

Building a Television Audience for World Cinema in the (Late) Era of Media Scarcity

Although I'm going to focus on some of the achievements of C4 in building an audience for world cinema in its first decade, first of all it's important to emphasize that C4 was not actually the pioneer British broadcaster in this area. It was **BBC-2**, which, like C4 also had a remit to cater for minority tastes and interests, who first brought world cinema to British television viewers, thereby asserting its difference from the mainstream in the '60s and '70s, and thereby anticipating some elements of what C4 would do in the '80s. BBC-2's 'World Cinema' strand began on 6th October 1965 [with Rene Clair's 'Les Belles de Nuit'], just a year after the launch of the channel [almost exactly 50 years ago], and ran almost continuously until 1974. Two years later the mantle was taken up by a strand called 'Film International', which ran until 1986. From then on BBC-2 had no regular specific commitment to world cinema, but experimented with weekly double bill 'matinees' introduced by a film critic or director, firstly under the title of 'Film Club' (1986-1991), initially presented by Derek Malcolm, and then 'Moviedrome', presented firstly by Alex Cox and then by Mark Cousins. These were not world cinema seasons as such, but had an 'art house' bias and often included films from around the world, with an emphasis on the rarely seen or cult film. However, the global dimension of what I would call these 'repertory' strands began to wane during the 1990s. In fact Cox left Moviedrome due to his frustration at foreign language choices being increasingly excluded from the strand.

What might be termed 'contextualized programming' or '**curated seasons**' of films, however, developed in the 1980s, largely due to C4, and this paralleled the contemporaneous repertory approach of the National Film Theatre (or NFT), London's Scala and Electric Cinema Clubs and the Regional Film Theatres.¹ These themed seasons were especially important, due to the lack of seriousness with which television created cinema, in terms of the majority of programmes about film. It was also certainly the case that the emergence of C4 and its consistent commitment to

¹ Gavin Millar, 'Sorry, no foreigners here', *The Listener* (London, England), Thursday, December 22, 1983; pg. 58; Issue [2838]. Criticising the complete absence of foreign films on TV over the Xmas period in 1983 (apart from one Jacques Tati film on C4), Gavin Millar praised the "astonishing display of product" at the London Film Festival of that year: "as well as European films by Godard, Resnais, Kluge, Tarkovsky and Goretta, there were films from China, Indonesia, the Phillipines, Thailand, India, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong; there were films from Africa, Latin American and the Middle East..."

world cinema and cult cinema during at least the first decade of its existence made BBC-2 'up its game'.

So there was a healthy competition between these two 'minority' channels. But more broadly, in the era of media scarcity (i.e. before video on demand and DVD/Blu-Ray special editions) film seasons came to exercise an almost pedagogical role in educating audiences about film. As Andy Medhurst noted in 1995:

Purists tend to forget that Pwllheli and Peterhead are rather more than a taxi journey from the NFT, and that television is our national repertory cinema...Television can secure films a place in the national consciousness they could never hope to gain through the minority practice of cinema screenings. Themed seasons draw on a public-service, broadcasting didacticism, inviting viewers to develop critical faculties through comparative analysis.²

Although C4's interest in and support for film culture was clear from the outset, largely due to the influence of the first Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs, some of the **early film seasons** were criticised for their lack of ambition. Julian Petley regarded C4's initial Fassbinder and Godard seasons as 'inadequate' and 'ludicrously truncated'.³ These were both short (and perhaps hastily arranged) seasons scheduled to coincide with special editions of the world cinema programme *Visions* devoted to the directors. Godard's was a week-long season in May 1983 consisting solely of *Vivre Sa Vie*, *La Chinoise* and *Weekend*; the Fassbinder season in July 1983 was only marginally longer, consisting of *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Merchant of Four Seasons*, *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* and *Fear Eats the Soul*. But this was soon remedied in August 1985, when C4 screened *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Fassbinder's 14-part epic version of a novel about Berlin between the wars, and a Godard season featuring some of his most controversial work from the '70s and early '80s, including the quirky eight-part video piece *France Tour Detour*.

² Andy Medhurst, 'Box of Delights', *Sight and Sound*, January 1995, p. 23.

