

## A Song for Europe?: British television and European film co-production policy

### Introduction

Good morning and welcome to a panel presentation from members of a research team at the University of Portsmouth, UK, who are engaged in a four-year project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, examining the contribution made by Channel 4 Television and BBC Films to British film culture since 1982.

This research project emanated from an earlier study on British film culture in the 1970s. I remember very well, as part of that research, presenting a paper at the inaugural NECS conference in Vienna, about the British government attempts to revive the film industry by promoting co-production agreements with European partners – initiatives which in the end were scuppered by the very reluctance of those Government officials who saw the interests of British cinema best served by promoting transatlantic relations rather than cross-channel ones. The British view was that: 'While the benefits of European co-operation may be great for the industry in most European countries, they are more dubious for the British industry, given that its primary orientation (outside the home market) is not towards Europe, but towards North America'.

It became very clear, to all involved in that earlier research project at Portsmouth, that what transformed the fortunes of the British film industry after the 1970s was not, sadly, changes in the attitudes of Government ministers or official film policy, but the advent of the UK's fourth television channel, Channel 4, in 1982. For the first time in the history of British broadcasting, Channel 4 intended, as part of its core remit, to sponsor the production of feature film for television broadcast and cinema release. So began a new era in British film culture, to which the BBC in turn contributed also. But Channel 4 not only revitalised feature film production in the UK. By broadcasting a whole range of independent and alternative work - including shorts, avant-garde and experimental film and video, animation and new programmes about film – the channel also broadened the horizons of British television viewers and enriched their appreciation of what film (as a medium) can be. It is the scope of that thirty-year contribution to British film culture that our current Portsmouth project is attempting to map. In so doing, we are aware that we are not

only engaged with assessing the contribution of a television broadcaster to film culture, but are also concerned with the impact of film on television culture. Moreover, we acknowledge that much of the inspiration and the impetus for the transformation which Channel 4 heralded, came from broadcasters elsewhere in Europe, where the passionate affair between film and television was, in many cases, a pretty stable marriage of long-standing.

What we want to do on this morning's panel, therefore, is firstly to recount the influence of European (especially French and West German) television on the model for promoting film culture which Channel 4 adopted in 1982. And secondly, we want to illustrate how the involvement of British broadcasters in European film culture during the 80s and 90s, ushered in a new era of co-operation and cultural exchange which has sometimes been in tune with and sometimes at odds with UK film policy towards pan-European initiatives.

In the first of this morning's papers, therefore, I want to focus on film policy and economics. In the first part I shall attend to the formation of Channel 4's film policy, and its origins in the German broadcaster ZDF. In the second part, I want to offer an overview of Channel 4's subsequent involvement with European co-production initiatives, and its influence upon British government film policy towards Europe.

But before I embark on that two-part history, I want to spend a few moments summarising for you the main features of our Portsmouth project, which we'd be very happy to talk more about afterwards...

### ZDF and Channel 4's film policy

The story of ZDF and German film culture is well known and has been examined by a number of scholars writing both in English and German. It will suffice here to offer a concise summary of their combined narratives...

The particular histories of the broadcasting companies in Germany (as recounted by scholars like Knuth Hickethier and Susanne Schmidt), derive in part from the BBC model of public service broadcasting developed in relation to the post-war political

settlement of Germany. But their specific remits were been reinforced by subsequent legislation in West Germany.

For example, in 1963 the Federal Court ruled that television companies were required to provide a platform for 'all relevant social groups' (Johnston and Ellis, 1982, p.61). This principle of social inclusion was also combined with a responsibility to offer balance in programming. Arguably both Constitutional mandates were incentives to foster an independent programme-making culture and offered in particular opportunities to film-makers.

These opportunities were consolidated in the West German Film Promotion Act of 1967 which led to the transfer of state-subsidy mechanisms from the Kuratorium to an administrative body comprising state representatives, television companies and film producers. This move in essence shifted the balance of economic power over film production into the hands of the broadcasters, and especially Zweites Deutches Fernsehen (ZDF) and ARD's Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDF).

