

**Channel 4 and British Film Culture Conference**

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**The Failure of the Avant-Garde? An Assessment of the Contribution of  
British Experimental Film to Channel 4's Early Years**

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The imaginative range of British experimental film in the 1970s was a key determinant of Channel 4's film culture in the broadcaster's early years. The avant-garde of the 1970s embraced individual filmmakers such as Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway, the productions of collectives including Cinema Action and the Berwick Street Collective, the funding policies of the BFI Production Board and the Arts Council of Great Britain, the production and exhibition context of the London Filmmakers' Co-op, and critical writings in *Screen*, *After Image* and other journals.

Productions shaped by this tradition were strongly represented in Channel 4's output under Chief Executive Jeremy isaacs, as is evidenced by strands such as *The Eleventh Hour* and *Film on Four* (notably *The Bad Sister* directed by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen), in the channel's arts output (such as Greenaway's *Four American Composers*) and in series such as *Commodities* and *Visions*.

Yet this work, for all its diversity, largely failed to impress Jeremy Isaacs' successor Michael Grade or the critical culture of the time, not to mention the channel's audiences. Films centrally engaged with formal experimentation were effortlessly marginalised and dismissed after 1987.

Reassessing a number of key experimental films from the early years, including *The Bad Sister* and *Commodities*, this paper explores the reasons for failure of the film avant-garde and asks whether it was inevitable that the

aesthetic and political imperatives of this tradition would prove incompatible with the demands of terrestrial network television.