

Calculated Risks: Film Finances and British Independents in the 1970s

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Abstract

This article examines three British films made in the first half of the 1970s. It draws upon the reports made by Film Finances' assessor John Croydon to the Chairman R.E.F. Garrett, and correspondence between Film Finances and the films' producers, as well as scripts, schedules, daily progress reports and budgetary information. Two of the films, *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) and *'Don't Look Now'* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973), were backed by the struggling independent studio, British Lion. The third, *Lisztomania* (Ken Russell, 1975), was the second in a planned three-picture deal with Goodtimes Enterprises' subsidiary Visual Programme Systems (VPS), and was supported by the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC); but the deal collapsed in spectacular fashion, almost bankrupting its producers in the process. The focus of attention here will be on production histories, rather than the films themselves. I hope to be able to assess, thereby, what additional value the Film Finances archives can provide in understanding the relations between capital and creativity in the British film industry in this period.

Introduction

One of the well-established tenets of the 'new' film history is that film culture cannot be explained in any straightforward way as a reflection of its time without taking into account the context of its industrial determinants and its authorial collaborations.¹ This *raison d'être* for researching production histories remains persuasive, insofar as it may be possible to

demonstrate how commercial, creative and censorial battles leave their marks on a film, or how studio regimes are organised in order to produce certain kinds of product. But the success of production history research is necessarily limited by two factors. Firstly, and most obviously, it depends (like all history) on the available primary sources (audio-visual material, interview testimony and archival documents). But secondly, and more profoundly, its methodological success depends upon the relative stability of the industrial apparatus and the cultural field. That is not to say that this approach is untenable in periods of rapid social and cultural transformation – witness the strength of Sue Harper’s work on Gainsborough in the mid-1940s, or Charles Barr’s seminal study of Ealing Studios.² Far less does it challenge the orthodoxy of the Marxian principle that the economic base determines the cultural superstructure. Rather, it is to observe that in some historical periods that causal chain is weakened by a dissociation between capital and creativity in the cultural field, such that its lines of operation are indirect, and its influence opaque. These were the conditions which obtained in the UK in the early 1970s, when a number of industrial and cultural factors conspired, with remarkably unpredictable results in the film culture.

In *British Film Culture in the 1970s: The Boundaries of Pleasure* (Harper and Smith, 2011), we argued that the curtailment of the UK film industry’s financial dependency upon Hollywood (which had reached its apotheosis in the late 1960s), created a kind of cultural vacuum in the first half of the 1970s. Whilst economic constraints, typified by the number of one-picture deals, made it difficult to sustain creative momentum and continuity of personnel across projects, the reduction in studio space and cheaper, portable equipment, afforded directors more flexibility to shoot on location. And although in practice this freedom was often restricted by tight budgets, and the creative relationships between key personnel were put under new pressure, these changes had consequences for the type of films directors were able to make, and there was a radical shake-up in the range of directorial autonomy. This

resulted in a fragmented film culture characterised by extremes: on the one hand, a cinema of clumsiness and expediency, and on the other hand, one of sublime innovation. Above all, we suggested, this was a cinema of contingency; but contingent upon what?

The role of chance in creative practice (be it accident or serendipity) would make for a compelling cultural history. But whatever its appeals may be, they defy empirical enquiry. Risk, however, is another matter. As suggested, the British film industry of the early 1970s was a precarious market in which the lines of communication between capital and artistic production were often remote and sometimes stretched to the limit, creating conditions of unpredictability and risk. For sure, film-making always involves risk. But in this period, arguably, the stakes were higher. This not only exposed (sometimes novice) financiers to greater risk on their investments; it also spawned a number of filmic ‘rogue-traders’ who seemed to thrive on the adrenalin of risk itself: from Roman Polanski and Sam Peckinpah, to Michael Winner and Ken Russell. The role which Film Finances played in this period, therefore, was particularly acute. As underwriters of risk, they handled some of their most testing cases at this time, presiding over the financial collapse of an old order (symbolised by British Lion), and the ambitious rise of a new (exemplified by Goodtimes Enterprises). Their carefully calculated risk-assessments, as evidenced in their production files, provide an invaluable new source which may enable the sometimes inchoate relations between capital and creativity to be calibrated with more clarity.

1. The Wicker Man

Film Finances’ dealings with British Lion dated back to the company’s reformation under the Boultings, Launder and Gilliat in the mid-1950s. However, recent upheavals at Shepperton Studios had sent shockwaves through the industry, and the fortunes of the long-suffering independent were again uncertain. Against this backdrop the young Canadian producer, Peter

Snell, who had been appointed in July 1972 (initially as Head of Production and swiftly thereafter as Managing Director), greenlit two films: *'Don't Look Now'*, and *The Wicker Man*. He would produce the latter himself. It was to be directed by debutant Robin Hardy, scripted by playwright Anthony Shaffer, and starred Christopher Lee, Edward Woodward, and Britt Ekland. The budget was set at £406,600 and the Scottish location shoot planned for 40 days over a seven-week period beginning on 8th October 1972, and preceded by two weeks' rehearsals. Snell applied to Film Finances for a completion guarantee.

On 4th October, as rehearsals were underway, John Croydon sent his preliminary assessment of the project to Robert Garrett. He found that 'The script is presented in master scene form, is very overlength and very complicated and hazardous and quite impossible to relate to the schedule'.³ On meeting Snell, Croydon reported that 'he immediately and wholeheartedly concurred in that opinion, whilst making the reservation that he had spent the last weeks with the Director reconstructing the script and the method of production, but not on paper'.⁴ From this admission, Croydon concluded, 'I can only presume ... that the film will be directed on an ad hoc basis'. And presciently, he adduced:

If it has not been committed to paper, then one has the problem of the transmission of these thoughts down the line to all the technicians who will be involved ... [and] it would not necessarily follow that in the time available there could be a meeting of all the minds to produce a cohesive production plan.⁵

The extreme haste with which the production was assembled had been due to John Bentley's take-over. In April 1972 British Lion was sold by Star Associated (a conglomerate owning theatres, bingo halls and discos) which had run the ailing studio for less than a year (retaining John Boulting as Managing Director). Bentley's Barclay Securities invested £5.45m, apparently on the strength of the development potential of Lion's Shepperton site.

