

BFI Media Conference – 3rd July 2014

**Channel 4
and British
film culture**

Dr Ieuan Franklin,
Bournemouth University/University of Portsmouth

The Project

A red rectangular box containing the text 'Channel 4 and British film culture' in white. 'Channel 4' is in a large, bold, sans-serif font, and 'and British film culture' is in a smaller, regular, sans-serif font below it.

Channel 4 and British film culture

An assessment of the broadcaster's film policy and programming, and its impact on British film culture since 1982

- 4-year project began 01/04/10
- 2 PhDs and Research Assistant
- Major Conference 2012
- Digital resource enhancement / BUFVC partnership
- Archival innovation
- Publication outputs: 2 journal special issues, monograph
- Website: www.c4film.co.uk
- C4 Press Packs Resource - www.bufvc.ac.uk/c4pp

Channel 4 – Origins and Remit



Obligations on C4 laid down by the 1980 Broadcasting Act:

- Firstly the Act dictated that programmes broadcast on Channel 4 must ‘contain a suitable proportion of material calculated to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for’ by existing channels.
- Secondly it stated that the broadcaster must ‘encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes’ and generally ensure that the fourth channel had ‘a distinctive character of its own’.

Key issues

- During its thirty year history film has become a key facet of the broadcaster's identity.
- C4 has funded and 'exhibited' a diverse range of film content over 30+ years. Hence their tagline '*We don't just show films, we make them too*'.
- C4 as hybrid broadcaster – public service role but funded through advertising
- Tension between the 'art house' identity C4 fostered during its early days and attempted to maintain into the 21st century, and the commercial imperatives which govern the channel
- Issues that will be discussed today:
 - Remit
 - Repertory Function of C4's Film Library
 - Commercialism and competition
 - Scheduling
 - Policy and Regulation
 - On-air continuity and promotional materials (e.g. idents)

The (Black) Art of Scheduling

“Scheduling is at once the most crucial and most conservative area of the television institution. The placing of the programmes, the relation between them and the viewing taken as a whole offered on any one night is as important if not more so than any one single programme can ever hope to be. **The schedule is in itself the bearer of meaning, politics and values.**” Alan Fountain, Commissioning Editor for Independent Film and Video

Quoted in Julian Petley, ‘C4: Is Innovation Being Ousted by Convention?’, *Television Weekly*, 15th February 1985.

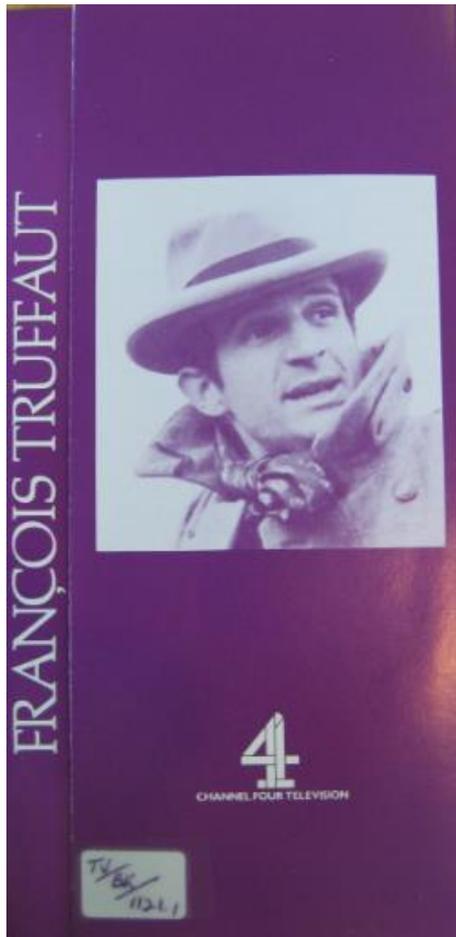
Film seasons and their educational value

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 Pwlheli 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.”

Andy Medhurst, ‘Box of Delights’, *Sight and Sound*, January 1995, p. 23.

'Back-up' Publications



Creeping commercialism?

In a *Sight and Sound* editorial in November 1992, the 10th anniversary of the launch of the Channel 4 in 1982, the magazine wryly noted,

“As a measure of the road Channel 4 has travelled in its ten years, one might note that *Film on Four* was one of its major innovative contributions to television in 1982; in 1992 the same channel has given us *The Big Breakfast*.”

- US imports

“We are being accused of taking money away from home production to pay for the imports. *Au contraire*. We are protecting ourselves commercially to do less commercial things such as regional programming that we wouldn't be able to afford otherwise...”

