

'A sense of time and place': examining the regional aesthetic in the work of Channel 4's first Commissioning Editor for Fiction, David Rose.

David Rose was a leading figure in British television, first at the BBC and then later at Channel 4. After working as a producer on *Z-Cars*, in 1970 Rose was made Head of Regional Drama at the newly formed BBC Pebble Mill in Birmingham. There he had a specific brief to commission work by regional writers and to raise the profile of the regions on mainstream television. After ten years as head of English Regions Drama, Rose was appointed Head of Fiction at the newly formed Channel 4. Fiction was also to encompass the Film on Four strand (which later became Film Four). It was Rose and Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs who defined Channel 4's role as a 'publisher' broadcaster, commissioning films from independent producers for television broadcast and theatrical release. This created an unprecedented partnership between British television and the film industry. Between 1981 and 1990, David Rose and his associates Karin Bamborough and Walter Donohue commissioned 136 feature films for the Film on Four strand, boosting British film-making at a time when the industry was at a low ebb. Many of the early films on Four were set in regional UK locations, and this paper will argue that at Channel 4, David Rose drew upon his experiences at BBC Pebble Mill in the 1970s in commissioning feature films which drew upon regional themes.

At Pebble Mill Rose had worked closely with writers, exercising creative control and yet offering an unusual degree of creative freedom. BBC regional drama was committed to capturing the complex texture of urban and rural life and addressing issues that were of concern to those beyond the Metropolis. What followed were not tokenistic attempts to place plays in the provinces. Rather, Rose encouraged regional writers to, in David Rolinson's words, 'mirror some aspect of a community.' In this way Rose's work at Pebble Mill succeeded in providing a 'space' for new writers and directors to showcase their work on television. He encouraged talents such as Ted Whitehead, Willie Russell, Alan Plater, Jack Rosenthal, Alan Bleasdale, Ian McEwan and Brian Glover, as well as more inexperienced one off writers. He also encouraged David Hare, a theatre director, to direct the film *Licking Hitler*, which is often held up as being one of the most radical and notable examples

of the single play. This was a practice that Rose continued at Channel 4, with almost half of the Film on Four writers and directors being new to television.

The first strand that Rose produced at Pebble Mill was called *Thirty Minute Theatre*, although this title was later changed to *Second City Firsts*. It was groundbreaking in many ways, and the first story in this slot, called 'A Touch of Eastern Promise', showed Rose's commitment to regionalism on television. This half hour drama not only depicted the multi-cultural aspects of Birmingham society, but it was also, very unusually, shot on film on location in order to give a better sense of city life. Rose quickly realised that location shooting on film, though expensive, could display regional and multicultural diversity more effectively than studio-bound work. Film was able to, in Rose's words, 'reflect regional life, the landscape and the community...to somehow get a feeling of the outlook of the regions.[On film] space is created!'

1

The creation of those spaces arguably went against the grain of conventional BBC drama at this time, and perhaps self-consciously so. In the 1970's, the single play was imbued with a strong vein of naturalism, which made a play like *Penda's Fen* by David Rudkin (1974) all the more surprising. Set in pastoral Three Choirs England, this play follows the story of a clergyman's son as he has his self-image and all of his value-systems stripped away. In the course of the play he encounters an angel, a demon, the crucified Jesus Christ and Penda, England's last Pagan king. If *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) has often been described as the 'archetypal Film on Four', writer and director David Hare says that this sort of play was typical of the 'culture' of BBC Pebble Mill in the 70s:

When I saw *Penda's Fen*, I just couldn't believe it. And that is the whole BBC Birmingham culture right there, which was David Rose letting people do what they wanted and nobody in London knowing what was going on. You know: "The earth splits open? Oh yeah?" There's just no way a London producer and script editor would have been having that. But my God, that film went out at nine-thirty at night on a majority channel, it's incredible – an hour and a half long. And how bold to do it!<sup>2</sup>

The single play *Gangsters* (Philip Martin, 1975) also went against the grain of traditional drama. It was conceived by David Rose on a train to Birmingham. He then commissioned Philip Martin to research and write it, and it was released first as a single play and then later developed into two series.<sup>3</sup> *Gangsters* took its cue from the American crime movies and it was a first in that it included every ethnic minority in Birmingham and through location shooting managed to successfully capture the atmosphere of city life.<sup>4</sup>

David Rose left Pebble Mill in 1981, signing off on David Rudkin's wildly imaginative three hour production *Artemis 81*. This was a fantasy film about an author who avoids human contact, only to be approached by an angel of love from an alien planet who tries to unlock his emotions. It was a more fantastic production than even *Penda's Fen*, although Rudkin admits being disappointed with the post production of the film as it lacked David Rose's 'controlling presence' following his departure to Channel 4.

