

Channel 4 and British film culture – a case of (e)merging methodologies in film and television studies?

Part I

I can't hope in the space of an hour to do justice to thirty years of film on four. Nor are we in a position yet to present what they call in policy reports, our executive summary. Instead, I want to use this paper to do three things. Firstly, and quite straightforwardly, I will outline the project, its aims and outputs. Some of you will already be familiar with these. Secondly, and briefly, I will say something about our main sources of evidence and issues in accessing and interpreting these. But then thirdly, and in more detail, I want to examine the methodological challenges of writing a cultural history which combines approaches from what have hitherto been the fairly discrete disciplines of film and television studies. I want to argue that, in some senses, those disciplinary distinctions are artificial, and that film and television historians needs to shape up to the reality of the interdependence of film and television culture in the UK, drawing, where appropriate, on other theoretical models.

By far the most significant archival developments have come from Channel 4 themselves, on two fronts. Firstly, the BUFVC held a full-back run of Channel 4's weekly Press Information Packs (1982-2002) which, besides complete listings, have movie notes on every broadcast film. This invaluable resource is being digitised by the BUFVC and in partnership with the Portsmouth team we are publishing that database with a contextual website on the BUFVC's website. Secondly, Channel 4's archives manager, Rosie Gleeson, has been incredibly helpful to us in the difficult process of enabling access to Channel 4's own archives. From a starting position where we didn't know what they had and they didn't know what we wanted, our researchers have signed an access agreement which allows them to work at Horseferry Road and order up materials. Everything, but everything, has to be cleared by the company's lawyers, but it's been worth the wait and this resource is now producing untold riches.

Beyond the archives, the other major source of information for the study has been interviews. So far the team has conducted something in the region of 30 interviews (mostly with former, but also some current, employees at Channel 4, including all the past heads of film). Notwithstanding the caveats attached to value of personal testimony as evidence (from bad memories to big egos), these have been incredibly useful. And I will say more about their importance when I come on to discuss methodologies.

There is a small extant literature on the subject of Channel 4, and a quick survey will suffice to indicate some of its bias and limitations. Firstly, and perhaps inevitably, a number of accounts tend to focus on the formation of Channel 4 and the early years, from academic interventions (like Sylvia Harvey's, Dorothy Hobson's, Simon Blanchard and David Morley's and Peter Catterall's), through personal memoirs (Isaacs and Grade), to journalism: Maggie Brown. This is not merely a quirk of historical chronology; it also seems to me to reveal a common tendency to view the real significance of Channel 4 as in the circumstances of its birth, and its (near mythical) revolutionary moment. This is a narrative which is hard to escape, but which, I will argue, requires revising. To date, there is only one dedicated book on *Film on Four*, published by the BFI's John Pym in 1991.

Aside from the broad literature on British television of the last thirty years, including studies of policies, institutions, genres and so on, and a handful of books on British cinema of the period (notably Friedman, Hill, Murphy, Walker, and Higson), there is only one volume (edited by Hill and McLoone) that squarely addresses the relationship between the two media. This is significant. It became quite clear to us early in our work that one of the challenges of our project was in addressing the new interdependence of film and television in the UK which Channel 4 inaugurated. But it was equally clear that, in disciplinary terms, scholarly work on the period had, with this one exception, entirely ignored the major transformation in film and television culture which Channel 4 brought about, and the need to address its new symbiotic relationship.

For we recognized that in pursuing our aim of assessing the contribution of Channel 4 to British film culture, which no study had previously done, we were also, inevitably, considering the impact of film on television culture (a point admirably made by Cathy Johnson at *Screen* conference in 2011). I want to argue that the need to address this symbiotic relationship has important implications for how we do film history, and requires that we think beyond established methodologies. In order to begin to do this, however, it is necessary first to look back.

Part II

The inspiration for the Channel 4 project came from my work on Sue Harper's AHRC project on the 1970s. Firstly, in mapping the fragmentation of British film culture during that decade, we observed that the relations between the film and television industries continued to be mutually suspicious (despite some limited cross-over), as television's twenty-year rise to a position of popular supremacy eclipsed a cinema in steady, seemingly terminal, decline.

