

## Channel 4 and British Film Culture Conference

University of Portsmouth/BUFVC at BFI Southbank, London, 31 October–2 November 2012

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Proposal for paper from

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### **Forgotten histories? Film on Four and British Retro and Heritage Films of the 1980s**

#### **Abstract**

From Channel 4's launch and throughout the 1980s, feature-film dramas set in the past – whether 'retro' biographical narratives set in relatively recent mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century decades, or the so-called 'heritage films', typically set in the Edwardian or Victorian eras – formed an important, high-profile and successful strand of Film on Four's output as producer or co-production partner. Examples such as *Dance With A Stranger* (Mike Newell, 1984) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (Stephen Frears, 1987) were among the most acclaimed British films of the 1980s, and a broader range made stars of actors such as Rupert Everett, Miranda Richardson and Daniel Day-Lewis. Some, notably the Film on Four/Merchant Ivory adaptations from E. M. Forster, *A Room With A View* (1985) and *Maurice* (1987), not only remain well loved a quarter-century later, but continue to attract new (transnational, and young) 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences via YouTube and other online spaces of film culture and fandom. Despite these evident impact(s), however – within the UK and internationally, and across time – both the retro and heritage strands have been largely written out of the Film on Four/Film 4 International 'brand' and subsequent narratives of its production history.

This paper will revisit the field of Film on Four period-film productions/co-productions of the 1980s, and critical debate around them, to highlight ambivalences around the perceived ideological status of both the 'retro' and 'heritage' strands of representation that may in part (although not solely) account for the analogously ambivalent position of such films within the Film on Four 'brand'. In contrast, it will illustrate how the retrospective online reception of some of these 1980s case studies by 21<sup>st</sup>-century audiences and fans throws such negative critical and industry assumptions into question.