³ Julian Petley, 'Big Screen, Small Screen', *The Listener* (London, England), Thursday, May 24, 1984; pg. 32; Issue 2859.

It is worth briefly exploring this much fuller Godard season in greater depth, as documents from the IBA [Independent Broadcasting Authority] archive reveal the extent to which Jeremy Isaacs was prepared to go to ensure that C4 could show a greater range of world cinema (including a “bolder approach to the scheduling of adult material”). Pre-empting potential problems regarding the scheduling of *Numéro Deux* and *Sauve Qui Peut*, which featured explicit content, Isaacs wrote to the IBA’s Head of Television David Glencross, asserting that “each is a serious piece of work”, reminding Glencross of C4’s statutory remit to be encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes, and stating the following:

“The viewers we serve do not wish to be cosseted and protected from what is challenging or unusual. They welcome it. They do not want television that is unadventurous, bland, conformist. They look to us to widen their choice.”

In the event, after taking legal advice, the IBA passed the Godard season, and I’m sure Isaac’s directness and forcefulness here played a role. Interestingly, the Godard season saw a collaboration between two strands (and hence two separate areas of the channel), *World Cinema* (constituted of Derek Hill’s purchases for the channel) and *The Eleventh Hour* (the creation of the Independent Film and Video Department), with the latter handling the more radical fare. I’m going to now devote some attention to each area - the importance of Derek Hill as a film buyer and of the importance of Alan Fountain and the Independent Film and Video Department, which will then lead me to consider the issues of audience figures and scheduling in regard to world cinema as a marginal area of TV content.

Derek Hill was one of the very first C4 employees, and he was also the longest-serving of the initial team – he actually began buying films for the channel in 1980, 2 years before the channel launched, and carried on working at C4 until 1994. From the outset he benefitted from the largesse and open-mindedness of Jeremy Isaacs – as Derek recalled in a recent interview for our project:

“He said, you know, go out there and buy what you fancy, more or less. And I said what’s the budget, and he said oh, details. And at the end of the month I rang him up and said I’m afraid I’ve spent a million pounds and he said well done, keep going! It’s not like that now.”

Jeremy Isaacs wanted C4 to “glory in the best that was alive and kicking in world cinema” (quoted in Geraghty 2005: p. 6) and backed Hill in his determination to acknowledge a broad film culture (Kitson 2008). Hill’s purchases were immediately exhibited in a regular film strand called WORLD CINEMA and formed the basis of numerous film seasons, such as Sunday matinee season ALL-INDIA TALKIES (January – April 1983).

Hill bought films that British television audiences had never seen before, from Turkey, Greece, Japan, Latin America, Australasia, as well as Europe. For example, in 1984, C4 was the first television company in the west to include Indian popular films as a regular part of its programming and audience research proved that they covered a huge mainstream audience.

Basically there was quite a simple division of work between two film buyers for approximately the first decade of C4 – Leslie Halliwell was responsible for buying Hollywood and classic films, and Derek Hill was responsible for independent and art-house cinema. Hill made many suggestions about how films could be grouped together – by theme or genre, as well as by director or nation – to form seasons. Many of the resulting seasons proved that there could be a serious audience for foreign language films. One season programmed by Hill was a Canadian series, which featured a mix between subtitled films from Quebec and English language films from Toronto and other cities, and Hill was pleased to see that the audience figures were equal for each.

As I suggested before, there was often a cross-over between Derek Hill’s film buying and Alan Fountain’s department of **Independent Film and Video** within C4. The IFVD was devoted to funding and showcasing a wide range of independent, experimental, avant-garde and political documentaries and feature films from small workshops and filmmaking collectives in Britain and internationally. The Department prioritised the newly coined ‘Third Cinema’ by programming seasons such as 25 YEARS OF THE NEW LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA (Oct/Nov 1983) and AFRICA ON AFRICA (June/July 1984). In 1988 the Department launched a strand called CINEMA FROM THREE CONTINENTS, which ran until 1994, providing a regular presence in C4 schedules for feature films from developing countries. Much of these were specially-commissioned or co-produced with other European TV companies to

fund and support filmmakers in the Third World [Fountain 2001]. Fountain became very adept at building a global lists of contacts in commissioning work, making a small budget go a long way by providing relatively small amounts to a variety of projects. To quote Jeremy Isaacs:

“Alan was also excellent – which I had never really foreseen – at buying...and funding...films by filmmakers who only had 2 claims to fame. One that they were good filmmakers, and the other that they came from a country which had never had a film on British television before. So we would filmmakers from Iran, filmmakers from Nigeria and so on and so forth. And that slot, *Cinema from Three Continents*, was enormously worth doing.”

