as any other.

**Scots don’t make movies. We go to see them.**

And yet we have writers and novelists of the highest ability able to create the stories of our time, and stories filled with symbolism of our past.

Ready to collaborate are our painters, graphic artists, cartoonists, and camera crew, composers, and a legion of superb actors. No wonder their contemporaries elsewhere are lauded and venerated. They have the opportunity to develop and grab it with enthusiasm.

For my part, I accept reluctantly that many of my best Scottish projects won’t be realised. At the very least that’s a lost opportunity for the employment of talented contemporaries. In fact, it’s a bloody disgrace.

**2. An open letter to Donalda MacKinnon, Director of BBC Scotland on the first anniversary of her tenure**

*Dear Donalda MacKinnon*

Leaving the BBC is like leaving the Communist Party, you’re never forgiven. In consequence it was not a surprise to hear my company’s drama proposals, praised by you and colleagues, were brushed aside after I left the BBC’s employment. That was way back then. Now that you are in a position of influence I wonder what authority you have to decide specific programming ideals, or is new, fresh programming still a matter for BBC London and its *Strictly Come Dancing* elimination contest?

A year ago on your appointment to director of BBC Scotland, amid a lot of condescending hoopla about you being the first woman to command the post, you made this public statement, a laudable one.

> “I know there’s a wealth of talent and creativity in BBC Scotland, in the wider sector and in partner organisations. Working brilliantly together, I’m confident we can make compelling and enthralling programmes that entertain and inform all of our audiences.”

2 “A hard copy was mailed to Donalda MacKinnon and Tony Hall, in addition to posting on BBC, and selected newspaper, sites; also e-mailed to the Scottish Parliamentary committee looking into ways of developing the Scottish film industry.”
“A wealth of talent” contradicts BBC colleagues who believe there is not enough talent in Scotland to justify increased transmission time, or producers to propose and supervise independent productions. That is the presiding bullshit.

Throw food into your backyard and all sorts of birds and mammals appear from nowhere to feed. Or put another way, if BBC Scotland doesn't offer opportunity nor encourage it, a paucity of indigenous talent will remain the self-serving prophecy. And if BBC subjects Scottish selection to London criteria all you will get are cloned programmes, duly rejected by BBC London.

Some gossip: your predecessor Ken MacQuarrie, mindful of the BBC’s reputation, said in the pleasant cadences only a Gaelic speaker can deliver, “I’ve read your polemic; if your projects are rejected I hope I won’t be reading attacks in the press.” My reply was instant, “Are you telling me the head of BBC Scotland has no veto?”

So, I ask you, has anything changed? Have you been given a veto?

If your authority is hobbled by your London bosses, in the same manner the Scottish Parliament is constrained by Westminster, and you restricted to platitudes, then you might as well sit under your desk playing Angry Birds on your iPhone for all the good you can do.

But please be advised: the issue at the heart of this letter is fraud – as citizens we can be fined and jailed for not paying our licence fee; BBC Scotland cannot be sanctioned for acting like a spiv selling sugar-ollie water at a £147 a bottle. On that basis alone distrust of the BBC is not irrational. So, other than an alternative Scottish broadcaster, is there anything BBC Scotland can do to redeem its flagging reputation?

Below, I set out aspects of BBC Scotland’s output demanding remedy.

A Balance of Opinion.

BBC Scotland is guaranteed to argue it was scrupulous in ensuring all political parties received a balance of broadcasting exposure during the Great Debate to reinstate Scotland’s self-governance. I lost count of television and radio programmes issuing from English regions in which Scotland’s legitimate political ambitions got ridiculed or dismissed as ‘nationalist’. Ignorant commentary exists to this day. Sometimes it arrives in a brief aside, or a quip, sometimes within lengthy discourse.

Even the best of BBC journalists are apt to utter ‘inaccuracies’. They crib from each other, sustaining myths and fiction, or lift from newspapers. That laziness, allowing vested interests to set BBC News agenda, leaves the BBC open to accusations of bias, a ‘state’ broadcaster disseminating narrow British orthodoxy.

Media antagonism aimed at a legitimate movement for greater civil rights places a broadcaster in the position of acting as if a policing arm of the state, naming and shaming its own citizens. We condemn coercive techniques practised in authoritarian societies, but in the United Kingdom the same tactics employed to silence dissent are upheld as patriotic.
**REMEDY:** Give generous air time to those living in Scotland to discuss its future.

**The Voice of the People**

Interviewing members of the public in the street *vox populi* is a hackneyed convention. BBC is obliged to obtain a balance of opinion: two pro and two anti statements edited from a number of individuals interviewed.

Editing down to one-line statements is unscientific as an indication of public mood. If a place is 60% one way, 30% the opposite way, and 10% don’t give a damn, presenting viewers with a 50-50 balance of opinion disrupts truth, giving viewers the impression the town or city is split down the middle – a phony conclusion.

**REMEDY:** Exclude vapid *vox pop* interviews from political news items and debates.

**Reporting Scotland**

I am sorry to confirm television’s *Reporting Scotland* remains a Mickey Mouse operation, backwoods, inert, visually pedestrian, its presenters pickled in aspic. The entire edifice will benefit torn down and given a fresh, dynamic presentation.

The lack of any international news remains an insult to viewer intelligence and expectation. Scotland is a multi-cultural society keen on knowing its place in the world; why does BBC Scotland hang on to its kailyard origins? Commissioning and transmitting the work of London-based production companies no matter how worthy does not constitute serving Scotland, particularly when you have so little funds to share.

