

Born Risky: Channel 4 and the Red Triangle

This paper is presented as small case study which is part of a much larger research project, funded by the AHRC, which is assessing the impact of Channel 4 on British film culture, from its inception in 1982. The project, in collaboration with Channel 4 and the British Universities Film and Video Council, has enjoyed unprecedented access to Channel 4's own archives and has completed over 30 interviews with former and current personnel at Channel 4, as well as figures in the film industry. Early on we recognized that, in aiming to explore the creative synergies between British broadcasting and UK film culture, which Channel 4 pioneered, we would necessarily be considering not only the impact of television on film culture, but also the impact of film on television culture. I hope that the story of the Red Triangle will provide some insights into that two-way exchange. Research for this paper has also been augmented by the IBA archives here at Bournemouth and it's proper that I should acknowledge that source and the staff at the archive for their assistance to us.

On the face of it, this paper appears to present a case study in film censorship on television – and, indeed, that's its primary theme. But there's also a sub-plot which I'll alert you to at the outset. It is really the metanarrative of all debates about censorship: that they highlight larger power struggles between ideological forces. What seems to me interesting are the moments when shifts in the ideological plate tectonics cause the tsunamis in the cultural sphere. Taking a retrospective view, Channel 4's red triangle experiment looks more like a storm in a teacup, but I want to argue that the contemporary evidence suggests a transformation of a more fundamental nature.

The trouble with controversy, as George Orwell once observed, is that it polarises opinion, such that people claim publicly either to be more offended or less offended than they really are, and the voices of extremity are the only ones that get heard. Controversy is also exploited, by broadcasters and politicians alike, to score points against one another, to claim the moral highground whether that be in the name of freedom or decency. Today we witness this same conflict re-enacted in the wake of the Levinson enquiry about press freedom and regulation.

But let's get down to brass tacks. The use of television content warning symbols is widespread internationally.

There is a well-established rating system in the United States, and some form of advisory labelling is in existence in over 40 countries although, interestingly, not the UK. So why should Channel 4's short-lived experiment during the winter of 1986/7 have courted such controversy? It wasn't even a new idea then to Jeremy Isaacs, Channel Four's first chief executive (1981-87). At Thames Television in the mid-1970s he had produced the award-winning, twenty-six-part series *The World at War* (ITV 1973-4).

Under an agreement with the IBA a warning symbol was introduced for the episode which dealt with the horrors of the holocaust broadcast on 27 March 1974.¹

Subsequent audience research was commissioned by the IBA in the ATV area of the West Midlands. Amongst its findings, Dr. J. M. Wober, deputy head of research at the IBA, reported to Barry Reeve, research and marketing services manager at ATV, that older people were less aware of the symbol, fewer women than men disregarded the symbol, 66% would keep watching next time they saw a warning symbol, and that 'nearly everybody thinks the symbol is a good idea, which,' he added wryly, 'may merely reflect how little of a good idea such a question is'.²

But fast-forward twelve years and audience research conducted by Channel Four in the wake of inflammatory press coverage prompted Isaacs, under some pressure from the IBA, to think again.

The Broadcasting Act (1981) Section 4 (1) (a) required the IBA to 'satisfy themselves, so far as possible, that nothing is included in programmes which offends against good taste or decency or is likely to encourage or incite to crime or to lead to disorder or to be offensive to public feeling'. However, the Act (Section 11 (1)) also imposed 'a duty on the Authority to ensure that programmes on Channel Four contain a suitable proportion of matter calculated to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by ITV; and to encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes'. Between the devil and this deep blue sea Channel Four had, the IBA noted, 'from time to time transmitted important but often

difficult films – generally from abroad – which have occasionally pressed very close to the absolute limits of acceptability under Section 4 (1) (a)’.³

As Barry Gunter observed, Isaacs’ ‘decision to conduct an experiment with a continuous warning symbol stemmed from audience research which indicated that despite on-air announcements and statements in *TV Times* about the content of certain late-night films, around half the viewers of such films reported that they were not aware of the particular nature of the material before they switched on’.⁴