Despite the ‘marginal’ status of these films, and the fact that C4 was a brand-new channel with a modest **audience share** in these early years, the resulting audience figures were not insubstantial. To quote Alan Fountain:

“Some of the ratings for things like *Cinema from Three Continents*, which went out very late on a Sunday night. People used to say the ratings aren’t very high and I used to say fine – when did you last fill Wembley Stadium 4 times to watch an African feature film? They were amazing audiences really.”

Cinema from Three Continents was shown at 10pm on Sunday nights, for about 30 weeks of the year, and marked a time when the Department was beginning to make inroads into the mainstream of the schedule. Up until that time it had been rather ham-strung by being mainly anchored to the late-night slot *The Eleventh Hour*, which was often criticised as a ‘ghetto’ slot because of its place on the margins of the schedule. Fountain had complained in 1985 of the ghettoization of his Department’s output in the following terms:

Black tends to mean 10.30 or 11.00 or even 11.30; Third World similarly; formal experiment 11.00 onwards....

Even before the launch of *Cinema from Three Continents* the IFVD’s record in representation of global issues and identities was impressive. I did some research on the first 5 years of *The Eleventh Hour* (1982-1987), and found that, of a total of 270 films or programmes, 140 – or 52% - were either non-British or were ‘transnational’

co-productions, including a wide variety of countries in Europe, Latin America, Africa and beyond.

Importantly, the IFVD also produced so-called 'back-up' publications on their film seasons, which served that pedagogical role I discussed earlier, and which attempted to generate some coverage and create some audience impact. In the first 5 years these booklets on *In the Pink* (a gay and lesbian film season from 1986), *New Waves* (a season of low-budget workshop feature films, 1984), and booklets accompanying seasons on African cinema, Polish cinema, New Latin American Cinema and Video Art.

End of the world cinema?

I'd like to conclude by offering some thoughts about the rise and fall, if you like, of world cinema on British television. This is too big a subject to cover here, but I'd like to suggest that the peak was in the late '80s, and then things began to go downhill in the early 1990s. One way of measuring the impact of all this activity might be to consider the effect it had on independent or regional film theatres, to return to the idea of repertory programming which I discussed earlier. This would be very difficult to quantify, but it is telling that in 1988 Margaret Matheson of Zenith Films actually raised the possibility at a BFI Governor's Meeting of privatising or closing down the NFT on the grounds that it had become redundant thanks to the increased range of world cinema on TV and video.⁴

As C4 was increasingly exposed to market forces, selling its own advertising from 1993, it became harder for the C4 film buyer Mairi Macdonald to persuade the planning department to schedule foreign films in 'decent' slots. The channel controller could put pay to imaginative seasons, and even accepted seasons might be shrunk to a handful of titles. On BBC-2 this even happened to seasons in progress. And the kind of seasons permissible were increasingly dictated from 'on high'. For example, in the early 1990s priorities at the BBC shifted from long-planned seasons on directors, actors or countries to quick film series inspired by current world events. The upshot of this was that the BBC's film buyer Gay Robertson had

⁴ Alan Smithee, 'A Bleak Picture at the Film Institute', *Telegraph*, 27th September 1988.

almost 200 foreign language films awaiting transmission at this time – she referred to this as her ‘continental shelf’!

But the question of why world cinema has declined in the multichannel age of British television has not really been answered, or even addressed. Now foreign language films are a real rarity on British TV screens, despite the prestige event of the BBC Four World Cinema Awards, and are once again confined to occasional appearances on the margins of the schedules of BBC-2, Channel 4 and the Film4 channel. I’d like to conclude by raising a question which we might return to in discussion, a question which emerged during our project conference in 2012, timed to coincide with the 30th anniversary of Channel 4; with so many channels available, why is there such a paucity of choice when it comes to films? Do more channels have to mean more of the same?