Secondly, in terms of our approach, we had recognized that established archival methods were inadequate, on their own, to account for the variety (both in type and quality) of the films produced, since the operations of creative agency were often randomly organised and chaotically performed. It was hard to recover evidence of intention or of symbolic capital, in a landscape where film as a medium was losing its cultural purchase.

It seemed to me clear that, by the beginning of the 1980s, British film culture was undergoing a profound transformation on a number of fronts: cinema attendance was at an all-time low, home video was taking off, the vestiges of British film production were struggling to survive financially (despite the continued exploitation of our studio facilities by American majors), erstwhile successful independent producers were either sinking or swimming across the Atlantic, and more generally moving image culture had become diffused, from commercial television on the one hand, to a whole sub-culture of film co-ops and artists' video workshops making adventurous work on a hand-to-mouth,

cottage industry scale. Finally, the Annan report, which had been published in 1977, not only paved the way for the establishment of a fourth television channel, but it explicitly referred to the need for greater co-operation between the film and television industries in the UK. When it arrived, in 1982, Channel 4 became the engine which drove this transformation in moving image culture.

When, in 1979, Jeremy Isaacs boldly announced his application for the job of Chief Executive of the new fourth channel at the Edinburgh Television Festival, he included in his manifesto a commitment to film. And in enacting this commitment he was drawing upon the models of more mutually supportive relations between film and tv which pertained in other European countries.

There were other challenges that Isaacs, Rose and his team had to face in developing film. Cynical voices within the industry were already set against Channel 4's ambitions. Meanwhile the culture vultures were circling overhead awaiting the imminent demise of British cinema.

While David Rose's editorial team, which included Walter Donohue and Karin Bamborough, both script editors with theatrical and literary, rather than film, backgrounds, sought out new talent, Channel 4 endeavoured to woo the independents with the semblance of a strategy, as these profiles published in the magazine of the Association of Independent Producers show. They show the development of a commissioning mechanism both in feature film and in the newly-created Independent Film and Video Department under the auspices of Alan Fountain.

The establishment of key relationships was crucial to the embedding of film commissioning within the framework of a television institution. The obstacles that had to be overcome included agreements with the CEA lifting the 3-year embargo for TV broadcast on any film costing less than £1.25m, and with the ACTT union in the Workshops Declaration, which provided a framework for working practices, wage rates and copyright for independent film-making co-operatives, many of which received direct funding from Channel 4 and whose

work was broadcast in regular strands like *People to People* and *The Eleventh Hour*. In another agreement, with the BFI Production Board, Channel 4 took first option on broadcast rights for any BFI film in return for an annual subvention. The BFI Production Board films supported by Channel 4 included Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986) and Terence Davies's *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988). The 1980s also saw Channel 4 foster productive relationships with David Puttnam's *Goldcrest* (in a three-film series called *First Love*), with the fledgling Working Title Films (whose breakthrough came with *My Beautiful Laundrette* [1987]) and with Palace Pictures (who notably brought to Channel 4 Neil Jordan's films *Company of Wolves* [1984], *Mona Lisa* [1986], and *The Crying Game* [1992]). Besides gaining cinema releases, each of these titles was also screened in Channel 4's flagship film strand, *Film on Four*.

By the end of 1983 (its first year of operation) statistics published in *Screen Digest* established the increasing popularity of film on television, and Channel 4's role in this transformation. By 1986 Channel 4 had also co-funded important films by European auteurs including *Voyage to Cythera* by Theo Angelopoulos (1984), Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984) and Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* (1986), and had established Film Four International as a sales venture under lawyer Colin Leventhal.

When in 1984 the Conservative Government abolished the three instruments of state support for the film industry, Channel 4 was already well-placed to be invited to contribute to a new public-private partnership (The British Film Finance Consortium), and David Scott, their director of finance, sat on the committee.

OK. As Sue Harper once said, 'So far, so anodyne'. So let's pause there, having given what we might call the narrative of emergence – a narrative which conveniently coincides with the careers of both Jeremy Isaacs, as Chief Executive, and David Rose, as head of film. This tells us how Channel 4, a new television broadcaster, became involved in the film industry and, we might say as good film historians, the conditions which enabled certain kinds

of films to get made and shown (both in cinema and on television). It is one of the narratives of emergence which are interwoven in the several published studies of the early years of Channel 4. If I was to begin the next chapter in the story (and don't worry I'm not going to), I would be conforming to the four-part history of film at Channel 4 which John Hill has advanced. So I now want to consider some models of analysis which may help to outline the mixture of methodological approaches I think are necessary for understanding Channel 4's relationship to film.