The red triangle warning symbol experiment ran on Channel Four from 19 September 1986 to 7 February 1987, and was applied to ten films screened after 11.15pm. It took the form of a white triangle with a red border and was shown in a corner of the screen throughout the entire film. The symbol appeared with the words ‘special discretion required’ before a film began and at the end of each advertising break. As David Glencross, Chairman at the IBA, pointed out, ‘There was no intention that the symbol be used with material that would not otherwise have been transmitted by Channel Four’.⁵ However, as their independent film buyer, Derek Hill, revealed to us in interview, the symbol became a very useful way of packaging some radical art-house films he’d acquired.

A suitably measured press release of 21 August 1986 announced: ‘The channel is reluctant to cut the work of outstanding film directors, but it is equally concerned to alert viewers who might themselves be offended, or might wish to protect others in their families’.

Isaacs was quoted, maintaining that ‘viewers are capable of making informed choices themselves about what they watch. This symbol will help them choose and will also serve to warn those who come across one of these films unawares’.⁶

The fact that a film was to carry this warning was publicised in the press and in *TV Times* via Channel Four’s weekly press information packs [link to rt1⁷ & rt2⁸]. As it turned out, the channel was compelled by the IBA to make some cuts for graphic violence in three of the films shown, and it was felt in some quarters that the symbol served paradoxically to attract additional attention to some otherwise obscure art-house curiosities.

The 'red triangle season' began with Claude Faraldo's critically acclaimed 'surreal black comedy' *Themroc* (France, 1972), 'starring Michel Piccolo as a middle-aged worker who suddenly throws off all sexual, social and political inhibitions'.⁹ Mary Whitehouse of the National Viewers and Listeners Association described it as 'One-and-a-half hours of unadulterated assault on the senses containing the glorification and enjoyment of mindless violence'.¹⁰ The fact that the film runs to 110 minutes presumably indicates she found some moments of respite in this onslaught. Subsequent films in the series garnered similar opprobrium from the self-appointed guardian of public morals, who presented her findings to the Parliamentary All Party Media Group on 17 February 1987 as part of an ongoing campaign to incorporate television within the Obscene Publications Act.

Shuji Terayama's *Sho o Suteyo, Machi e Deyo* [*Throw away your books, Let's go into the streets*] (Japan, 1971) was broadcast on 10 October 1986. Adapted from his own stage play, Terayama's first feature was screened by Channel Four the week after his 1974 film *Denen Ni Shisu* [*Pastoral Hide-and-Seek*]. Both had been subjected to minor cuts for violence. Such curatorial sensitivity cut no ice with Whitehouse however, who observed that this rite-of-passage drama 'had the recurring theme of anarchy, both moral and physical, and contained the prolonged and graphic attempted seduction of a virgin teenage boy by a woman prostitute'.¹¹

Another kind of teenage angst was the focus of the Dennis Hopper-directed *Out of the Blue* (Canada, 1980), which was the penultimate offering in the season, screened on 10 January 1987, in which a rebellious 15-year old kills her dysfunctional and abusive parents.

The imaginative schedule also included three films by the German director Helma Sanders-Brahms. *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter* [*Germany, Pale Mother*] (1980) and *L'Avenir d'Émilie* [*Future of Emily*](1984) were shown either side of *Die Berührte* [*No Mercy - No Future*] (1981), only the latter attracting the red triangle treatment for its stark examination of a female schizophrenic's alienation and abuse. Institutional exposés of a different nature were provided by David Stevens' comedy-drama set in an Australian VD clinic ([The Clinic](#), 1982), and with the concluding film in a short season of work by the late Turkish director Yilmaz Güney: *Le Mur* [*The Wall*]

(Turkey/France, 1983) is a harsh indictment of the penal regime in Güney's homeland.

