

Welcome to the Dark Side of the Screen: *Midnight Underground* and Channel 4's funding of experimental film and video in the 1990s

With the establishment of Channel 4 in 1982 came the possibility for a change in British broadcasting. It looked set to become terrestrial television's trendy young upstart, promising 'innovation' and 'experimentation' in form and content to an audience that had become accustomed to the reliable duopoly of the BBC and ITV companies. The fourth channel would provide an additional source of funding and a new exhibition space for filmmakers working independently at a time when the independent 'sector', as such, had yet to become fully established. I should stress that there were filmmakers working outside of mainstream film and television institutions at this time. During the 1960s and 70s groups such as the London Film-Makers Co-op supported producers of oppositional and experimental film and artists' moving image. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the term 'experimental' to describe any film that operates outside of the parameters of mainstream cinema. When making this judgement I have considered a range of factors. Indeed, terms such as 'experimental', 'oppositional' and 'avant-garde' are always open to interpretation and have been contested by academics and practitioners since the earliest days of moving image production. For example, a film may be described as formally experimental in instances where the filmmaker flouts narrative conventions, uses unfamiliar editing techniques, or incongruous sound design in their work. Some artists may alter the physical properties of the filmstrip, as in the case of GPO Film Unit contributor Len Lye, who scratched the emulsion of film stock to create a landscape of seemingly random particles that pulse across the cinema screen when the film is projected. Other films that can be categorised as 'experimental' adhere more closely to formal and narrative conventions. However, their chosen content and subject matter is either politically or culturally oppositional. Examples include the films produced by Britain's regional film workshops during the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Groups such as Newcastle's Amber film collective combined aspects of drama and documentary during this period to explore a range of social and political issues, including the alienating effects of regional gentrification and the unemployment caused by the decline of the UK's coalmining industry. Although not formally experimental to the same extent as avant-garde and artists' moving image, their films do occupy a space outside of mainstream cinema practice. Indeed, a film's

experimental status is not simply determined by its aesthetic qualities and content. I wish to suggest that the identity of any moving image work is shaped by the circumstances of its production and the spaces in which it is traditionally exhibited and received by audiences.

During the 1960s and 70s there were organisations dedicated to screening experimental film and video in Britain. But, as Julia Knight and Peter Thomas have argued in their recent monograph *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (2011), these were niche spaces, only really capable of attracting a limited audience. Furthermore, alternative exhibition spaces in the UK were largely confined to the capital and other major metropolitan centres, meaning that cinemagoers located in small towns and villages across the regions had difficulty accessing experimental moving image. During the 1970s, there were several attempts made by broadcasters to bring experimental film into British homes. Notable examples included Scottish television's 1971 transmission of ten short films produced by moving image artist David Hall, and a 1976 episode of BBC2's *Arena* strand devoted entirely to artists' film and video.¹ Hall's films were commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council and broadcast, unannounced, in August and September 1971. One of these films shows a running tap that slowly fills the television screen with water. Another film uses time lapse photography to depict a television burning against a backdrop of fields and sky. Apart from these rare, unprecedented, instances, experimental film and video largely remained a specialist concern, confined to art house cinemas, festivals and galleries. It was not until 1982, with the birth of publisher-broadcaster, Channel 4, that experimental filmmakers were offered a fairly regular outlet on British television. Turning specifically to the 1990s and the late-night film strand *Midnight Underground*, I am going to examine Channel 4's relationship with alternative moving image, assessing its role as a funder and broadcaster of experimental film content.

Since its inception, Channel 4 has been committed to film culture in the UK. The channel's first Chief Executive, Jeremy Isaacs, believed firmly in television's potential as an exhibitor and sponsor of film of all kinds. Indeed, he had previously been chairman of the BFI production board and had assigned funding to a number of low-budget British features. On joining Channel 4 he appointed his production board colleague, Alan Fountain, as specialist commissioning editor for independent film and video, while feature film and drama became the province of ex-BBC producer

David Rose. Working with the support of his colleagues Rod Stoneman and Caroline Spry, Alan Fountain was responsible for funding low-budget drama and documentary shot on film and video. The contribution of the Independent Film and Video Department took a variety of forms, ranging from full commissions and co-productions, to the purchase of completed work and broadcasting rights at pre-production stage.² Another significant percentage of their funding was dedicated to the Grant-Aided Workshop sector, under an agreement negotiated in 1982 with the BFI, the English Regional Arts Associations, the Welsh Arts Council and the ACTT union. The Workshop Declaration provided support for non-commercial production and training undertaken by cooperatives and collectives across the UK. Recipients were frequently working in regions neglected by central government and the film industry, while many participants came from social groups traditionally excluded from film production.