Union anxieties about asset stripping were addressed by protracted negotiations involving the NFFC and Lion International, resulting in a compromise where 40 acres of land were sold for property development, retaining 20 acres for film production.⁶ Whatever Bentley's commercial motives, he knew nothing about film-making and, as John Boulting stepped down, it was necessary for the new management to get some pictures on the books. Snell had brought with him Shaffer's script of *The Wicker Man*; Bentley approved the proposal virtually on the spot, but on one condition: it had to be begun immediately.⁷ Croydon concluded his report to Garrett:

I think that under the circumstances we have little option but to proceed with this guarantee in the hope that Hardy proves to be a fast Director capable of applying instant modification to the script content and that between them Snell and Morley prove capable of extremely difficult production control.⁸

On Monday 9th October, as filming began, Film Finances issued a letter of approval in principle. The following day, however, an ever risk-aware Croydon wrote to Ted Morley at the production office at Douglas House, Newton Stewart, Wigtonshire, about weather cover:

If you encounter bad weather and there is an interior set nearby, presumably you will not hesitate to use it, even if it means that any or all of your leading artistes were likely to exceed schedule.

The point is, of course, that with your schedule you cannot afford to miss a day without obtaining screen time. I hope I have made my point and that you will, together with Mr. Hardy, make all endeavours to ensure that this happens.

kindest regards and best wishes for good weather and a smooth schedule.⁹

Croydon's anxieties, and his lack of trust in the production team, are quite evident in this urgent reminder. His blessings on the venture are more in hope than anticipation. And, as it turned out, his concerns were entirely justified.

A few days later the production secretary, Beryl Harvey, was writing apologetically to Croydon enclosing 'some script amendments ... a couple of copies of schedules – more to follow!'. The promised progress reports were 'held up until I can get all the information from Plockton'.¹⁰ By the end of the first month, Garrett himself sounds the alarm: 'We are surprised that although this picture has now entered its fourth week, we have still received no Cost Statements'.¹¹ The next day, Snell writes to Croydon, apologetically, 'for the delay in getting the attached cost statements to you, which I brought down with me from Scotland yesterday'. But he sounds a resolutely up-beat note on the film's progress: 'I am really very pleased with the footage that we have to date. Our weather cover is working well and at the moment I am optimistic that we will meet our schedule, the balance of which I enclose'.¹² This was a revised schedule dated 28th October.

Croydon, however, was not impressed. Three days later, he follows up a telephone conversation with Snell to express his anxiety: 'In our book the film is shown to be quite four days over schedule, which cannot possibly match your Cost Statement that shows an "eat into" the contingency of just over £8000'. And whilst he acknowledges Snell's admission 'that if the film is to be completed on schedule and for its budget that cuts and modifications must be applied to the script', he requires sight of 'a plan of campaign that will indicate a conclusion to your schedule that will satisfy not only yourselves, but us'.¹³ Croydon conveyed the full extent of his mistrust of the producers in a subsequent letter to Garrett dated 6th November: 'Snell cannot bring the necessary pressure to bear on the Director to make the necessary cuts and modifications in the script that would enable him to be sure of completion on the due date'.¹⁴

The script held by Film Finances (based on a core text printed on 8th October 1972) reveals that significant re-writes did take place during shooting (throughout which the screenwriter, Anthony Shaffer, was present), since there are amendments dated as follows: 14th October, 18th October, 19th October, 26th October, 6th November and 7th November. By comparing these dated amendments to the schedule, it looks as though Shaffer was completing re-writes each weekend, based on the progress of the week's filming. The changes certainly give what is often a verbose, theatrical script, more economy and pace, and allow (as shooting must have revealed) that much of the film's narrative enigma is conveyed *visually*. A brief example serves to illustrate this point. Excisions of 26th October to Howie's final, desperate May Day pursuit of the missing Rowan through the town remove much of what were originally conceived as dialogue encounters in various homes and shops, and the pantomime travelogue of this frenzied sequence is conveyed much more effectively in the finished film by its colourful montage and musical accompaniment. Notably, scene 119 finds Howie pausing in this frantic chase in a refrigerated apple store to reflect (in 'thought voice'):

I can never search this whole island in time. I haven't even started on the castle or the caves, or the outlying farmhouses, and they can always see me coming, and hide her back in some place I've already searched. It's useless. I'd best get back to the inn, rest up for an hour, and be on my toes for the procession.

It is clear from this rather prosaic self-reflection, that the additional set-up this would have required was an unnecessary waste of time in a schedule that, by its final day (on which this was scheduled to be shot), was four days over.

In all, no fewer than twenty scripted scenes were deleted largely, according to an internal production memo, because 'Robin now agrees they have been covered well enough by what we have shot'.¹⁵ The last days of the shoot were hampered by bad weather and the

final Daily Progress Report concludes, a tad ruefully, ‘END OF SHOOTING – ALL SCENES ASSSUMED COVERED’.¹⁶

The weather, however, had not been the sole reason for the production overage and its almost daily schedule revisions. As Croydon had astutely surmised, Hardy and Shaffer’s project had been rushed into production, without an adequate shooting script, lacking proper contingency planning, and with badly-marshalled creative resources. And its practical feasibility was tested by the number and spread of location set-ups, and the interpersonal dynamics of the crew. These production problems clearly made for a difficult location shoot, and the results were uneven. But the full implications of the production difficulties didn’t really emerge until post-production got underway in February 1973. They were gravely concerned as it emerged that ‘the post-Production period will be extended by a period of seven weeks, which we find totally unacceptable’. They concluded: ‘In view of the above, we would ask you to reduce your editing period and deliver this film as fast as possible and that in the meantime, we will only be signing cheques necessary to complete the delivery of the film’.¹⁷