The radical Yugoslavian director Dusan Makavejev (*WR: Mysteries of the Organism*, 1971) was represented in the series by his anarchic Anglo-Swedish comedy *Montenegro* (1981), starring Susan Anspach and Erland Josephson, notable for its use of Marianne Faithfull's bittersweet anthem of liberation, 'The Ballad of Lucy Jordan'. But Mrs Whitehouse was more preoccupied by a 'Prolonged scene where a woman is entertaining everyone by singing and gyrating naked while a radio controlled model tank, with an erect plastic penis sticking out of the barrel, is driven around her while she gyrates'.¹²

The press packs reveal that the red triangle films, which included the celebrated Antonioni's *Identificazione di una Donna* [Identification of a Woman] (Italy/France, 1982), were interspersed with other international offerings of equal stature which did not require the warning: Yaky Yosha's *Ha'ayit* [*The Vulture*] (Israel, 1981), Bergman's *Persona* (Sweden, 1966) and Yannick Bellon's *L'Amour Viole* [*The Rape of Love*] (France, 1977), though the latter presumably avoided the triangle only because a gang rape scene was cut for television broadcast. And the movie notes provide ample evidence of the critical plaudits they all shared.

The finer points of well-informed scheduling, however, failed to avert criticism, not only from those of the Whitehouse persuasion, but from advertisers too. *The Times* reported that 'Bank of Scotland, Kelloggs, Hill Samuel and Sainsbury have ... banned their products being advertised during the screening of such films'.¹³ To liberal opinion the application of the symbol seemed equally ill-judged. The majority of complaints received by the IBA and Channel Four concerned the intrusiveness of the on-screen symbol to the viewing experience. And, ironically, the symbol may well have been responsible for *The Clinic* and *Montenegro* (both sex comedy-dramas and the 'lightest' films in the selection) attracting viewing figures of 2.7million each.

In keeping with the self-consciousness that attended seemingly every innovation and controversy at Channel Four during the 1980s, the red triangle was debated on a *Right to Reply*. It was first raised on 27 September 1986, when Jeremy Isaacs contributed a written statement requesting that viewers 'be patient and tolerant as we try to demonstrate that contemporary work that portrays life, honestly and explicitly,

and that has previously been thought by everyone else unsuitable for screening on television, can successfully be included in our schedule'.¹⁴ Not perhaps Isaacs' finest diplomatic hour, it was left to channel controller Paul Bonner to appear on an hour-long *Right to Reply* Special on 7 April 1987 to explain the experiment, to present the audience research conducted by Channel Four and the IBA, and to hope it all might be quietly forgotten.

The Channel Four board met on 23 June 1987 to reflect on the experience. On average the research showed that audiences for the red triangle films were three times greater than other late-night film screenings during the same period, but that the figures for audience appreciation were overall poor, 'suggesting that the increase in audience size might be a temporary effect of the symbol's use'.¹⁵ Concerned by adverse publicity which the symbol's use had attracted for difficult material which was arguably only of minority interest, the IBA favoured dropping the warning pending further research. Isaacs, with the support of his board, and figures that showed strong public endorsement of the experiment (86%), was minded to retain the symbol, but 'to attempt to devise procedures to limit gratuitous publicity'.¹⁶ The IBA respected Channel Four's position, though David Glencross warned that reducing press attention was 'likely to prove difficult'.¹⁷

By August 1987 *The Guardian* reported 'a Channel 4 spokesman' conceding that while 'the symbol would be retained throughout at the top left-hand corner of all films whose sexual content, language or violence might offend some viewers, the triangle would not be shown in the *TV Times*, or on the screen until immediately before the film started'. And although 'Channel 4 would still do its best to describe such films in pre-publicity', it had 'no plans for screening any such late night films in the current year's schedules'.¹⁸ In the event, temporary self-censorship was the best remedy for unwarranted extra attention. The 'damned red triangle' was one of Channel Four's more ignominious innovations 'which fortunately', Isaacs recalls, 'we could get rid of fairly soon'.¹⁹

But it seems the idea just won't go away. In 1995 the Broadcasting Standards Council commissioned new research, at an estimated cost of £60,000, which found that '92 per cent of viewers wanted more information about programmes, and 40 per cent suggested on-screen symbols would help guide viewing decisions.