Chris Griffin-Beale, Quoted in John Naughton, ‘Cosgrove Defends C4 Tactics in the TV Ratings Game’, *The Scotsman*, 20th December 1996.

The era of media scarcity

As the journalist Farrukh Anwar noted at the time in an article about the censoring of films on TV,

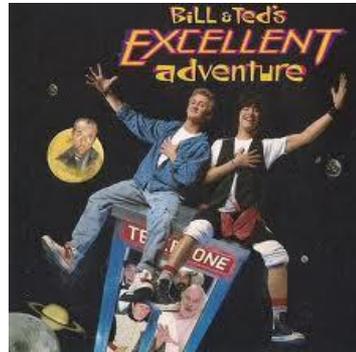
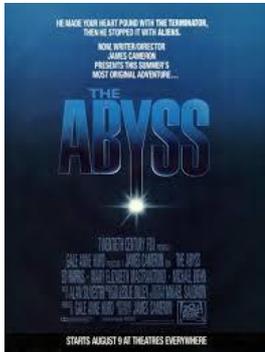
“...Despite occasional cuts for length (*Chinatown*), more frequent trims for sex (*Fatal Attraction*) and violence (*Die Hard 1* and *2*); as well as heavy redubbing of “motherloving” swear words, the British public rush home in huge numbers to watch a film on terrestrial television. Even a 40 minute interruption by Trevor McDonald and the weather report does not deter them.”

Farrukh Anwar, ‘Short Cuts’, *The Guardian*, 24th November 1993, p. 4.



Commercialism and Competition

Channel 4 'breaching its remit to win viewers'



Channel 4: 20 Feb 1983

- 6.00 Indoor Athletics from America
- 7.00 Rod and Line. Michael Horden in Arthur Ransome's fishy tales.
- 7.15 The Avengers. Strange to think watching these elegant, jokey, golden oldies (rising 20) that Diana Rigg, now a Great Lady of the stage, was employed as active decoration and allowed to act on not much more than one cylinder.
- 8.15 Feiffer's Follies. The cartoonist who has made a corner in the American liberal conscience, gets an hour to himself - along with the neurotic well-meaning New York types he catches for a living.

Channel 4: 21 Feb 1993

- 6.00 Moviewatch. Including an interview with Nicolas Cage and vox pop reviews.
- 6.30 The Wonder Years.
- 7.00 Fragile Earth. A British firm, paid by "the international community" to train Somalis in clearing the debris of war, comes up against complex political and financial problems.
- 8.00 Opinions: Britain 1993. Former defence minister Alan Clark talks about the state of the nation.
- 8.30 Benny Hill. (above) Tribute to a comedian's success in exporting a wink and a nudge.
- 9.15 Andres Segovia: The Song of the Guitar. Prizewinning film of the Grand Old Man of the Guitar, 90 tomorrow. (above) still playing.
- 10.15 Crucible: Science in Society: Fun Fare. From the travelling round-abouts and swings up to today's hi-tech ways of scanning ourselves.
- 9.00 Lipstick On Your Collar. (above) See Choice.
- 10.10 Film: Withnail & I (Bruce Robinson 1987 UK). Richard E Grant and Paul McGann play two out-of-work actors who abandon London for the Lake District. Terrestrial TV Premiere of an intelligent, well-acted comedy of Sixties bohemian life.
- 12.10 Film: Guelwaar (Ousmane Sembene 1992 Senegal) First in a series of African films. Political satire: a politician is killed and his body disappears from the morgue. To 2.15am.
- 11.15 Alfred Hitchcock Present: Banquo's Chair. Trapping a murderer. (above)

