

## Written evidence submitted by Zsafia Szemeredy

I'm co-founder of Green Eyes Productions, a sustainability consultancy based in the UK and Hungary - two capitols of service production destinations. I believe my dual nationality and working in the two industries simultaneously provides me a very unique look into our sector.

My company, Green Eyes Productions is barely 2 years old, yet we can already count Disney, Apple, Netflix, Paramount, NBC Universal and HBO, amongst our international clients. From the UK side I'm proud to say we have worked with multiple independent companies such as 60forty Film, Sisters, The Forge and have provided training and education at the BFI, NFTS and various local events. We are currently engaged as principal partners in the Greening the European Filmmaking Policy event series, alongside Warwick and Cambridge Universities, Film London, the Irish and Sardinian local partners. Beyond the UK we also work with our international partners, and our local CEE partners - whether that ranges from local production service companies, The Observatory, Eurimage or film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, Tallinn Black Nights, Venice etc.

Our primary role is to advice productions how to be more sustainable on the ground. However, we quickly realised it is a Sisyphean task. Firs the industry needs foundations to build on, infra-structurally, education-wise and culturally as well, in other words the triumvirate of People, Planet, Profit needs to be cultivated in our industry as well and it must be joined up with a long-term, holistic view.

At my company, we stand on two legs. My business partner is a biologist and science communicator, I myself have worked in the creative industries all my adult life. I have worked in exhibition, distribution, festivals, marketing & PR in the first leg of my career. Then I have followed my heart and took roles that were related to writing, such as a development executive position at Bafta Roccliffe and ad hoc jobs at the London Screenwriting Festival and other reading tasks. My years at the NFTS have opened doors to me, that would have stayed shut in front of me, - as I didn't have a British passport at the time - and have given me a vast array of knowledge and network that contributes to my world view and company leadership model.

Even before I started working in sustainability I was convinced, that a well-rounded education in life includes understanding the entire film chain, what motivates the industry I'm working in, familiarising myself with the players and their interests and such. Hence, I strived for trying a bit of everything so I can see it holistically, and understand everyone's interest and motivation. I'm convinced this is helping to shape my current view at Green Eyes as well, and provides me with insights that I'd like to share with you, in the hope of creating a better, more sustainable, diverse and flourishing film sector for the future to come.

### **How attractive is the UK as a global destination for the production of film and high-end television?**

- What are the barriers to maintaining and increasing overseas investment in the sector?
- What are the benefits and challenges of overseas investment for the UK's film-making capacity?

From what I see, the UK is very attractive in principal, and mainly to US productions. As a European, my bone of content is, that there is a reduced opportunity to co-produce as Europeans with the UK. France, Germany, Spain etc. they all get to collaborate. The UK, although an eligible and likely candidate, is NOT even part of Eurimage. Canada is part of it, the UK not.

It is clear as day, the sector is flourishing. My questions is however, which way is it going to go forward? What is the end goal, to only produce streamer content? Currently the system only supports large US investment almost and does not cater for smaller, local productions. The industry complains about the lack of originality across streamer slates etc., perhaps we need to

look at how best we can encourage independent cinema and TV sector to flourish again and not stifle it with policies and regulations that only cater for the loudest and strongest.

The UK is undoubtedly has an extremely skilled workforce and a great infrastructure - compared to other European countries that I've worked in. However, the workforce has been seriously dented when EU nationals - who the sector relied on - could no longer come and work without a visa (that is almost impossible to obtain for productions). I also believe, that the world is rushing towards an age, when sustainability MUST be considered at every single decision making. So from a certain POV I wonder, is it sustainable to encourage more co-productions? Is there a way to design the rebates and incentives with environmental considerations in mind and for the long run, so the infrastructure can be built around it properly (meaning tramlines, public transport to studios, entire European crews using ground transport, co-productions not stipulating equipment travel cross continents for rebate purposes etc.)