Rose's work at Pebble Mill showed a commitment to portraying regional life on national television through the privileged use of location shooting on film, an overwhelming priority towards regional writers, and an encouragement of creativity that went beyond the traditions of naturalism peculiar to television drama in the Seventies. At Channel 4, Rose commissioned films of modest budgets and promoted new writers and directors, although he also continued to draw upon the relationships that he had forged with writers and directors at Pebble Mill. Early Films on Four were criticised for being a strange breed, with little consistency between them. James Scott commented that 'they could have come from anywhere, even dropped from the moon.'<sup>5</sup> He added that they 'don't relate to very much, and show no awareness of cinema tradition.' However, like their Pebble Mill predecessors, many of the early Channel 4 films explored regional concerns. They displayed an acute sense of geography, which, James Saynor argues, followed a 'formula of socially displaced characters firmly positioned within a regional landscape' a formula which 'had very much characterised the offerings of Rose's 70's writers like Peter Teirson, Alan Bleasdale and David Rudkin.' Indeed, just about the only process for selecting scripts that David Rose would admit to in early interviews was that they should 'take strength from a sense of the particular, a sense of time and place.'<sup>6</sup>

Between 1982 and 1987 approximately 19 out of a total of 66 Channel 4 productions dealt with regional themes. Through a survey of these early productions, three different types of regional film can be broadly identified. Firstly, one of the most identifiable aspects of the first commissioned Films on Four were those films set in rural areas. These were productions in which the central characters seem firmly bonded to the landscape and indeed in which the landscape almost seemed to play a major character. Barney Platts-Mills' *Hero* (1982), Michael Radford's *Another Time, Another Place* (1983), and Bill Bryden's *Ill Fares the Land* (1983), are typical of this category. Films of the second category include productions set in regional urban centres. These productions deal with themes such as poverty, confinement, and urban depression, and tend to include plucky characters set against a grey and miserable working-class England. Films like Chris Bernard's *Letter to Brezhnev* (1985), Alan Clarke's *Rita, Sue and Bob, Too* (1988) and Joseph Despins' *The Disappearance of Harry* (1983) are good examples. Such films offer a view of the regions which seems consciously at odds with London. In these productions provincial poverty is often at the expense of the south, with employment and opportunities shown to be gradually diminishing from the regions until there is nothing left but the local factory or the dole queue. The third type of film can be said to utilise regional backgrounds simply as a backdrop to the main action of the film. Examples include Charles Gormley's *Living Apart Together* (1983) or Neil Jordan's *Angel* (1982). In *Angel* the use of the rural setting seems to signify a sense of placelessness, although the landscape ultimately takes a back seat to a story primarily driven by the universal themes of violence and revenge. I will focus here on films of the first and second category, and examine a few examples from each.

*Another Time, Another Place* is set on the Black Isle, just north of Inverness, and follows the story of Janey, who falls in love with one of the Italian prisoners of war stationed in her village during WW2. *Another Time* was critically acclaimed for a sense of poetic realism reminiscent of Renoir and its use of landscape which seemed to draw upon European rather than British cinema. In this film landscape is used to emphasise a sense of stifling claustrophobia which is suggestive of Janey's entrapment in her marriage and her homeland. Numerous landscape shots make the ground and sky seem too close together - in the words of one reviewer, 'glowering lurid skies [are] hung so low one feels the characters will have to crawl beneath

them' which leads to feelings of oppression rather than the sense of freedom associated with wide open spaces. Janey's Italian has shown her that there are other times, and other places, but that she will probably never see them.