This transfer of film-making power to television was made explicit in the subsequent 'Television Framework Agreement' of 1974 which, as Thomas Elsassaer writes, 'obliged the various West-German broadcasters to co-produce feature films and to set aside additional funds for transmitting independently made films first shown in the cinemas' (Elsassaer, 2005, p. 212). Florian Kopf records that 74 films were produced between 1974 and 1979 under the terms of the Television Framework Agreement as a result of the investment by the television companies of some DM46.6m, and they spent an additional DM5.6m on acquiring the broadcast rights to 28 unknown future film projects. And from 1974 onwards television representatives sat on the project-funding panels of the Film Development Agency as well as the film committee of the Federal Ministry.

As Jane Shattuc reports, with this move ZDF and WDR became 'the German equivalents of the major American film studios because they financed, coproduced, or distributed almost all of West Germany's feature films during the 1970s' (Shattuc, 1995, pp. 46-7).

These changes in particular did much to revive the flagging fortunes of Das Kleine Fernsehspiel (literally the little television play) which had been rooted in a tradition of

safe adaptations of literary classics. Under the auspices of the liberal intellectual avant-garde who now dominated ZDF, renowned film critic Heinz Ungureit was appointed as head of the newly-created department of Film und Fernsehspiel.

As Shattuc recounts, he declared ZDF's ambition was 'to come to the aid of television with film and to come to the aid of film with television' (in Shattuc, 1995, p. 47).

The resulting transformation of film and television culture in West Germany was profound indeed. Between 1963 and 1980 ZDF broadcast 2,200 feature films over 500 of which were German premieres of foreign language films which couldn't find theatrical distribution in West Germany. During the 1970s over 60% of ZDF's own film productions were independent commissions or contracted to freelance producers (Anthony Smith report to Annan Committee). Finally, under the leadership of Eckart Stein, Das Kleine Fernsehspiel was reinvented, with a regular Thursday 10pm slot which was open-ended, offering maximum flexibility to its schedulers, and a brief to commission low-budget, art-house films. While its declared ethos was on the traditional values of quality television drama (good writers, strong scripts and imaginative casting), the format attracted and did much to advance the careers of a number of noted German auteur-directors, including Alexander Kluge, Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders, Werner Schroeter and Rainer Werner Fassbinder (although Fassbinder found a safer home for his more audacious work at the more adventurous WDR). (Source: Shattuc, 1995, pp. 47-9). And the support and freedom offered to new film-makers also promoted the work for example of women film-makers, as Elsaeser reports in the case of Jutta Bruckner (Els, 2005, p. 216). Finally, in an effort to promote this new art-film culture ZDF also pioneered a series of film education programmes. Whilst both production budgets and audiences for Das Kleine Fernsehspiel remained consistently small, its principles were protected by the broadcaster for over 30 years.

Emile Fallaux, writing in the Foreword to the proceedings of the 23<sup>rd</sup> International Film Festival in Rotterdam in 1994, states that 'when Channel 4 was set up in the early 1980s, the most important example for its film department was the widely respected Das Kleine Fernsehspiel' (1994, p. 4). And commercial threats to its

existence at that time, prompted the Rotterdam festival to mount selective screenings of its films as a tribute to its achievements and influence.

It was no accident then, that in laying plans for the fourth television channel in the UK (which was enshrined in the Television Act of 1981) its first Chief Executive, Jeremy Isaacs, should take his newly-appointed head of film and drama, David Rose, to ZDF to learn more. Indeed, comparisons between European broadcaster models had been discussed as part of the proceedings of the Government committee set up under Lord Annan to make arrangements for the new fourth channel which were published in 1977).