Part III

This model is persuasive in so far as it coincides not only with the tenures of particular heads of film (under successive chief executives), but also marks out the way in which the film department at Channel 4 (in its various guises) responded to changes in broadcasting policy, economic conditions, and technology. In this way it constitutes an institutional study (of the kind that Georgina Born has undertaken at the BBC). It is television history which interprets the ways in which the structures and operations of institutions are shaped by policy, regulation and market economics. I am reminded also of Nicholas Garnham's *Structures of Television* (though he was writing about a rather earlier television landscape). It also follows the approach of Lesley Aston and Paul Bonner's monumental 6-volume history of Independent Television.

From a film history perspective it would be convenient to define this as a producer-auteur model, whereby successive heads of film at Channel 4 have fostered the kind of film they were interested in. David Aukin, for example, was keen to move away from period dramas and gritty social realism and to embrace genre films which might have a broader commercial appeal (hence his backing of *Dust Devil* – which failed commercially but became a cult horror film – of Danny Boyle's *Shallow Grave*, and of Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*). Aukin said in interview: "I had more of a broad church approach ... I think a very significant film was Richard Stanley's film ... suddenly the industry said, 'Fuck, he's doing *Dust Devil*'. You know, that's interesting, that's not something that we would expect Channel 4 to be doing.'

Again, Paul Webster, when he was appointed by Michael Jackson as head of the newly-created, semi-autonomous mini-studio (FilmFour Ltd), had ambitions to make bigger-budget films squarely aimed at the international market, but told us he was thwarted by institutional interference which demanded that he also backed the latest Ken Loach film, and still required him to produce films for television broadcast. Significantly the mini-studio, FilmFour Ltd., was a short-lived experiment. It didn't work, for reasons I will come on to.

So persuasive though the producer-auteur approach might be in tracing the lines of creative agency which lead certain kinds of films to get made, the model does not take account of the complexity of the institutional determinants upon film sponsorship at Channel 4. We need to acknowledge that these figures (Rose, Aukin, Webster, Ross) are not producers in the conventional sense, but remain commissioning editors (who work with independent film producers and work **for** television executives). They experience constraints (as in the case of Webster) even when the organisational structure promises autonomy. And they work within a creative industry economy where different dynamics of creative autonomy apply.

In order to interpret their key roles, therefore, depends upon an awareness of two dynamic sets of institutional conditions which may be seen to operate, respectively, on vertical and horizontal axes. Vertically, at any given point, one needs to be mindful of the internal power relations, the institutional structure and the behaviours of particular individuals according to their role ascription; horizontally, one needs to take account of what MacMillan called 'events': the series of moments on which the history of any organisation turns. Webster was frustrated not only by interference from the broadcaster who had granted him putative autonomy, but by a series of big-budget flops which accrued significant debts before the successes of *Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) and *Touching the Void* (2004)

Another quote from our interview with Aukin will suffice to illustrate a broader point. What seems very important to me is not whether Aukin is right or wrong. Nor particularly am I concerned about how one might trace the operation of chance in the mechanisms of cultural production. Rather, I am interested in his testimony as discourse. Because this is the rhetoric and the behaviour of a film producer working in the television industry. Margaret Lantis, the American anthropologist, talked about vernacular culture – discourse associated with particular kinds of institutionally or professionally determined behaviours. I think such analysis is largely missing from work on the creative agency of workers in the film industry. We have no effective language for describing some of the drivers of creative and commercial decision-making. And I think we could learn from this.