### **What more can be done to incentivise film and high-end television production in the UK?**

- Are the current funding routes, tax credits and governance for the industry fit for purpose?

I think it's important to look at loop holes and such when we attract co-productions and projects to invest in the region for example only attract a production for one reason, use all resources and leave without compensations. Shouldn't productions leave something behind? Invest in the industry? I find it very irresponsible, that we all plan for the length of a production and not beyond, just using the resources but not focusing on joining forces and collaborating with a real governing vision behind it. Had we looked at the industry as a whole, we could be making serious change. For example, why are UK productions obliged to pay an offset fee, when they could be paying an 'inset' fee into a pool that can be allocated for infrastructural development, research etc. by an industry committee? An average blockbuster and HETV pays between £20-40k compensation (well below market-price, I must add), there are hundreds of productions shot in the UK every year, the internationals are not even paying compensation. Add up all that, and we could invest it back into Grid Cabinets, train lines etc. to reduce the carbon footprint of the industry and be a world-leader in that sector. If you are still wondering why despite the heat waves, flood etc., every studio has commitment goals now, it's not an attractive idea to beat your competition and gain some headway, it's compulsory going forward. ESG reporting is coming in the EU from 2024 as well, the US requirements are getting stricter, so why should we be lagging behind?

Are the current funding routes fit for purpose? Well, do they consider environmental sustainability? No. Then, no, they are not fit for purpose. We have to start from the highest level and consider sustainability from the top, it will only trickle down to production level if we do that. If executives are trained to make the lofty decisions with sustainability in mind from the start (either because they are made to do so or they are incentivised) it will be for the better for our entire industry. I had a highest level of exec tell me once how he wishes PET bottles could be banned on set. I looked at him and wondered: you are the only one who can currently ban them. Why didn't you do it? It's a minuscule example, a small drop in the sea but illustrates my point well I believe. Some of the large decisions but a pen of a stroke for the executives if it's a requirement and/or their interest lies with it.

As Dorothy Fortenberry say **"If climate isn't in your story, it's science fiction."** To me it emphasises the need take everything even more seriously. Should our tax rebates and incentives be tied to a financial reward and a base requirement line in regards to sustainability the all industry could benefit from it. Look at some of the European countries, Austria has introduced a 5% rebate, Hungary is bringing out domestic support, so does Slovakia, Belgium had it for years. We are lagging behind. Germany has a green mandate for the entire industry, and official training, where is the UK counterpart? We are supposedly leading the industry - instead we have a calculator that is NOT tailored for Film and HETV, only for broadcasters, which is a serious issue if we consider that inward investments comes for the feature and HETV incentives and we haven't got a calculator that fits the purpose (nor does anyone to be fair, there's a genuine need for unification and data sharing on that front with the EU and the US) at the moment). If sustainability would be tied to the

payment terms, no doubt every production would be a lot more sustainable, which would result in infrastructural developments, new technologies; inward investment in other words.

- **What are the current challenges facing the UK's independent film production sector?**

- What is the demand for and capacity for production of films with a clear British identity?
- Are the nations and regions of the UK adequately represented and supported in the production of British films?

I can only echo myself. It is great, that there is support for micro budget UK productions. However, how are you supposed to shoot, when the workforce diminished? The European skilled craft force cannot work in the sector now.