It is worth listing the elements of the ZDF model which Isaacs and Rose copied:

1. They conceived of twin departments to deal with, respectively, Film (under Rose) and Independent Film and Video (under Alan Fountain). These were equivalent to the posts occupied at ZDF by Urgureit and Stein.
2. They planned to commission mainly new work for television broadcast and potential cinema release, made outside the broadcasting institution.
3. They adopted a model of combining equity investment and broadcast rights in commissioned work.
4. They developed regular slots for the broadcast of seasons of feature films (entitled Film on Four), and for art-film and experimental work (Eleventh Hour and Midnight Underground).
5. They commissioned work from overseas film-makers (including notable feature auteurs but also new film-makers).
6. They had a brief to discover and support new British film talent.
7. As in West Germany, Channel 4's remit demanded both balance in programming and social inclusion, which informed the ethos of their film commissions.

Although there are evidently significant parallels between the film policies of ZDF and Channel 4, it should not be thought that Channel 4 simply adopted the German model – it rather adapted it to a very different British context. In order to understand this it will be necessary to rehearse briefly the relationship between film and television which obtained in the UK prior to the advent of Channel 4.

Vincent Porter (1982) outlines the conditions which maintained a clear separation between the film and television industries in the UK:

1. The ACTT (the film and television workers' trades union) exacerbated the situation whereby workers in the film industry were generally paid much higher wages and enjoyed better working conditions than their technical counterparts in television, where lower wages were seen to be offset against more permanent contracts. ACTT exploited these inherent inequalities as a bargaining tool to put pressure on BBC and ITV employers for improvements.
2. Anecdotally those in the film industry (especially the IFPA) despised television because it perceived the small screen to demean the prestige of its product, while broadcasters since the late 1960s had acquired the television rights to a huge back catalogue of feature films for what was perceived by the film industry as a fraction of their real value.
3. Generally television saw little reward in investing in an expensive product which, because of holdback regulations laid down by the Cinema Exhibitors Association, could not be broadcast until at least three years after their theatrical first run. When, in a submission to the Government-commissioned Terry Report in 1976, the ITV companies proposed investing in feature film production if exempted from the excess profits levy imposed by the Treasury, the idea was rejected by the Government because it would reduce its revenue income from television, and opposed by the ACTT who feared it would inspire independent productions outside the conditions of agreement within television and thereby undermine the position of television workers by employing freelance, casual labour (Porter, 1982, p. 5). Throughout the 1970s the calls from successive Government reports (including the Terry Report and the Annan Committee findings) for greater co-operation between the UK's film and television industries fell on deaf ears largely because of different sets of vested interests held by management, unions and Government departments. The difference between this situation and the one that had obtained in Germany rested upon two facts: the relative weakness of the West German film industry after the Second World War in relation to the dominance of the new television companies; and the lack of union power (which resulted in a large and flexible freelance labour market).

## Channel 4

When Channel 4 came into being in 1982, therefore, it could not simply map the German model (inspired by ZDF) onto the UK situation, when it came to film sponsorship. It had to manage delicate negotiations with both the trades unions and the CEA in order to gain the flexibility necessary to sponsor the production of low-budget films, and to broadcast them and/or sell them for theatrical distribution according to their preference. And, furthermore, Channel 4 was born into a British film culture that was already deeply divided along ideological faultlines. The commercial cinema sector (which was itself in serious decline) was entirely separate from the grant-aided sector (which was effectively a cottage industry surviving on hand-outs from the British Film Institute and the Arts Councils). Its products were therefore frequently (a) more political radical, (b) more formally experimental, and (c) of inconsistent quality for television broadcast purposes. When Sheila Johnston and John Ellis interviewed Eckart Stein they suggested that a major difference between this British avant-garde sector and its German counterpart was a concern 'with subverting existing conventions of portrayal'. Stein agreed and expressed his view of the rift in British film culture thus: 'There is an over-pressure of conventional film language and the opposition to this over-pressure is an over-reaction. It isn't an over-reaction in the British context', he added, 'but for us it would be an over-reaction' (Johnston and Ellis, 1982, p. 73).