During the 1980s, the Independent Film and Video Department developed a flagship strand entitled the *Eleventh Hour*, which provided a showcase for its commissions and purchases. The *Eleventh Hour* occupied a semi-regular slot in the Channel 4 schedule, appearing on Monday nights at approximately 11pm from November 1982 until the end of 1988 when it was gradually phased out of the schedule. The film and video broadcast in this strand was incredibly varied both formally and thematically, including experimental shorts, documentary, independent features, seasons of Latin American, African and women's cinema, alongside content produced by the subsidised film and video workshops. There was little consistency in running time; indeed, the early Channel 4 schedule as a whole lacked uniformity, except for the key markers of the 7pm news, the daily quiz show *Countdown* and the twice-weekly soap *Brookside*.³ This inconsistency allowed for the screening of content with varied running times, which may not have fitted within the boundaries of a more conventional schedule. The choice of production medium was similarly fluid, as high-quality telecine and VTR equipment allowed for the transmission of work produced on a range of formats, including U-matic three quarter inch tape, 16mm film, and super 8, which was to become increasingly popular with independent filmmakers throughout the 1980s.⁴

With its diverse international content, themed seasons and accompanying literature produced for audiences and members of the press, the *Eleventh Hour* created a distinct space for independent film on terrestrial television. In a lecture

given at the National Film Theatre in February 1982, Fountain confirmed that he wanted Channel 4's independent commissions to have a different aesthetic from BBC and ITV programmes, with the intention of 'breaking up the sameness of current television'.⁵ The strand certainly contained a range of features with films such as the 1970s feminist production *The Song of the Shirt* scheduled alongside world cinema productions and contemporary American independent films. The *Eleventh Hour* also broadcast workshop film and video from the 1970s and 80s, while also showing older examples of British experimental moving image such as Humphrey Jennings' post-war propaganda film *A Diary for Timothy*. Editions varied in configuration, with some episodes devoted to single feature-length film and video works, while others showcased two or more short features. This was a diverse programming strand that allowed the Independent Film and Video Department to present a broad spectrum of content. However, it can be argued that *Eleventh Hour* failed to develop a clear identity throughout the course of its existence. Shown in what Rod Stoneman has since described as 'the tundra of the schedule',⁶ the strand was placed at an immediate ratings disadvantage. Most significantly, the Channel 4 schedule had not yet reached maturity and was far from being the rigidly demarcated entity that it is today. The Channel 4 brand would ultimately come to rely upon a distinct perception of the broadcaster's target audience, particularly in relation to specific time slots and niche advertising groups.

Catherine Johnson has suggested that Channel 4 did not truly embrace branding until the 1990s when it was forced to become more competitive as a result of the 1990 broadcasting act.⁷ This legislation made Channel 4 responsible for selling its own advertising, placing the broadcaster in an increasingly competitive environment at odds with its public service remit. It can be argued that the identity of late-night programming on Channel 4 morphed during the 1990s, becoming increasingly self-assured and developing an identity that was more cohesive than that of the academic and, at times, esoteric, late-night content of the 1980s. Using the case study of film strand *Midnight Underground*, I hope to explore this evolution in greater detail, considering the ways in which Channel 4's relationship with experimental moving image developed during this period.

Midnight Underground first appeared on Channel 4 in 1993, having been commissioned by the Independent Film and Video Department, under the direction of Rod Stoneman. The commission provided funding for an eight-part series to be

presented by Benjamin Woolley and packaged by John Wyver's media company Illuminations. This first series was a cohesive product with a distinct authorial presence, offering a detailed introduction to the history of experimental cinema and showcasing films produced by British, European and American directors. Although essentially a platform for a range of content purchased by the channel, each week had a clearly defined theme, which served to link the features shown within any given episode. Presenter Benjamin Woolley guided viewers through the series' difficult content, providing detailed introductions at the start of each episode and appearing between features to offer criticism and contextualising information. The first series opened with the following declaration:

Welcome to *Midnight Underground*, welcome to the dark side of the screen. It's from here that for the next 8 weeks we shall be taking the last tube into the cinematic unknown, into the underground film movement that's acted as mainstream cinema's laboratory and incubator, and provided an occasional home for such talents as Martin Scorsese, Derek Jarman, Kenneth Anger and Sally Potter...