The kind of support that is available for British productions only helps the segregation further: there are the micro budget, patchwork auteur productions financed through all the available little funds (often favouring the small established players, who are drowning in the seas of independent world without any lack of EU support) and the juggernauts, the streamers, the studios. Whatever happened to the mid-sized British productions? Four Weddings and a Funeral kind? Who could finance that now? It is at the disposal of the 'Giants', since all available support for independent cinema is for the micro category and for the very few. The issue with being at the disposal of the 'Giants' is the eco-chamber effect, the apathy for trying something new and rolling the dice. When you are that big, you have to make sure what you finance is a hit, you can't risk much, otherwise your competitors step in - this leads to a stalemate of franchise releases and barely any independent creative continent. Even genes mutate and adapt, so why do we let our industry go stale and play for the safe? Because there's no longer a support network. In my view, that's what our current system is lacking. It is great we have the support for up and coming etc. and it can always be increased further, diversified, regionalised all of that, but don't forget the next step and the next step, what happens to the players of the middle ground? They need to be supported as well. That's when we get quality content. Talent is raised through the first ranks, now you give them the wind and support to shine that talent and actually make films and series that can find real audiences, that the micro auteur wonders can never do. Sorry to say it so bluntly, but you need money to find an audience, in this age of content flood, you have to cut through somehow!

It also needs to be diversified who is being supported, how is being supported and what is asked of them (thinking of sustainability requirements here). There needs to be room for experimenting. Can't all UK productions be low-budget, 1m, grim, sheep-filled, kitchen-sink stories. We need to make a lot of failures, try a lot of new things, hear a lot of new voices if we want the industry to flourish and audiences to leave their homes and come back to cinemas. Until tentpoles dominate every screen, I'm not inclined to pay out a lot of money for another take on something I've seen before.

- **What are the issues facing the UK's film exhibition sector?**
- **What more can be done to protect and promote the UK's screen heritage?**

I've eluded to this above, overall everything is connected. If we can produce more diversified content (meaning here different budget ranges) then they can come back to cinemas and attract audiences. You can try an incentivise audiences to come back with cheaper tickets, events etc. but ultimately everyone is just fed up being fed fodder, as tentpoles are fast becoming nothing else, not much nourishment in them, you don't go home and ponder on them, they are often more like a cheap ride in an amusement park (pun intended) just explosions and lazy storylines of side characters that had a tiny role in a previous segment of that franchise one time.

- **What can the industry and Government do to ensure British film and high-end television can adapt for the future?**

- What should be prioritised to ensure a strong skills pipeline and retention in the film and high-end TV industry?
- What are the risks and benefits of artificial intelligence to the sector?
- What needs to change to ensure the industry is supporting inclusivity and sustainability.

In my view, there are a few necessary steps that I tried to unfold above.

1. Think holistically and long-term from a sustainability POV and from an industry POV as well. Consider slates, entire companies not just single productions and plan for a larger industry investment to support them. (Build Grid Cabinets in cities to reduce generator usage, provide public transport to studios, train pass for film crews, support vendors that are switching to clean energy kit etc.) Provide sustainability training on all levels focused on each department, key executives as well as crew.
2. Enable EU co-productions and workforce.
3. Bring back the mid-sized production support level.
4. Tie sustainability to the tax incentives, application funds etc. set up Committees, provide training and really develop the infrastructure that is missing around it - that will benefit the entire industry.
5. Govern AI with caution. Yes, it can be a great opportunity, but don't fly too close to the sun. By now we have all watched enough science fiction and dystopian catastrophes, no-one wants a world dominated by a few 'Giants' who only hold their own interest dear. Automation and streamlining is great, but I do not want a world where my kids will watch Marilyn Monroe and Tom Cruise in an AI generated film thinking it's completely real, because there's no limit of whose face we use and how we write a story. Somewhere down the line it's just another tool for carving out an even bigger gap between already distanced parties, David and Goliath, the super rich and the plebeian, the privileged and the not so much.

All in all, I'm convinced that if our industry releases 599 series in the US in one year alone (according to a Guardian article) that's an indicator of how much content we create. The more content we produce, the larger the industry footprint gets. So if we want to keep up with this speed (although there's an argument to be had here for less content but with a better quality filter) we also have to think of the implications of producing all this content! Are we killing the planet meanwhile producing cheap entertainment? Are we stifling creativity while trying to satisfy the masses? Where does responsibility lie and who should make the decisions? Would it help to have policies, guidelines and incentives in place to provide a better framework? Yes, I think it would.