Film Finances were also anxious about the emerging scale of the production overage which was, by this time, in excess of £60,000 (on a £30,500 contingency). On 27th February 1973 they wrote: ‘In view of the current cost position on the film, we would ask you to make arrangements for a member of this Company to become a signatory upon the Bank Account and that no further cheques should be issued without our authority’.¹⁸ In particular they balked at an overage on music of £4260, and on script writers of £958. When it emerged that the separate ‘blossom shoot’ had cost an extra £1375 they subsequently withheld payment until, ‘in order to avoid embarrassment to yourselves’, they released the money on 19th April.¹⁹

But these developments can only be fully interpreted in the context of changes which were taking place at Shepperton. In January 1973, following British Lion's announcement in the previous November of losses of £1.22m, John Bentley was himself the subject of a buy-out by the financial services group J. H. Vassaveur.²⁰ At this point the remaining directors – Lord Goodman, Sir Max Rayne and John Boulting – resigned.²¹ Independent producer Michael Deeley, who had formed a business partnership called Great Western Investments with erstwhile journalist and publisher at IPC Barry Spikings, and Welsh screen actor Stanley Baker had, prior to the take-over, acquired a twenty-three per cent share in Barclay Securities.²² This gave Deeley and Spikings seats on the board of British Lion and, in March, Peter Snell was told he was to be replaced and Michael Deeley became Managing Director.

Under conditions of corporate instability the value of film product is likely to be misunderstood, especially in a case like *The Wicker Man* where the film's own identity was insecure, as a result of its ill-prepared production. Deeley's immediate problem was that there was no distribution deal in place, despite this being a stipulation of Film Finances' agreement.²³ Apparently George Pinches, who booked films for Rank, had formed an understanding with Snell that Rank would take the film, but later turned it down.²⁴ Deeley's application to EMI was also rejected.²⁵

Meanwhile, under pressure from Film Finances to complete post-production work in order to avoid further overage, editing the film became another area of creative conflict which has subsequently taken on a mythological aspect in the film's cult history.²⁶ Here, the Film Finances archive is useful in providing some hard evidence. Eric Boyd-Perkins had been responsible for the mobile cutting room on location and his work continued, alongside Robin Hardy, back at Shepperton, assisted by Denis Whitehouse. However, paradoxically the pressure applied on the one hand by Film Finances and on the other by Michael Deeley, involved bringing in additional editorial support in the shape of Don Coutts and John Foster

at a cost of a further £1238. As a note on the balance sheet indicated, ‘The budget did not provide for two assistant editors in the post-production period’.²⁷ An internal memo from Film Finances’ accountant Richard Soames to their Managing Director Bernard Smith of 16th April 1973 shows an invoice had been presented from Shepperton Studios (no. 20177) for ‘re-editing after editing completed’ to the tune of £620 (Boyd-Perkins was on a rate of £160 per day).²⁸ It is fair to assume that this protracted work resulted in the first cut of 102 minutes.

Now acting independently, Peter Snell set up a hasty publicity stunt involving a spare Wicker Man left over from the production which was erected at Cannes in May 1973, despite the fact that the studio hadn’t yet released a print for screening. Notwithstanding this, the attention of veteran American independent producer Roger Corman was attracted and, in correspondence with Michael Deeley, he agreed to view the film when it was ready. A report of overages totalling some £65,000 on the production was made to Michael Deeley at the end of July 1973 by the production accountant Ernest Shepherd. It refers to the need to include an extra ‘£600/£700’ in respect of ‘your visit to the USA’. It seems this was Deeley’s mission to Corman who offered some advice (although no deal) on how the film might be re-edited.

By the end of June *‘Don’t Look Now’* was finished. Deeley returned to Rank – British Lion’s traditional domestic exhibitor – and managed to reach an agreement that they would take both films and show *The Wicker Man* as the B-feature (a practice that was by this time, in circuit cinemas, arcane). In order to work as a double-bill, this required further, drastic editing, removing some 16 minutes from the running time and compressing the film’s two-day timeframe into one. Film Finances complained that although they had signed cheques ‘in respect of Mr E. Boyd-Perkins and Mr D. Whitehouse for their weekly salaries’, it was ‘in as much as they were payable to two individuals’ and, in their view, ‘should be strictly against distribution’.²⁹ Deeley retorted that ‘work done by the Editor and his Assistant is, as far as

we are concerned, part of the production cost since the film is not yet completed'.³⁰ Five days later Deeley wrote to the film's insurers requesting an extension of cover 'for another four weeks. There is currently certain work being done', he explained, 'which will involve negative cutting'. This 86-minute cut was released to British audiences paired with '*Don't Look Now*' in December 1973, previewing at London's Victoria Metropole before its official opening on 21 January 1974 at the Odeon Haymarket.³¹ The rest, as they say, is history.

So what does the Film Finances file on *The Wicker Man* add to territory which has already been well-trodden by the cultists? I believe this new evidence enables us to see through the 'legend', with its heroes and villains, and to re-connect with the historical context. The correspondence and documents reveal the gulf between the financiers and the film-makers, and the effects of that mismatch upon a poorly-managed production. They show what kind of haphazard creativity emerges from the expediency of high-risk conditions. They also chart the death throes of a major British studio. But in that regard, *The Wicker Man* tells only half the story.