Graphic: Brian Green

Dyke accuses Channel 4 of breaching its remit

19th March 1983

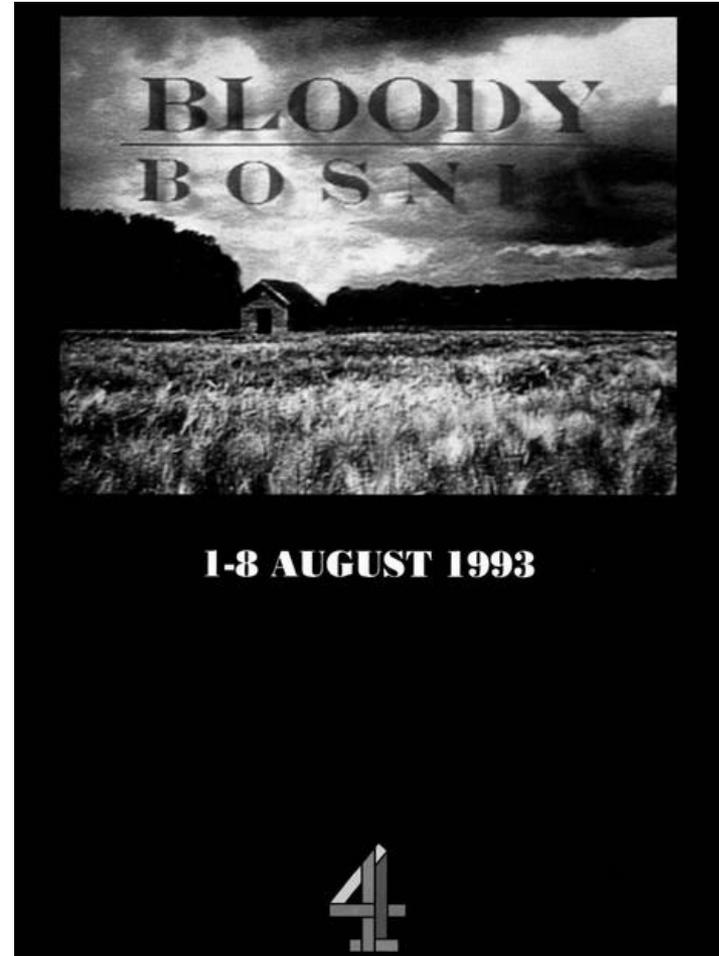
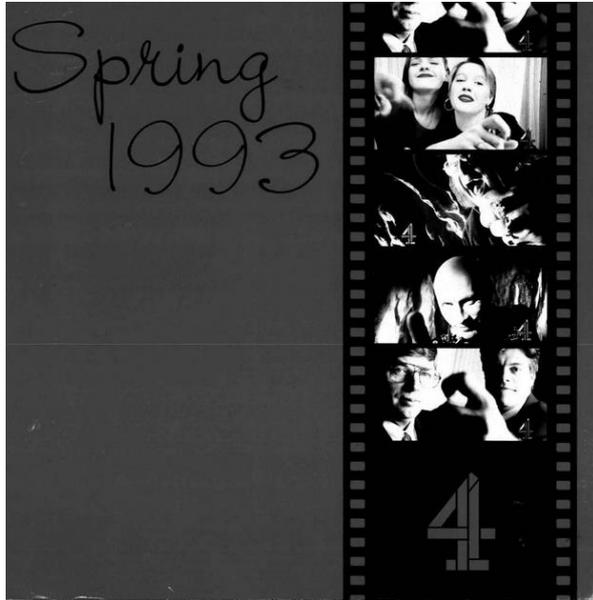
This note is really to ask two things. Firstly, can we hope that quite a few programmes in the package will be quietly forgotten? Secondly, can we ask that if you were to contemplate a peak-time slot for the more ITV type programmes, we should be given a good deal of warning?

CHANNEL FOUR

CONFESSTIONS OF A NAZI SPY	Sat.14.10	S.A.T.
BOOMERANG	Sat.24.10	S.A.T.
PAKEEZAH	Sun.12.25	No Cert.
THE BISHOP'S WIFE	Sun.22.30	S.A.T.
THE SHADOW BOX (TV)	Tue.21.00	POST 9.00
DIRTY MARY	Wed.22.00	No Cert.
BULLDOG DRUMMOND'S BRIDE	Fri.24.20	No Cert.

17th March 1983

Seasons of Themed Programming



The scheduling of purchased film content has to fulfil certain commercial requirements:

- First of all it is imperative that films are screened before Channel 4's broadcasting rights expire, as is the case with any other channel that purchases feature films.
- It is also important that a broadcaster reliant on advertising revenue gain the highest possible viewing figures for their film purchases.
- Seasons provide a context in which older or less familiar films can be screened on television, providing a linking theme that acts across a number of weeks to promote viewer loyalty.
- So in this way we can see scheduling as the conjoining of *economic motivations and editorial motivations*.

Marketing: the Film4 Channel

Some background...

- In 1998 the FilmFour subscription film channel was launched. During the early years the channel broadcast five or six films per day (6pm – 6am).
- On the actual launch day Channel 4's entire evening schedule was given over to the Film4 launch, with the showing of four movies back-to-back, including *The Usual Suspects* and Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book*. It was thought at the time that this would be the only time that anyone could see FilmFour for free, as the subscription cost a fee of £5.99 per month.
- However, in 2006, Film4 was made available for free as part of the UK's Digital Terrestrial Television platform, becoming part of Channel 4's wider portfolio of channels that came under the Freeview umbrella.