THE GRANT AIDED SUBSIDY £300, 000 per year to the BFI Production Board for co-productions, other groups such as the Womens Film Television and Video Network (WFTVN) who received £7000 in 1984 for their work. These were effectively hand-outs with no strings attached, and the subsidy rationale began to wane when groups claimed money for supporting operational infrastructure without submitting new work.

THE ACTT WORKSHOP DECLARATION – enabled flexibility on union rules about working conditions for its members on projects budgeted at less than £1m.

HOLDBACK AND THE CEA – that the 3 year embargo on television broadcast from the date of theatrical first release be waived on films budgeted at less than £1.25m

In setting out his aspiration for the Independent Film and Video Department at Channel 4 in 1982, its first commissioning editor Alan Fountain issued a cautionary note: 'Although the Channel has a vital interest in the health of an autonomous independent sector, it is to be hoped that the sector itself will envisage its future role as working within and across both mediums – cinema and television' (in Hartnoll and Porter, 1982, p. 38.) In private, in the same year, Fountain set out his ambition for the IFVD:

'C4 can and must make an absolutely qualitative break in its treatment of film/cinema. It will be showing products from all over the world – many of which will be completely new to a high percentage of the audience. The Channel's approach has to enable audiences to understand and enjoy this work. The handling of independent film/video has to be seen as an integral part of a total approach: if it is separated off it will remain a very minority, slightly strange and distant, if artistically worthy, object – foreign to all but already well informed viewers.

It is therefore vital that this sector of independent film/video appears in the following ways:

- a) Within the context of comprehensive approach to cinema
- b) Within other strands of scheduling under specific themes, concerns, issues – possibly sometimes forming an innovative aspect within a wider context of other work.'

In a 1983 interview reflecting on the first 9 months of Channel 4's operation, Isaacs commented:

We set ourselves to have programmes that would make use of the work of independent film and video workshops, and indeed we committed ourselves to funding film and video workshops. This was in answer to the great cultural case which had been made over the years by the Independent Film-makers Association (Hood, 1983, p. 30).



## Conclusion

Writing in 1996 Angus Finney reports that as a proportion of the total number of films made in Europe, co-productions rose from 12 per cent in 1987 to 37 per cent in 1993 (p. 92). The number of European co-productions in which Channel 4 had an involvement rose from 2 in 1982 to 10 in 1997 – a 20% UK market share. It is often argued that what unites the European film industries and promotes their co-operation is not cultural understanding but economic necessity in the face of Hollywood dominance of their exhibition markets. And clearly the various initiatives since the advent of Channel 4 have had financial motives at their centre, including Eurotrustees, Eurimages, the MEDIA programme, MEDIA II, EUROPA Cinemas, Channel 4's own European Co-Production Group, and British Screen's European Co-Production Fund and any number of co-production treaties negotiated and re-negotiated by European partner governments under pressure from their film industries to provide financial support. John Hill, for example, writes that European partners recognize a 'shared situation and set of problems which certain forms of European collaboration [might] help alleviate' (in Jackel, 2003, p. 88).

And yet, despite the logic of those schemes, and the role taken by British broadcasters in advancing the interests of the cinema via European co-operation, I want to return to the cultural argument which, I suggest, in the case of the relationship between European television and film remains compelling. At the end of the day, the common ground which Channel 4 really shares with European television companies in its relation to film is the cultural imperative. These broadcasters have dedicated budgets which, though they might fluctuate with the vagaries of economic fortunes, are protected and, largely, in the gift of autonomous heads of film commissioning who are not required to return a profit on their investments. They can afford to make modest films on their cultural merit alone. It goes without saying, that this principle stands as the cornerstone of a European-wide subsidy system which is diametrically opposed to the commercial logic of Hollywood cinema. But it is a principle that I think is worth remembering and valuing, and one to which, in recognizing its origins, British broadcasters owe a debt of gratitude to their European neighbours. Thank you.

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