We can also learn much from political economy approaches in the case of Channel 4, particularly in challenging what I earlier referred to as the bias in favour of the early years, the myth of cultural revolution (DID C4 lead a cultural revolution in the early 1980s?), and the narrative of emergence. I think the problem with the palpable nostalgia (shared amongst those *soixante-huitards* who were at its heart) for this notion is that overlays the fundamental contradiction that was attendant at the birth of Channel 4: It was the bastard child of free-market Conservatives and the liberal left-intelligentsia. And what they created was a hybrid entity which combined public service remit and IBA regulation with a commissioning and broadcasting strategy that anticipated deregulation and the multi-channel digital world by at least a decade. It was vital, in the early 90s, that Michael Grade resisted Conservative attempts to fully privatise the Channel, because it would have lost its cultural mandate (including support for British film). Equally, the brief experiment of the semi-autonomous FilmFour Ltd and the satellite subscription channel FilmFour, underscored the need for internal subsidy in order to support the cultural policy which is at the core of Channel 4's remit.

This, in turn, provides the very British and curiously hybrid arrangements for subsidy for the film industry which now combine public money (via the

National Lottery) with significant investment from public service broadcasters (BBC and Channel 4).

The reasons, it seems to me, for the radical innovations of the early years were a combination of the people in post, the lack of a structured independent production sector, the flexibility of a fledgling institution, and the need to fill a TV schedule. Some of it was ground-breaking and some of it, we mustn't forget, was rubbish. What has pertained since those heady early days, which have tarnished the dreams of many an old Marxist, is the emergence of a strong indie production sector (especially in the light of deregulation), the commercial reality of sustainability in a multi-channel world, and the hegemony of brand identity.

This moral subsidy, as I call it, is what underpins television's commitment to film, on the basis that no-one in television expects to get any money back from film. What they do get is kudos. What they give, aside from capital investment, is what we might think of as husbandry. They identify, nurture and develop talent, and they are responsible, often, for overseeing projects from beginning to end.

Which brings us back to film itself in case you thought film itself was in danger of becoming lost in all this. I want to conclude by focussing on what I consider to be necessary adjustments in our perception of British film made by (rather than for) television.

Academic and critical discourse is unique in calling films texts – no-one else who is involved in the making, selling or consumption of films thinks of them in this way. IS that a problem?

Not necessarily, unless we think of them only as texts. What this research has pointed to is the ways in which Film4 specifically, but television intervention generally, has redefined this object in different ways. And I'm not talking here about those rather spurious aesthetic debates about whether television has demeaned the cinematic spectacle. But in other ways. Firstly,

television considers film to be both product (projects in which it invests) in the manner of film studios, and which it sells internationally and markets at festivals etc. And also as broadcast content (as schedule filler), whether that be commissioned work or acquisitions, home-grown or imported. In this sense the schedulers (like art galleries) are important curators of film work. Sometimes, institutionally, these two industrial perspectives have created tensions, as I mentioned earlier. But where it seems to me that the broadcasters are united, is in a third conception: film as brand label. This point was made conspicuously by Paul Grindey, Head of Business Affairs, quoted above. It was also made in interview by Christine Langan, head of BBC films. For those of us who regard film as an artform reducing it to the status of a brand label may seem uncomfortably demeaning, but it is vital we take account of this aspect of the way in which contemporary film (especially that marketed by Film4 and BBC Films) is perceived. Not only is this the measure of the value attached to feature film and a key *raison d'être* for film subsidy on the part of broadcasters. But I think it also contributes, through marketing, to a more prominent image of national film culture (with all the problems that term entails).

To mark 30 years of Film4 they recently produced an App. One of the peculiarities of charting the history of Channel 4 as an institution from birth, is that it was also, always, writing its own history. In this way it seems to behave rather like a child arriving, a few years beyond infancy, at self-consciousness of its own identity and place in the world. At key moments (the first birthday, the tenth anniversary, the launch night of Film4) it has looked back and constructed an image of its own past – selectively, of course, as all history is written.

And the Film4 channel's occasional seasons of British films are trailed with clip compilations that present an idea (debatable of course) of national film culture. And for that, I suppose, we should all be grateful. I will show one such trailer by way of a finale in a moment. But for now, to conclude,

I think that this project has taught me firstly the need to draw together different approaches from film and television studies in order to be able to fully understand the intervention of television broadcasters in the British film industry. And secondly, it has made me reconsider our methods in relation to ideas about creative agency, about the film text itself, and (something I haven't had time to address today) patterns of film consumption. Thank you.