2. '*Don't Look Now*'

On 12th January 1996 Julie Christie (who plays Laura Baxter) told Mark Sanderson in interview: 'Nic [Roeg] has an unusual eye and an unusual mind ... As a director he is quite secretive, not enormously collaborative, but this is the way he succeeds. The whole film could have gone completely haywire, it was a bit of a risk ... In the event the risk paid off'.³²

Like *The Wicker Man*, this film was greenlit by Peter Snell at British Lion, and was a location picture to be shot under challenging seasonal conditions. It was also an independent production conceived from scratch – a one-off. Unlike *The Wicker Man*, it was financed by an independent consortium assembled by Anthony B. Unger, based on US tax shelter investments, it was registered as an Anglo-Italian Co-production, and it was managed by the

American production team of Peter Katz and Steve Previn who had cut their teeth at AIP, acting as Casey Productions Ltd. A memo of 27th September 1972 from Robert Garrett to John Croydon reports a call from Katz outlining this new proposition ‘based on a short story by Daphne du Maurier ... Will have 4 days shooting in England and the balance will be in Venice starting in November’. In an amusing reversal of fortune, Garrett writes that ‘the papers are being sent to us immediately, but I have said that it is possible it might have to take second place to another proposition (“Wicker Man”) which is starting at an earlier date’.³³

A fortnight later Croydon responded to Garrett with his initial assessment. As with *The Wicker Man*, Croydon finds that ‘the script is written in a straight forward master scene form and is, I believe, too complicated and presents many hazards which I must detail as they arise in conjunction with the proposed schedule’.³⁴ (This is almost his default position, it seems). He goes on to highlight a number of questions relating to permissions and set-ups in various locations in Venice, and criticises the ‘erratic’ presentation of the schedule which ‘has obviously been arranged for sequence shooting without any attempt to spread the work over the days available’.³⁵ This observation reflects Croydon’s customary caution, informed by a parsimonious approach to production scheduling, which takes little account of the creative decisions which inform sequential shooting. Indeed, Nicolas Roeg himself arouses suspicion: ‘We have no personal experience of him in the role of Director, but rumour has not been very kind to him in this respect. We obviously have to exercise the greatest care...’.³⁶ If part of Croydon’s reticence is bafflement, part is also prejudice: ‘

If there are no explanations available as to why the schedule is presented as it is, then it is a nonsense and the UK personnel connected with this film will probably find themselves in the position where they will have to determine the order of shooting and not the Italian production control.

I would go so far as to say that if Roeg has to shoot these sequences in the order in which they are scheduled, then, unless he has a very clear and perceptive mind, he, himself, will become muddled.³⁷

The twelve-page letter goes on to itemise a number of queries in the projected financial plan and concludes that ‘some very heavy discussions will have to take place between ourselves and the Producers before we can arrive at a decision’.³⁸

Despite these initial reservations, a letter offering a Guarantee of Completion was issued on 20th November, confirming the budget at \$1,332,657, and dependent upon a number of standard conditions (including approval of distribution contracts, music clearances, insurance, and contingency), but foremost ‘a meeting with the Director to approve the schedule of the film’.³⁹ Interestingly, on the following day Croydon sent a second report to Garrett, having had a meeting with Roeg and lunch with Katz:

I think I now have a glimmer of understanding of Roeg’s method of direction and, although my fears are not entirely allayed, nevertheless, I can view the schedule in a somewhat more optimistic mood than I was able to in the first place.⁴⁰

Whilst Katz had admitted that he had ‘not yet had an opportunity of discussing the script with Roeg on the level of Director/Producer’, and whilst he wants some ‘eliminations, and admits that he is unlikely to succeed in all of them’, he ‘nevertheless, confidently expects he will be able to make some script eliminations’.⁴¹ This report reveals, however, that Roeg and Previn ‘already have had in mind that certain minor insert and cut-away scenes will be left over from main shooting ... like the rats scuttling into the canal; the ducks fighting on the canal; ... the frogmen recovering the body and various individual run-bys of both boats and people’. And, on the basis of their recce trip to Venice, Croydon is relieved that ‘the selective location sites

... appear to be much easier to shoot than I had first imagined', which 'makes me a little easier in my mind about this project'.⁴²

Notwithstanding this guarded optimism, he continues, 'I think its chances of achieving schedule are marginal in the extreme'. And he requests 'an understanding with Katz that we are immediately informed of any script cuts or modifications', site of a 'promised map of Venice, spotting each and every location', and 'London representation on the film for a minimum of 3 weeks from the start of shooting in Venice'.⁴³ This last condition is required

because I know nothing of Roeg's work as a Director and although in conversations he tends to minimise the task, nevertheless, I do sense the attitude of perfectionist and he will be working inside the confines of a schedule that can only allow for perfection in the time that is available.⁴⁴

Croydon had calculated that the production would be running in Venice at a cost of about £25,000 per week, and feared that on this basis, its contingency of £50,000 could easily be eaten into if the shoot overran, leaving little cover for the post-production period. He clearly also feared that Venice would be a foreign location every bit as malevolent to the crew as it proves to be to the fictional Baxters. He itemises several particularly risk-laden set-ups including, unsurprisingly, what the script calls 'Int. Gregorio':

This is either a Cathedral or a large Church in need of restoration. A scaffolding has been erected from floor to ceiling and John, the husband, in charge of restoration climbs the scaffolding and steps into a cradle to take him nearer to a fresco for examination. An accompanying workman frees the rope which operates the cradle and it gives way, tipping John out, though he is able to save himself

by clinging to the scaffolding. The scaffolding itself begins to give way and John and the workman barely escape with their lives.

Obviously our enquiry must be concerning the nature of the building in which this sequence takes place. Perhaps there is a building in such a form of restoration; if not, what will the building be and will a permit be forthcoming to erect the scaffolding and perform the stunt called for? ⁴⁵

But Roeg's recce had been fortuitous on this count too. He told Mark Sanderson:

I remember the Italian location manager saying, 'The church situation is very difficult'. We'd looked at virtually every church in Venice and in most cases the script would have had to have been approved by the Vatican but we still hadn't found one. He suggested that we construct one in a warehouse outside the city but then, on the last day of the recce, we discovered a little church on the outskirts called Santo Nicolo dei Mendici. I couldn't believe it. What's more it was being done up – the scaffolding was already there – and a sign announced that it was being paid for by the British 'Venice in Peril' fund. ⁴⁶

It seems as though, thanks to thorough planning, *'Don't Look Now'* enjoyed all the luck that had eluded *The Wicker Man*. Yet, when shooting commenced, things did not begin quite so auspiciously.