You identified what you describe as “deficits” in BBC Scotland’s news coverage. What steps have you taken to address relevance and authenticity?

**REMEDY:** Give news and current affairs a backbone and a budget.

**Radio**

Radio programmes suffer from blocks of mindless chatter. Listener share is in free-fall yet BBC Scotland insists on one presenter monopolising three hours every morning.

The format is tired, a rehash of past lightweight entertainment shows treating listeners as stressed out housewives. The afternoon is no better. At a time of rapid political and social change, when the established order is questioned by all quarters, the department ought to be full of ideas, people jostling for one hour slots. Where are they? What we have is one show fits all sizes.

**REMEDY:** Give new talent the opportunity to exploit the medium.

**The Alex Salmond Show**

If anything should be broadcast by BBC Scotland it’s the *Alex Salmond Show*. Sadly, you and I know that as far as the BBC is concerned, it thinks the SNP is as toxic to British hegemony as Russian Television, the broadcaster that buys BBC’s *Top Gear*. 
Salmond interviewed the exiled leader of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, a scoop, and a fine example of democracy at work, an interview no British broadcaster thought of organising. He had Scotland speak internationally. Why does BBC Scotland act as if a provincial outpost, timid, nothing done without London approval?

**REMEDY:** Think big, think international, be bold.

**Slanderding and discrediting by innuendo**

In the lexicon of self-determination howlers let slip by BBC presenters and journalists are legion. From Kirsty Wark’s open indignation on seeing the SNP elected to govern; to persistent descriptions of SNP members as ‘separatists’, there is a determined agenda to tar sections of the electorate as a threat to social stability. One might as well call democrats insurgents, or ‘Death Eaters’, to quote the ever-thoughtful JK Rowling.

With almost 400,000 English living in Scotland and half-a-million Scots in England, together with their families, permanent border controlled separation is a preposterous claim. That notion goes unchallenged on BBC political programmes. Why subject Scotland to propaganda programmes extolling Britannia’s glory days, a plethora moronically entitled “The Best of British”, content resolutely south of Manchester?

Scotland does not want the Lego variety of democracy easy to disassemble and rebuild in Westminster’s image, a comforting illusion. There is a profound distinction between the democracy Westminster is following, and the better society Scotland yearns for that the BBC ignores. BBC Scotland has a duty to explore beliefs and question dogma and orthodoxy, to give a platform for the exchange of ideas. Why call activists ‘separatists’ or ‘dissenters’ unless you intend to demean?

**REMEDY:** Stimulate interest in Scotland’s neo-renaissance, not reduce or suppress.

**Drama, what drama?**

The lack of any substantial drama emanating out of BBC Scotland for years is a disgrace. Whilst BBC is due thanks for creating regular work for local actors and writers in a soap, authors, directors, actors, cinematographers and the like of the first rank are ignored. Worse, innovation is nowhere to be seen. Drama of a political nature is shunned.

The excuse is lack of money. (I deal with this in the next category.) Yet there are ways to make good drama at low cost. Unions in Los Angeles, for example, have an agreement allowing lower fees paid on low budget films.

In fact, nowadays you can shoot an entire film on a high quality iPhone, enhanced later by digital magic. (See Sean Baker’s *Tangerine.*) Why not offer aspiring filmmakers one minute iPhone drama slots between programmes instead of yet another BBC commercial, or an annual competition followed by a collective transmission?

Why should we not produce an event drama at least once in a while and not once in a generation made by the USA? Why are our great authors of the past ignored? Do
we need to see another version of *Pride and Prejudice*, but not anything of Scott or RL Stevenson? Why has BBC Scotland never produced a drama about the Highland Clearances, an issue of international significance? Scotland *invented* the historical novel. With digital techniques the cost of recreating large set pieces need not be prohibitive.

Why are our contemporary novelists shunned? Does anybody at BBC Scotland read modern Scottish novels? You pay lip service to Edinburgh’s excellent Book Festival but leave it to London to dramatise major novels. Does an English audience have nothing to learn from a Scottish perspective?

**REMEDY:** Extricate Scotland from London’s domination of drama.

**Show me the money!**

When Tony Hall took over as Director-General he promised to provide ‘the regions’ with an equitable share of investment. Nothing I draw notice to has the remotest chance of blossoming while BBC London insists on snaffling every penny of Scotland’s licence fees and tossing back a meagre allowance, a familiar *cri de cœur* from football fans as well as horrible ‘separatists’. Has he followed up on that promise?

Hall announced: “The BBC has pledged to show a more diverse range of programmes than its rivals and to do a better job of reflecting the UK’s different nations as it seeks to reinvent itself to better compete with Netflix and Amazon.”

Can you tell us if BBC Scotland is ‘renewing’ itself, what new productions have been commissioned, or is it steady as she goes?

**REMEDY:** Viewers *are* shareholders in BBC. Where is our dividend?

The trust you talk of as breeched is an understatement. BBC Scotland is culturally irrelevant. No wonder friends and associates warn an open letter is a futile gesture. I reply, how different is that from appointing a new director of BBC Scotland?

I asked if you had a veto, a deadly serious question. You need the right to reject decisions laid on Scottish broadcasting by BBC London which minimise or side-line our politics, culture and international outlook while protecting London’s interests. Scotland categorised as a provincial region is not graven in stone.

Without a large measure of autonomy – I hesitate to use the word *independence* and embarrass you – the output of BBC Scotland is a criminal waste of licence payer’s money. And as the viewer isn’t in charge of choosing content you can’t blame us.