

Channel 4 and British Film Culture Conference

BFI Southbank, London, 1-2 November 2012

Productive relationships: Film on Four and the new creative culture of the 1990s

Laura Mayne, University of Portsmouth

In the 1990s, under the aegis of Commissioning Editor David Aukin, Film on Four became characterised by greater risk-taking, more variety in film content and moves towards operating more like the studio-type outfit that it was to become under Paul Webster in 1998. But Film on Four also remained loyal to its original 'remit' as defined by Channel 4's former Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs and former Commissioning Editor for Drama David Rose; to make films for cinema and television, and to encourage and foster new talent. Indeed, in this period, around half of all commissioned Films on Four gave opportunities to untried writers and directors.

However, in addition to providing a platform for new talent, this paper will argue that Film on Four also gave rise to new development and production practices. For example, Aukin and his team did not simply finance films, but often took significant editorial and creative input at script and production level. Film on Four could also offer the benefit of years of accumulated experience to new filmmakers in a fragmented industry of small, single-film production companies. Perhaps most importantly, Film on Four could also offer new writers and directors a space for innovation. Working within low-budget cinema and funded by a broadcaster with a firm cultural remit arguably brought the freedom to experiment, and Aukin in particular seemed to welcome more visually innovative and visceral styles of filmmaking.

This paper will examine these issues through a case study of the relationship between Film on Four and the writing, producing and directing team of John Hodge, Andrew McDonald and Danny Boyle. This relationship began in 1994 when Aukin took a risk in financing the controversial film *Shallow Grave*, and continued when Hodge, Boyle and McDonald decided to make *Trainspotting* (1996) with Film on Four despite receiving more lucrative offers from elsewhere. More generally, this paper will examine how Film on Four's creative relationships with producers, writers and directors has culminated in innovative work which has had, and continues to have, a profound impact on British cinema.