The film was shot in England between 18th and 22nd December 1972 and recommenced shooting on location in Venice on 8th January, principal photography being completed on 3rd March 1973. The opening scenes which take place at the Baxters' home and culminate in their daughter Christine's drowning, were filmed at the Old School House, Bell Lane, Broxbourne, Herts. It was the home of the actor David Tree who played the

Headmaster, Anthony Babbage, at Johnny's boarding school (Heath Mount School, Woodhall Park, Watton-at-Stone, Herts). As Roeg later told Mark Sanderson in interview:

The girl who played Christine [Sharon Williams] was very pretty – exactly the sort of child John and Laura would have had – and a good swimmer too. Her mother and I took her to the swimming-pool to practise going under the water and she was perfectly happy, but as soon as she saw the pond she just would not go under. She screamed and screamed. The farmer on the neighbouring farm had a daughter of a similar age and said she was a lovely swimmer so we tried her out and she was fine but as soon as she got the red mac on she refused to go under the water. In the end we rigged it in a water tank with a double: there are actually three children in that sequence.⁴⁷

During the filming of this sequence the Daily Progress Reports reveal that 'whilst shooting Donald Sutherland [John Baxter] running into the water the camera operator slipped and his camera (A Wild Hand Held Arriflex) fell into the water, ... A 1000' roll of Eastmancolour 5254 was inadvertently sprayed by water when the firemen were making the rain effect with their hoses', and 'due to the everchanging winter light and very misty conditions it has once again been impossible to complete our exterior shooting'.⁴⁸ If outside proved challenging, progress on interior scenes was little better. Roeg confided to Donald Sutherland (who played John Baxter opposite Julie Christie's Laura), that his line 'Nothing is what it seems' was 'the very premise of the movie'. As a consequence, Roeg reported, 'we had to shoot the scene fifteen times' before his delivery was right.⁴⁹ These early teething troubles were reported to Bernard Smith at Film Finances by Peter Katz: 'The Production statistics for the English week were disappointing, if not alarming. As you know I had strong words with the Director about this situation and I am happy to be able to tell you that the first

week in Venice has been a happy contrast with excellent results'.⁵⁰ Katz shows himself to be adept at finding favour with the paymasters.

Yet, as further correspondence reveals, Film Finances kept a very close eye on progress for fear of the production falling behind schedule. On 24th January, Steve Previn was required to write to Smith, following a telephone conversation, to admit:

You were absolutely right to be concerned with the screen time accumulated as clocked by the script girl on the set and documented in the Daily Progress Reports. According to these reports our average daily screen time on the 18th day of shooting would be 1m, 23s. I realise that this would, of course, be too little for a shooting schedule of 53 days...

I can assure you that our finished film will easily have the minimum length of 95 minutes, for Nic Roeg's shooting technique is very 'cutty' and to get an accurate time during shooting on the set is difficult...

Hoping that this will ease your worries in that direction...⁵¹

The concerns of Film Finances were sufficient to require Bernard Smith to travel to Venice himself to visit the production, where the list of overages was accruing fast: Peter Katz' living allowance for two weeks in Venice, Donald Sutherland's living allowance between the English and Italian shoots, illness cover for several of the Italian crew, a camera for the Italian crew, payment to Italian fire brigade for rain cover, three sets of contact lenses to effect the 'blindness' of Heather (Hilary Mason), two specially-made wigs for Donald Sutherland, and last (but by no means least in the eyes of Film Finances) Nic Roeg's excessive use of film stock. In order to economise in this area the team agreed to print two-thirds of the rushes in black-and-white and only a third in colour, and an 'ultimatum' was issued to Roeg that he was to print only one take and keep one in reserve.⁵²

It is a remarkable testament to the commitment of the producers that, given Roeg's apparent profligacy, the litany of equipment failure, minor accidents, widespread illness amongst the Italian crew and a bout of 'flu that confined several of the cast (including Julie Christie) to bed, the filming was completed on schedule on the 53rd day (3rd March 1973). It is, perhaps, also a reflection on Nicolas Roeg's temperament (the self-absorption, resourcefulness and dedication to purpose that Julie Christie observed), that he was able to flourish, creatively, in a physical environment that challenged the film-maker, and amidst a majority Italian crew. But he is a director who flourishes in alien environments.

The Film Finances archive provides much evidence about this film's production history which has scarcely been documented, despite its critical status. Roeg told Mark Sanderson that 'in some ways it was a very tough film'. The producers (by which he referred to British Lion) 'had no interest at all in the film itself. Absolutely everything irritated them: they could have destroyed the picture'. He reveals that in post-production at Shepperton, 'as the pressure increased everything got harder and harder. In the end I broke into the cutting room and took away four reels of film so they could not destroy it'.⁵³

This is a fascinating admission which has unmistakable parallels with the fate of *The Wicker Man*, though Michael Deeley maintains he had nothing but admiration for Roeg's film. What is clear is that in the context of the same set of dysfunctional studio conditions, both films were the result of considerable struggles which increased the scale of their creative risk. Yet while both films were subjected to the same level of scrutiny and the same tests of probity at the hands of Film Finances, the archives show why one project almost foundered, while the other held its own. By the time Ken Russell's *Lisztomania* began filming at Shepperton in 1975, British Lion had sold its loss-making studio and been absorbed by EMI.