*Ill Fares the Land*, is another of the early Channel 4 films which firmly positions socially displaced characters within a regional landscape. *Ill Fares the Land* tells the story of the residents of the island of St Kilda in the Outer Hebrides and their tough decision to leave their remote home for the Scottish mainland. In the film the landscape is portrayed as beautiful but untameable. In presenting a landscape of extreme oppositions the film recalls Michael Powell's telling of the St Kilda story in his 1936 film *The Edge of the World*. Shots of the landscape, of the cliffs of the island jutting into the sky and of waves crashing onto the shore emphasise its rugged beauty but this is harsh and fickle as much as aesthetically pleasing. The island gives life but it also takes life away, and this is ultimately why the villagers must leave their perfect society for life on the mainland.

Barney Platts-Mills' *Hero* focuses on a mythical Scottish past. Young Dermid O' Doune joins up with the legendary Finn MacCumhaill and his band of men to battle the 'Kings of the World' who seek to lay claim to the Highlands. Here, the landscape is also something to be battled against, but it is not beautiful. Rather, it is sepia, brown and gray, and the climate is characterised by a damp and bitter cold that characters struggle to escape by huddling under blankets. The landscape seems to mirror the plight of the characters and of the country itself – bleak, scarred and exploited. The use of landscape in the film is almost expressionist - in their quest Finn, Dermid and their gang travel over wide open spaces, but when Finn turns against Dermid and hunts him down, Dermid's sense of entrapment is emphasised through the use of a low-angle shots of cliffs and rocky outcrops. These seem to bear down on him, crushing his spirit.

Confinement and claustrophobia also play a part in the urban, regional films of my second category. In Chris Bernard's *Letter to Brezhnev*, two working-class Liverpudlian girls seek an escape from boredom and a lack of opportunity. While not directly political, the film deals with the depression which results from unemployment and economic malaise during the Thatcher era. Aerial shots of Liverpool seem almost superfluous here – of real interest are shots of bleak, run-down council

houses, peeling brown wallpaper and the stifling atmosphere of family arguments in tiny flats. Alan Clarke's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* also deals with similar themes, with two young Yorkshire girls seeking pleasure and thrills against a depressing urban backdrop. The opening shot of the film is very suggestive of regional decay. It begins with an aerial shot of West-Yorkshire and gradually moves in and then pans along a street, following Sue as she strides happily down the road. At the same time the camera places her against a miserable backdrop, emphasising the flatness of a series of brown, grimy housing estates.

Other Channel 4 films also make use of regional settings to explore political themes. *Giro City*, directed by Karl Francis, is set both in Wales and Ireland and deals with the controversial topics of IRA intrigue and media censorship. Joseph Despins' *The Disappearance of Harry* (1983) is a psychological thriller about a wife who discovers that the sudden disappearance of her husband may be linked to a series of terrorist attacks by a group of modern day Luddites. The film tackles unemployment and Union unrest in the 1980s. Set in and around Nottingham, the film was acclaimed for its fine portrayal of the city and its manufacturing roots.

One could argue that, for David Rose, 'space' has long been an important concept. A passion for film, a prioritising of regional talent and a commitment to fostering creativity amongst his writers meant that the output of BBC Pebble Mill succeeded not only in simply portraying the regions of England but in successfully depicting the rich texture of life and community in the provinces themselves. It can be argued that Rose's work at Channel 4 was a continuation of his work at BBC Pebble Mill. In his time at the channel, David Rose succeeded in his ambition to commission a variety of films that took 'strength from a sense of the particular, a sense of time and place', and under the management of Rose's Fiction department a 'space' for regional film was maintained on British television.

The 80s was a time when British cinema became more pluralist than it had been at any time in history but at the same time it was arguably more representative of British life than ever before. John Hill also notes a growing recognition of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales in the national cinema of this era and Rose undoubtedly made a contribution to that recognition at Channel 4. However, it is worth considering how far Rose's work at the channel was part of a wider cinematic movement in the 1980s

towards the margins of national life and away from the metropolis, and in the interests of further discussion I would like to end this paper on a question rather than presenting a definite conclusion - how far can this centrifugal movement at Channel 4 be seen as part of a sort of re-mapping of British landscapes in cinema in the 1980s, aesthetically, geographically, and politically?

---

<sup>1</sup> David Rolinson, *Alan Clarke* (Manchester, 2005) p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama* (London, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> BFI Screenonline.

<sup>4</sup> Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama* (London, 2003)

<sup>5</sup> Saynor, James, 'Writers Television', *Sight and Sound Vol 2, 1992* 'Writers Television' p.10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*