Thirty-eight per cent wanted warning symbols in listings magazines'. But Colin Shaw, the Council's director, said broadcasters should proceed with caution. The red triangle and an earlier "black dot" experiment by the now defunct ATV were abandoned because they became a "turn-on" for viewers attracted to sexually explicit material. In an increasingly fragmented and multi-channel television environment it would be difficult to produce uniform standards and symbols, Mr Shaw said'.²⁰ Plus ça change.

But amidst all this research and opinion-forming what does this really symbolise? Let's not forget the context. 1982 witnessed the Video Nasties moral panic which resulted in the Video Recordings Act of 1985. Channel Four continued to court controversy since that was the interpretation that its soixant-huitard, liberal executives chose to place upon its remit to experiment with form and content. In the wake of the Red Triangle debacle, the Conservative Gerald Howarth MP brought a Private Member's Bill before Parliament which attempted to incorporate television broadcasting under the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. So the 1980s witnessed a primal struggle between the forces of reaction and the forces of liberalisation on a number of fronts of which this was but one, small example. And how was the impasse resolved? Not by authoritarian regulation. Much less by a velvet revolution. It was resolved by deregulation (under the Broadcasting Act of 1990) which, in good Conservative practice, introduced a free market. Problem solved? I think not, but hegemony restored perhaps. It can be argued that the forces of Conservatism ultimately triumphed over those of the liberal intelligentsia. Despite the fact that Isaacs' successor Michael Grade fought successfully to defend Channel 4 against Tory plans for its privatisation, he also presided over an era when Channel 4, now reliant upon self-funding via its own advertising revenue, became increasingly commercialised and subject to the vagaries of an open market which its own institutional structure anticipated by a decade. But it is amusing to put this case study in some context. In 2013, out of the blue, Channel 4 invoked the ghost of Red Triangle as, of course, a marketing ploy...

¹ Letter from J. M. Wober to Jeremy Isaacs, 16 May 1974, IBA archives.

² Letter from J. M. Wober to Barry Reeve, 8 May 1974, IBA archives.

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- ³ Glencross, David, *The Channel Four Red Triangle Warning Symbol*, IBA Paper 112 (87), 17 July 1987, pp. 1-2.
- ⁴ Gunter, Barry, *The Channel Four Warning Symbol Experiment: The IBA's and Channel Four's Results Compared*, report to the IBA, March 1987.
- ⁵ Glencross, *op. cit.*
- ⁶ Channel Four Press Office, 'Channel Four Introduces Warning Triangle for Late Night Films', 21 August 1986.
- ⁷ Channel 4 Press Packs, Press information: 1986 week 38 page 3; http://beta.bufovc.ac.uk/new/c4pp/index.php/page/c4_pp_1986_38_0913_0919_003_pressinf (Accessed 04 Feb 2013)
- ⁸ Channel 4 Press Packs, Programme news: 1986 week 38 page 82; http://beta.bufovc.ac.uk/new/c4pp/index.php/page/c4_pp_1986_38_0913_0919_082_prognews (Accessed 04 Feb 2013)
- ⁹ Channel 4 Press Packs, Programme listings: 1986 week 38 page 73; http://beta.bufovc.ac.uk/new/c4pp/index.php/page/c4_pp_1986_38_0913_0919_073_proglis (Accessed 04 Feb 2013)
- ¹⁰ Mary Whitehouse, undated.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Angella Johnson, *The Times*, 21 October 1986.
- ¹⁴ IBA internal memo, 29 September 1986.
- ¹⁵ Glencross, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ Channel 4 Board minutes, minute 21, 23 June 1987.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Dennis Barker, 'Channel 4 stops trailing the red triangle', 5 August 1987.
- ¹⁹ Jeremy Isaacs, interview with the author, 9 November 2010.
- ²⁰ Andrew Culf, TV 'in need of a warning code', *The Guardian*, 8 December 1995, p. 10.