3. *Lisztomania*

Ken Russell's *Lisztomania* was the second in what was agreed as a three-picture deal with Goodtimes Enterprises who had produced and distributed the first film, *Mahler* (1974). The final subject in this trilogy of idiosyncratic 'biopics' of composers was to have been Gershwin. But, as Sandy Lieberman later confided in interview with the author, 'by the time we finished with *Lisztomania* we knew that we were not going to make Gershwin with Ken'.⁵⁴

The director's reputation was, indeed, well known by the mid-1970s, so much so that in reporting on the proposition *Lisztomania*, John Croydon complained that the screenplay 'is extremely complicated and full of what I suppose one can only describe as "Russellisms"'.⁵⁵ This is an interesting comment in the light of his professed ignorance of the work of Nicolas Roeg only a couple of years earlier. Better the devil you know, perhaps. Unlike the two British Lion films, this was to be largely a studio production although shot over 53 days in eleven weeks, beginning on 3rd February 1975. Croydon seemed reasonably content with producer Roy Baird's budget plan (with £420,000 coming from a rights deal with Warner Bros. covering all territories with the exception of Italy where it had been pre-sold for a further £66,500 to RM Productions, and £50,000 in the form of an NFFC loan). Croydon's reservations are almost entirely to do with the fantasy treatment and envisaged special effects, which required further explanation from the director and his art director, Phillip Harrison 'whose presence I have already requested at our conference, asking that he bring such sketches, ground plan drawings and details of as many SFX as possible'.⁵⁶

Croydon concludes:

Obviously, I can give this proposition no form of clearance at this stage. I really do not know how Ken Russell has fared with his previous productions of a similar nature. Baird assures us that his production of 'Mahler' exceeded

schedule by no more than one week-end and was shot for the budget figure; beyond that I really have no knowledge. There is no doubt in my mind that this is a very difficult film to make and it may well be that schedule and budget success is dependent upon the degree to which Russell is prepared to curb his creative imagination whilst he is shooting...⁵⁷

If Croydon was unaware of Russell's track record, he certainly knew his reputation, as the last remark confirms. The writing, indeed, was on the wall. Yet the following day Film Finances issued a letter confirming their willingness, in principle, to provide a completion guarantee, subject to their standard conditions, on the basis of a budget set at £460,818, with a contingency of £20,363.⁵⁸ And when shooting began in February 1975, briefly all seemed to be going well. Then the weekly cost reports began to detail significant overages on budget and schedule.

Cost report No. 2 (overage of £2750) for week ending 14th February includes 'increased hire charges due to prolonged shooting on first set and re-scheduling'.⁵⁹ A week later there's an overall increase of £5,990 for overages on 'equipment rentals', 'set construction', 'further extensions and amendments to sets', 'prolonged shooting time and amount of props on "Carolyn's Chapel" set ... and "Hell" set'.⁶⁰ Cost report 4 shows 'as at 28th February 1975 2 days over schedule', and additional costs amounting to £6887.⁶¹ And a week later the 'increased shooting on "Hell" sequence' is costing an additional £1750 in respect of artists' 'extended periods of engagement' and 'further extension of props and drapes'.⁶² Russell's Lighting Cameraman on the film, Peter Suschitzky, confirmed the material demands of the director's methods in an interview he gave to *American Cinematographer*: 'Russell tends to terrify the Production Department, so on a Russell film it's not difficult to have more equipment than you'll actually need for a sequence, in order to

have contingencies ready for any event'.⁶³ And such expressionistic excesses were what also began to terrify Film Finances.

On 19th March, Richard Soames wrote to the producer, Roy Baird: 'I am putting you on notice that we are seriously considering taking over the Production of this film, if there is no substantial improvement in the rate of shooting and evidence that costs are being controlled in relation to the budget'.⁶⁴ A week later Robert Garrett took the unusual step of writing to the Director personally: 'We should like to know why the picture is, at this date, by our calculations, already thirteen and a half days over schedule'. And he warns: 'I think I should tell you that we are considering, having regard to our rights, whether under the circumstances you can remain as Director of the film'. The letter is copied to Baird and Puttnam, and to John Terry (Managing Director of the NFFC). There is a caustic hand-written note at the top: 'This letter was intercepted by VPS before it reached Ken Russell' (original emphasis).⁶⁵

Things became incendiary on the very same day of Garrett's letter, when a report details a fire at Shepperton Studio Centre, Stage B, on Wednesday 26th March 1975: 'At approximately 7pm on 26th March, a fire broke out in the gantry on 'B' stage. The cause is believed to be from an electrical fault on a work light which had been upturned, causing the wood of the gantry floor to start to smoulder and subsequently flame'. Peter Price, the Production Manager, reports that the construction workers on set acted quickly to extinguish the fire, which was brought under control as the Fire Brigade arrived. He then informed Roy Baird, who was (amusingly) attending the premiere of *Tommy* (Ken Russell, 1975).⁶⁶ In a follow-up letter to Richard Soames at Film Finances, Price reports that:

Shooting on the Int. Liszt's Sanctuary set had to be suspended on Thursday due to the damage caused by the fire. This set, being designed totally in white, was

lined with paper with a hard topcoat of paint and it had to be completely re-decorated and the nylon net ceiling renewed.