Here, Woolley alludes to the critical standpoint that underpinned the first series. Experimental film practice is described as the precursor to mainstream cinema, being conceptualised as a training ground for directors who would ultimately become established names in both mainstream and art house contexts. The series accordingly focused on canonical filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger, Sally Potter, Maya Deren and Jan Svankmejer. Indeed, it can be argued that the series played its own role in this process of canonisation, influencing a generation of undergraduates who have since entered academia as film and television historians. In recent months I have spoken to a number of colleagues who first watched these experimental films late-night on Channel 4 and still use worn VHS copies of *Midnight Underground* in their own teaching.

The first series of *Midnight Underground* included a range of filmmakers who worked across multiple areas of experimental film practice. This included moving image artist Steve Dwoskin, avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren, the American underground's Kenneth Anger, Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, who were responsible for the beat-inspired *Pull My Daisy* and British art house director Sally

Potter. Although these individuals are united in their shared identity as celebrated *experimental* film practitioners, this curated content reveals a thematically and formally diverse creative field, consisting of a range of styles and film formats.

Like the *Eleventh Hour*, *Midnight Underground* was placed in ‘the tundra of the schedule’ and accordingly received only nominal viewing figures when contrasted with those commanded by peak slots on other terrestrial channels. The viewing figures for each episode are fairly consistent, lying somewhere between one hundred and one hundred and fifty thousand individuals, when both live viewing and video recordings are taken into account. Perhaps unsurprisingly the third episode, which appeared under the banner ‘New Sexualities’, received much higher viewing figures than any other instalments, with an audience of 644,000 (almost six times greater than the previous week’s episode, ‘Music for the Eye and Ear’, which only received 108,000 viewers).

Episode Title	Date of Transmission	Consolidated Viewing Figures (BARB)
Strange Spirits	6/9/93	131,000
Music for the Eye and Ear	13/9/93	108,000
New Sexualities	20/9/93	644,000
London Suite	27/9/93	149,000
Little Stabs at Happiness	4/10/93	140,000
The Surreal	11/10/93	158,000
Objects in Motion	18/10/93	156,000
The Sleep of Reason	25/10/93	132,000

It can be argued that the promise of shocking or titillating content became a key factor in programming late-night zones of the Channel 4 schedule. Sexually explicit and shocking programmes are, somewhat understandably, capable of garnering high audience figures, particularly when packaged successfully. In 1994, several months after the first season of *Midnight Underground* was broadcast, Channel 4 employed a new commissioning editor for Independent Film and Video to replace Alan Fountain who was due to leave the channel in the October of that year. Fountain's successor was Stuart Cosgrove, a young Scottish independent producer with a string of television successes to his name. It was, many suggested, a classic case of 'gamekeeper-turned-poacher'.⁸ When interviewed shortly after his appointment was publicly announced, Cosgrove stated that his key objective for the independent film and video department was 'To pursue a 90s agenda'.⁹ In a later interview with the *Guardian*, he would elaborate on this comment, stating that:

I shared a deep suspicion of those who want to fossilise Channel 4 and freeze-frame it in the early 1980s. As a Scot, raised on a debilitating diet of Culloden and shipyard mythology, I have developed a healthy anxiety about radical nostalgia, and the debilitating paralysis that obsession with the past can lead to.¹⁰

Cosgrove's '90s agenda' consisted primarily of re-branding the graveyard slot, to which the Independent Film and Video Department's commissions had historically been assigned. He identified a 'growing audience for late-night television', particularly - and here I am quoting Cosgrove directly - for 'iconoclastic and sub-cultural programmes which could only be shown after the watershed, to a consenting adult audience'.¹¹

When *Midnight Underground* returned in May 1995, it morphed into a strand that showcased more recently produced experimental moving image content. It was no longer the retrospective, meticulously curated film series it had previously been. The features included in the strand were increasingly controversial and packaged as 'cult' content. This is exemplified by the reworked version of the opening credits, which included grainy footage of youthful filmmakers using Super 8 cameras and hand-held video equipment. Furthermore the strand broadened its focus to include the work of