Film4 Idents





Publicity



Choose Four

FilmFour. The best in modern British Cinema.
Watch *Trainspotting*, *Fever Pitch* and *The Madness of King George*,
for the first time on British satellite television.

BRITISH CINEMA FILMS OF THE MONTH

Trainspotting - *Fever Pitch*
The Madness of King George - *Shallow Grave*
The Pillow Book - *Gregory's Girl* - *Brassed Off*
My Beautiful Laundrette - *Blue Juice* - *Backbeat*

FilmFour.
The new 5th channel from Channel 4. The films you love,
from the people who love them, presented, once a night.
SAMPLE FILMFOUR'S FIRST NIGHT FREE
by tuning to Channel 4 on Sunday Nov. 1st (7pm-4.25am).
Just one month's CALL through the new 5th channel sign
for £5.99 per month (satellite, cable and digital
subscriptions only. Excludes commissioning).

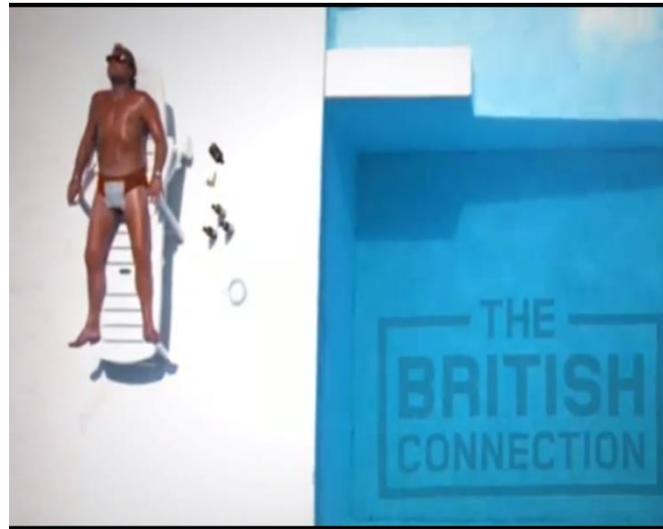
Call now on
0800 44 12 34
or call your satellite, cable or digital operator

£5.99
per month

FilmFour is a stand alone premium channel.

FILMFOUR **4**

The British Connection



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOs2KlAJZUY>

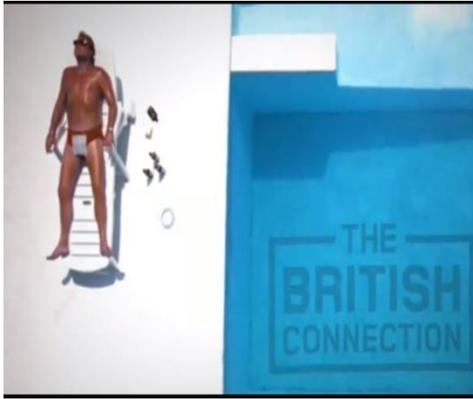




Branded



Enduring Love
(2004)



Sexy Beast (2000)



The Full Monty
(1997)

‘It begins with the audience...’

Our realization was that to the audience, ‘independent film’ doesn’t mean anything. When you asked, there was a clear distinction. There was a big audience who said, ‘I just want to see Hollywood blockbusters, Sky does that, I love the channels they do.’ But there was an audience we thought was complementary, which *wasn’t* saying ‘I go to the BFI and I want to see independent films’, but who *were* saying, ‘Yes, I do like some Hollywood films, but I like films that are a bit more interesting; I hate it when they’re formulaic. I like the clever, independent, cutting-edge films Channel 4 does.’

Unnamed executive, quoted in Georgina Born, ‘Strategy, Positioning and Projection in Digital Television: Channel Four and the Commercialization of Public Service Broadcasting in the UK’, *Media Culture Society*, Vol. 25, p. 787

As we learned by interviewing staff from 4Creative, this has led to Film4 profiling their audience in a certain way, dividing them into three distinct groups.

- Firstly, there are film fans who see their viewing as ‘quite transactional’ and favour blockbusters;
- Secondly, there are the viewers that C4 calls ‘the alternative mainstream’ who like being introduced to new films and being given recommendations, but they’re not defined by film;
- Finally, there are the real film buffs – the BFI Southbank crowd!