This work prevented us from completing the remaining shots on the set. All endeavours were made to ensure that all outstanding pick ups and inserts etc were done so that shooting could be continued. However, in spite of the effort put into the work on the set, one day of principle photography has been lost.⁶⁷

Following this fiasco, there is an air of exasperation (no doubt tempered with embarrassment) about Cost Reports Nos. 7 and 8 (which are referred to under a brief memo dated 27th March): ‘This report has been based on the latest schedule issued which estimates shooting to be completed by 9th May 1975, ie a three week overage’. Cadiou continues: ‘This overage has been the result of extensive musical numbers now to be included in the film which were previously not scripted or scheduled’.⁶⁸ Cost report No. 8 records another increase of £5,202 in costs because ‘to obtain maximum coverage of the Concert Hall music sequence at Wimbledon Theatre, we will be using 3 cameras’.⁶⁹

The patience of Film Finances had, by this time, been exhausted. They referred the matter to their solicitors Harbottle and Lewis, who wrote to Frank Bloom, at Nicholas Morris, solicitors for VPS, on 2nd April. The choice was simple: Film Finances either took over the production, or the guarantee was surrendered and Film Finances would be indemnified ‘for all loss and liabilities they may incur’; the latter course would result in Film Finances repaying half their guarantee fee to the producers.⁷⁰

Having evidently had no response from VPS on this matter, Film Finances duly issued notice on 9th April of their intention to take over the picture.⁷¹ There is then included in the file an intriguing document prepared by Robert Garrett entitled: ‘Notes for meeting with Puttnam on “Lisztomania”’, dated 9th April:

1. Not quite clear purpose of this meeting but must insist that the matter be finalised tonight one way or another. Have been very patient. Two weeks since we discovered true state of affairs, ie Russell was not slipping but was making another picture with Producer's approval, but without our knowledge...
2. To save time, have you decided to enter into the indemnity which was sent to your solicitors and which you have had ample time to consider?
3. If quibbling starts on the question of the size of the rebate, we must point out that it is illogical to expect a rebate at all. Present overcost is not due to normal hazards of production but to a deliberate change of policy... LISZTOMANIA II ... is a more costly project for which apparently you eventually obtained some additional outside finance ... If every producer behaved in this way, matters would be chaotic ...
4. If suggested that Warners have to be brought into this, we are not concerned with Warners ... We look to your company for the provision of the extra finance to make your Mark II picture and are not interested where the money comes from.
5. Alternative is that we take over the picture, appointing someone who we have in mind to be overall in charge. Russell to be retained but instructed to revert to original project approved by us and any additional numbers etc to be deleted.
6. Finally, will regard you in breach of your agreement with us and call on you to make good the overcost incurred.

If Garrett was unclear as to the meeting's purpose, he was clear enough in his assessment of VPS' culpability, which he attributes not to incompetence, but to duplicity. However, the sending of two further letters on 11th April reaffirming Film Finances' intention to take over the production, suggests the meeting between Garrett and Puttnam never took place.⁷² The second of these letters reminded VPS that Film Finances were now 'Managers and Agents in respect of the above film', and 'in the meantime, no cheques are to be drawn on the Production Account'. However, a hand-written note at the bottom of this letter indicates, belatedly, that this prerogative was 'not exercised in view of Indemnity given by Visual Programmes'.⁷³

This arrangement, and the bail-out deal Puttnam had struck with the film's US distributors, Warner Bros. to advance a sum of £75,000 'in the form of cash during the post-production period', is confirmed in a letter of 18th April.⁷⁴ The money finally arrived on 20th June, and Norman Swindell lost no time in writing to Bernard Smith at Film Finances, to claim £10,000, 'being the agreed amount refundable now and part of the total agreed refund of the completion guarantors' fee'.⁷⁵ The final cost report, dated 4th July 1975, shows an estimated final production cost of £603,249, some £162,794 over budget. On the bright side, Paul Cadiou reports that the three insurance claims made could amount to £11,429.47.⁷⁶ Principal photography was finally completed on 23rd May, 27 days over schedule, and the film went into post-production, including music recording, during the summer. *Lisztomania* opened in New York on 10th October 1975 and on 13th November in London, where it took £13,240 in its first week.⁷⁷ Despite Russell's popular notoriety, however, critically the film was a flop.

In interview Sandy Lieberman told me: 'Stylistically, I don't really think it worked either on an artistic level [or commercially]. It was too alienating for an audience, so it therefore had little commercial success ... We had to step in, in the place of the guarantor,

and that caused a huge problem for us. So despite the fact that we backed him [Ken Russell], and protected him from interference from an outside source, nonetheless we didn't really feel that he respected our position.⁷⁸ In 1975 Russell, at the peak of his flamboyant self-indulgence, was oblivious to the risks his backers had taken in order to protect his creative freedom. Only now, with access to the Film Finances files, is the full extent of that risk apparent.

Conclusion

The three films employed here as case studies are already celebrated, each in their own way: as cult classic, as consummate psychodrama, as flamboyant excess story. And I have deliberately steered clear of their cinematic qualities, in order to attend to their production histories. In this pursuit, the Film Finances archive does more than confirm what we already knew. Indeed, it does more than plug the gaps in our knowledge. It seems to me, in their unique role as completion guarantors, the judgements of Film Finances offer the perspective of another kind of institutional gate-keeper. And in their accounts of these chequered film histories, they provide fresh documentary evidence of the fractured lines of communication between capital and creativity that characterised this period in British film culture.

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All references, unless taken from published sources which are otherwise stated, come from Film Finances files. The box number relating to each film is included after the first reference.

¹ See J. Chapman, H. M. Glancy, and S. Harper (eds), *The New Film History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2007).

² See S. Harper, *Picturing The Past: The rise and fall of the British costume film* (London: BFI Publishing, 1994), and C. Barr, *Ealing Studios* (Cameron and Tayleur, 1977).

³ John Croydon, letter to R.E.F. Garrett, 4 October 1972, p. 1. Film Finances, Box 530.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ L. Wood, *British Films 1971-1981*, BFI Information Services, p. 11.

⁷ A. Brown, *Inside The Wicker Man: The morbid ingenuities* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2000), p. 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹ Letter from John Croydon to Ted Morley, 10th October 1972.

¹⁰ Letter from Beryl Harvey to John Croydon, 16th October 1972. Plockton was where the opening harbour scenes were filmed on the first three days of the shoot. It is some 260 miles north of the production base in Newton Stewart, Dumfries and Galloway.

¹¹ Letter from R.E.F. Garrett to Peter Snell, 30th October 1972.

¹² Letter from Peter Snell to John Croydon, 31st October 1972.