both film and video practitioners. This may be identified as a feature of Cosgrove's modernisation of late-night programming on Channel 4. The original series offered a reverential overview of celluloid experimentation, covering major twentieth century innovations. The new incarnation of *Midnight Underground* was progressive, showcasing young film and video artists working with a range of film and video formats. This was indicative of Cosgrove's push toward sub-cultural late-night programming that was capable of attracting substantial niche audiences, occupying – and here I am quoting Cosgrove once again – ‘the dark, satanic hour between Horlicks and bed’.¹² Examples of content at the controversial end of the spectrum included moving image artist Clio Barnard's 5 minute short *Hermaphrodite Bikini*, which depicts a multicoloured landscape inhabited by winged naked hermaphrodites. Similarly, Charles Herman-Wurmfeld's feature-length drama *Fanci's Persuasion* creates a highly camp, surreal portrait of modern San Francisco, celebrating queer sexuality in all its permutations. Along with Cosgrove's other commissioned strand, *The Red Light Zone*, and Caroline Spry's *Dyke TV*, this culturally subversive and potentially erotic content transformed late-night Channel 4 into an appealing prospect, offering audiences the promise of a series of illicit viewing pleasures.

However, I do not wish to suggest that the rebranded *Midnight Underground* strand simply consisted of erotic and culturally subversive film and video. Indeed, it provided a space in which young British directors could exhibit their work. A number of the film and video productions shown during the 1995 season were funded by the UK Art Councils, the British Film Institute and Channel 4. This reinforced the ethos of the first series, which conceptualised experimental moving image as a ‘laboratory and incubator’ for mainstream cinema. Here, experimental shorts shot on film and video acted as industry calling cards, flagging up new directorial talent. Indeed, Cosgrove made a concerted effort to commission and broadcast the work of young filmmakers in partnership with other national funding bodies. A particularly distinctive episode of *Midnight underground* transmitted on the 20th June 1995 showcased three short films produced under the BFI's New Directors scheme. The films shown during this week were Jamie Thraves' *The Take Out*, Stephen Brown's *The Curious* and Tim Rolt's *Traffic Island*. These are all darkly comic films with a clear narrative drive. Although formally and thematically experimental, they do not belong to the artists' moving image traditions showcased elsewhere in the strand.

They are far more accessible, owing more to mainstream cinema than to avant-garde conventions.

Tim Rolt's *Traffic Island* is a particularly distinctive short film, which wryly critiques contemporary television's obsession with the travelogue format, whilst also parodying eighteenth century travel literature and the epistolary novel. The film depicts a group of friends setting off on holiday to Frinton on Sea in their ancient Morris Minor. An accident leaves them marooned on a traffic island, which slowly morphs into an unsettling landscape, inhabited by strange sounds and creatures that fuel their collective paranoia.

Of the young directors showcased in the 1995 *Midnight Underground* season, a number worked subsequently with Channel 4 and received funding for longer film and television projects. Examples included Jamie Thraves, director of *The Take Out*, who went on to produce his first feature length film, *The Low Down* in association with Channel 4 in 2000. Clio Barnard of *Hermaphrodite Bikini* fame went on to direct biopic *The Arbor*, which combines documentary footage and avant-garde film practice in its portrayal of the life and work of Yorkshire playwright Andrea Dunbar. *The Arbor* received backing from a consortium of British funders, including Channel 4's digital sister channel More4. Annie Griffin, whose autobiographical film *Out of Reach* was broadcast as part of the *Midnight Underground* strand in June 1995, similarly retained a working relationship with the channel. However, she moved away from experimental production and went on to write and direct successful comedy series for the broadcaster, including the 2002 comedy drama *The Book Group* and assorted episodes of the 2011 sitcom *Fresh Meat*. These examples reveal the comfortable symbiosis that can exist between film and television producers and funders. Indeed, late-night experimental strands such as *Midnight Underground* created an ideal context for the development of new media talent. Short film production often requires a relatively low budgetary input and only occupies a short period within the television schedule. It can be argued that when successfully packaged and marketed in the context of clearly demarcated zones, this content was capable of attracting a significant share of the television audience: particularly when placed within the historically fluid 'graveyard' slot, which had yet to develop a fixed identity on British screens.