¹³ Letter from John Croydon to Peter Snell, 2nd November 1972.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Undated Memo entitled 'Script Scenes – Deletions, Necessities' from Sue Merry (Continuity) to Ted (Morley), Brille (Beryl Harvey), and Robin (Hardy).

¹⁶ Daily Progress Report No. 44, 25th November 1972.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Letter from the Director, Film Finances, to British Lion Film Productions Ltd., 27th February 1973.

¹⁹ Letter from the Director, Film Finances, to British Lion Film Productions Ltd., FAO Peter Snell, 19th April 1973.

²⁰ A. Walker, *National Heroes: British cinema in the seventies and eighties* (London: Harrap, 1985), p. 122.

²¹ E. Betts, *The Film Business* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1973), p. 287.

²² R. Shail, *Stanley Baker: A life in film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p.113.

²³ Condition #3 is 'Approval of the Distribution Contract', in a letter from the Director of Film Finances to British Lion dated 9th October 1972.

²⁴ There is some debate about this point. Michael Deeley suggests, rather coyly, that 'perhaps something went wrong in the personal relationship between Snell and Pinches' (Michael Deeley, *Blade Runners, Deer Hunters and Blowing the Bloody Doors Off: My Life in Cult Movies* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 102). Allan Brown is more candid in alleging that Ingrid Pitt, who was dating Pinches, had been cast as the librarian in order to secure the Rank deal, and that Snell slept with her during the shoot which Pinches later discovered – hence no deal (A. Brown, op. cit., pp. 98-101).

²⁵ Michael Deeley, op. cit.

²⁶ See J. Smith, *Withmail and Us: Cult films and film cults in British cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

²⁷ Budget spreadsheet, undated.

²⁸ Memo from Richard Soames to Bernard Smith, 16th April 1973.

²⁹ Letter from the Director of Film Finances to British Lion Film Productions Ltd., 16th July 1973.

³⁰ Letter from Michael Deeley to Film Finances, 19th July 1973.

³¹ A. Brown, op. cit., pp. 113-14.

³² M. Sanderson, *Don't Look Now* (London: BFI Publishing, 1996), p. 19.

³³ Memo from R.E.F. Garrett to John Croydon, 27th September 1972. Film Finances, Box 536.

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- ³⁴ Letter from John Croydon to R.E.F. Garrett, 11th October 1972, p. 1.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 4.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p.6.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p.12.
- ³⁹ Letter from the Director of Film Finances to Casey Productions Ltd., 20th November 1972.
- ⁴⁰ Letter from John Croydon to R.E.F. Garrett, 21st November 1972, p. 1.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid, p. 2.
- ⁴³ Ibid., pp. 2-3.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 3.
- ⁴⁵ Letter from John Croydon to R.E.F. Garrett, 11th October 1972, p. 4.
- ⁴⁶ Mark Sanderson, op cit., p. 72.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 74.
- ⁴⁸ Tim J. Hampton, Production Manager, Daily Progress Report, 19th December 1972.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 76.
- ⁵⁰ Letter from Peter Katz to Bernard Smith, 13th January 1973.
- ⁵¹ Letter from Steve Previn to Bernard Smith, 24th January 1973.
- ⁵² List of overages, undated.
- ⁵³ Mark Sanderson, op. cit., p. 74.
- ⁵⁴ Interview with Sandy Lieberman, London, 6th March 2008.
- ⁵⁵ Letter from John Croydon to R.E.F. Garrett, 29th January 1975, p. 1. Film Finances, Box 581.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 7.
- ⁵⁸ Letter from Film Finances to Visual Programme Systems Ltd (Goodtimes Enterprises), 30th January 1975.
- ⁵⁹ Memo from Paul Cadiou, Production Accountant, to Roy Baird (Producer), David Puttnam (Producer) and Norman Swindell (Director and Company Secretary at Visual Programme Systems Ltd), R.M. Soames (Finance Director at Film Finances) dated 19th February 1975, accompanying Cost Report No. 2 for week ending 14th February 1975.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., Memo dated 26th February 1975, in respect of Cost Report No. 3 for week ending 21st February 1975.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., Memo dated 5th March 1975, in respect of Cost Report No. 4 for week ending 28th February 1975.
- ⁶² Ibid., Memo dated 17th March 1975, in respect of Cost Report No. 5 for week ending 7th March 1975.
- ⁶³ Peter Suschitzky, *American Cinematographer*, Vol. 57, No. 2, February 1976, p. 228.
- ⁶⁴ Letter from Richard Soames to Roy Baird, 19th March 1975.
- ⁶⁵ Letter from R.E.F. Garrett to Ken Russell, 26th March 1975.
- ⁶⁶ Report from Peter Price, 27th March 1973.
- ⁶⁷ Letter from Peter Price to Richard Soames, 1st April 1975.
- ⁶⁸ Op cit., Memo dated 27th March 1975, in respect of Cost Reports Nos. 6 and 7, for 2 weeks ending 21st March 1975.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., Memo dated 4th April 1975, in respect of Cost Reports No. 8, for week ending 28th March 1975.
- ⁷⁰ Letter from Harbottle & Lewis to Frank Bloom at Nicholas Morris, 2nd April 1975.
- ⁷¹ Letter from Film Finances to VPS, 9th April 1975.
- ⁷² Letter from Film Finances to VPS, 11th April 1975.
- ⁷³ Second letter from Film Finances to VPS, 11th April 1975.
- ⁷⁴ Letter from Arthur Kananack at Warner Bros., to David Puttnam, Goodtimes Enterprises, 18th April 1975.
- ⁷⁵ Letter from Norman Swindell to Bernard Smith, 20th June 1975.
- ⁷⁶ Op cit., Memo dated 4th July 1975, in respect of Cost Report No. 16, for week ending 27th June 1975.
- ⁷⁷ *Screen International*, Saturday 22nd November 1975, p. 2.
- ⁷⁸ Interview with Sandy Lieberman, London, 6th March 2008.