As I have already mentioned, *Midnight Underground* went on to showcase experimental video during its later seasons. Video highlights included Daniel

Reeves' *Obsessive Becomings*, David Larcher's *Video Void* and Lis Rhodes' *Running Light*. When contrasted with the 1970s television pieces produced by video artist David Hall, it can be suggested that *Midnight Underground's* content fulfilled a somewhat different objective. Hall set out to create a series of interruptions that would distort the conventional flow of broadcast television. They appeared without warning, causing viewers to stop and take notice, effectively halting the normal progression of small screen entertainment. Reeves, Larcher and Rhodes' work is equally challenging, utilising video's opportunities for experimentation, through the overlaying of words and images, the use of brash colour pallets and the frequent repetition of looped footage. Nevertheless, this content was placed within the context of the *Midnight Underground* strand and subsequently given a clear identity within the Channel 4 schedule. These features were introduced at the start of each episode and further elucidation was given at the end of each advertisement break. Although not subject to the same degree of authorship as the first series, the strand continued to be curated and packaged in such a way that it retained a sense of cohesion and a distinct on-screen identity.

When reflecting upon the history of experimental moving image on Channel 4 and *Midnight Underground* in particular, it can be suggested that this is a history of personalities, as much as it is a history of broadcasting trends, legislation and the activities of assorted funding bodies. Julia Knight and Peter Thomas have suggested that Britain's experimental film and video sector developed during the 1970s and early 1980s as a result of increased funding opportunities offered by organisations under the leadership of sympathetic individuals such as Alan Fountain at Channel 4, David Curtis at the Arts Council and Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Sainsbury at the BFI production Board.¹³ Channel 4's experimental moving image content has followed a trajectory instigated, in part, by individuals. Indeed the appointment of a new commissioning editor can influence an entire area of programming, as revealed by the shift in scheduling ethos when the Independent Film and Video department came under the leadership of Stewart Cosgrove in 1994. Although still occupying the schedule's late-night zones, experimental film and video was rebranded by Cosgrove, becoming slick, sexy, cult content. *Midnight Underground* evolved in response to this change in ethos, and thus reflects the broadcaster's changing perceptions of its own late-night schedule throughout the course of the 1990s.

It seems pertinent to mention that experimental moving image is currently undergoing yet another transformation on Channel 4 with the return of late-night short film strand *The Shooting Gallery*. The strand has been developed once again by Stuart Cosgrove who is now the channel's Director of Creative Diversity. The press release states that:

The 2011 version marks out Channel 4 once more as the destination for new talent and creative risk-taking, but also rides the wave of new short form content that has exploded on the internet in recent years, but until now, has yet to find a mainstream TV outlet.¹⁴

It would seem that with the widespread popularity of YouTube, Vimeo and other online moving image hosts, audiences are now embracing short and experimental film in a way that was previously unprecedented. Channel 4's decision to broadcast this content reveals a clear reversal of influence. Indeed, television typically provides much of the material that is used in the creation of online fan content. It will be interesting to see if the revamped *Shooting Gallery* is successful and if so, whether it will be responsible for changing the public service broadcaster's attitude to online content.

¹ John A. Walker, *Arts TV: A History of Arts Television in Britain*, (London: John Libbey and Company Ltd, 1993); p. 124.

² Alan Fountain, personal communication, February 24, 2011.

³ John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); p.157.

⁴ Paul Bonner and Leslie Aston, *Independent Television in Britain: New Developments in Independent Television 1981-92: Volume 6*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); p. 91.

⁵ Stephen Lambert, *Channel Four Television with a Difference?*, (London: BFI, 1982); p. 150.

⁶ Rod Stoneman, 'Sins of Commission', *Screen* 33(2), 1992, pp. 127-144; p. 140.

⁷ Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television*, (London: Routledge, 2012); p. 87.

⁸ Stuart Cosgrove, 'In the Midnight Hour: Channel 4, already in trouble over The Word, is launching a six-week season devoted to sex. But the Red Light Zone, says C4's Stuart Cosgrove, is all about cultural independence', *The Guardian*, 6 March 1995; p. 14.

⁹ Stuart Cosgrove 'The Mind of a Commissioning Editor', *Vertigo*, 1(4), 1994, pp. 53-56; p. 55.

¹⁰ Stuart Cosgrove, 'In the Midnight Hour: Channel 4, already in trouble over The Word, is launching a six-week season devoted to sex. But the Red Light Zone, says C4's Stuart Cosgrove, is all about cultural independence', *The Guardian*, 6 March 1995; p. 14.

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¹³ Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2011); p. 217.

¹⁴ 'Channel 4 Launches New Hour Long Shorts Strand The Shooting Gallery', The TV Collective, <http://www.thetvcollective.org/2012/03/22/channel-4-launches-new-hour-long-shorts-strand-the-shooting-gallery/>, last accessed 10 February 2014.