

Channel Four and the rediscovery of old movies on television

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Published version

HALL, Sheldon (2012). Channel Four and the rediscovery of old movies on television. In: Channel Four and UK Film Culture, BFI Southbank, 1-2 November 2012.

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Channel 4 and the Rediscovery of Old Movies on Television

(*Channel 4 and British Film Culture* conference, BFI Southbank, 2 November 1982)

Unlike some other contributors to this conference I will not be discussing *Film on Four* – but I will be discussing *films* on 4. In this paper I will not be concerned with Channel 4 as a producer or distributor of theatrical movies, but as an *exhibitor* of theatrical movies *on television*, and most especially as a *curator* of them. As well as the new movies it had financed, made with television ultimately in mind and only in a few cases theatrically distributed, Channel 4 presented a great many films it had nothing to do with making but to which it gave the viewing public access. While charged with the need to be innovative, experimental and to provide a real alternative to the existing TV channels, Channel 4 was also obligated to cater to hitherto neglected sectors of the audience, including more mature viewers and those with minority interests. In the case of films this meant not only art-house and avant-garde works but also *old* movies – movies older than those typically shown by the BBC and ITV. This obligation it discharged with vigour, imagination and intelligence, resurrecting literally thousands of films from the ‘golden age’ of popular cinema, many of them never before shown on British television or not seen for decades.

This paper derives from a much larger project – a book on the history of theatrical films on British television. In the course of researching it, and drawing also on my own personal experience as an avid consumer of films from an early age, I have been able to form some general conclusions about the subject. One of them is this: if there can be said to have been a ‘golden age’ of films on television – and I believe there can – then it was the 1980s and 1990s, especially from 1982 to 1997. If ever there was a time to be a film buff in possession of a video recorder that was it. To be fair, this was due not only to Channel 4: the BBC in particular outdid its own past efforts in this period, though I would be inclined to attribute this at least in part to the stimulus of competition. Undoubtedly, however, Channel 4 acquired and transmitted a huge number of films that were unprecedented in their range and variety (two key terms that I shall not be able to do justice to today) and that have not been matched since, either on Channel 4 itself or by any other UK broadcaster.

The job of buying films for the new channel was entrusted to two individuals. Derek Hill was (and is) a distinguished writer and cinema programmer of long experience, whose responsibility was particularly for acquiring independent and foreign-language films, including older ‘classics’ (which the BBC had generally neglected), among them the first seasons on UK Tv of films from India, Latin America, Africa and the Arab countries. Hill was given virtually an open cheque book; in a note on ‘Future acquisition policy’ in a report submitted to Jeremy Isaacs (dated 8 January 1982) he wrote: ‘There seem to be two schools of thought: those who believe I’ve acquired enough for our first ten years; and those who think I’ll have to be given Channel Five.’ The task of dealing with mainstream distributors, including the American and British majors, was handed to the late Leslie Halliwell. Perhaps best known now as the founder and original author of the reference books *Halliwell’s Filmgoer’s Companion* and *Halliwell’s Film Guide*, Halliwell was attached to Granada Television (the ITV franchise holder for North West England) as film scheduler and adviser, and had since 1968 served as chief film buyer and negotiator for the whole ITV network. In this capacity he regularly purchased both feature films and television series, usually in large ‘packages’ that could comprise a hundred or more films at a time, including both recent and ‘library’ (older) titles. Halliwell’s personal preference was for films made before 1953, and especially for those of the 1930s. This decade, aside

from the silent era, was the most under-represented on television, as it remains today: of the hundreds of films listed in next week's *Radio Times* as showing on all channels (terrestrial, digital, satellite and cable) only one was made before 1939. This film, Michael Powell's *The Edge of the World*, was in fact one of the very first feature films ever transmitted on British television (one of only three British features broadcast by the BBC before World War Two) – mention of which allows me to segue into a brief history of films on British TV.

Until the mid-1960s, the film industry – especially exhibitors, as represented by the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA) – strongly resisted the showing of any films on television at all. The British branches of the Hollywood majors went along with this, with the result that virtually the only films available to television for nearly thirty years were B pictures from minor distributors, foreign-language films and others (mostly pre-war or at least pre-1949) made or originally released by the American and British majors that had slipped out of their control (for example, independent films whose copyright had reverted to their producers or titles that had been sold on to third-party distributors). In 1958 an all-industry body was set up specifically to prevent British films reaching television: the Film Industry Defence Organisation (FIDO), which over the next six years acquired 'negative covenants' on the TV rights of nearly 1,000 films at a cost of over £2,000,000, thereby preventing them from being shown on television for up to twenty-one years. Producers and distributors who dealt with the TV companies were threatened with effective blacklisting and with their films, past, present and future, being boycotted by cinemas.

This changed in late 1964 when the independent Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn and the American company MCA (Music Corporation of America, which as well as owning Universal Pictures also controlled the pre-1949 backlog of Paramount Pictures) sold packages of films to ITV and the BBC, respectively. This broke the blockade: FIDO ceased to acquire TV rights to British films (though it held on to most of those it had) and the CEA conceded that films more than five years old could be sold to television without its objection. Broadcasters now had access to an estimated 9,000 films, allowing them to pick and choose freely. Unsurprisingly, having been denied recent mainstream films for so long, they tended to favour those of the 1950s and (when sufficient time had passed) the 1960s. Many films of the 1940s and, to a lesser extent, the 1930s were acquired as well, though the older films were the less attractive they appeared to schedulers (they were often the subject of criticism and mockery by journalists). However, most films made before about 1933 were thought to be 'unsuitable' for television. Surprisingly, this notional boundary of desirability existed from a very early stage: even when the BBC began planning its pioneer television service in 1935-36 it did not want films older than 1933 and that was indeed the date of the oldest feature televised before the war. In the postwar decade many films only ten or fifteen years old were disparagingly referred to, both in the press and by BBC executives in private memos, as 'ancient'. This prejudice may have stemmed from a number of factors, including the poor condition of many existing prints and negatives and the 'dated' technical standards of silent and early sound films. It was even shared by the film industry itself and was one of the principal reasons both distributors and exhibitors gave for wanting to keep films off television. In 1937, the Managing Director of Paramount Film Service had written to Gerald Cock, the BBC's first Director of Television, to state that

we are definitely opposed to any attempt to push old product onto the public. We claim to be a progressive firm and are making every effort possible to increase the quality and standing of our product. We retire our films from circulation after a certain age, and we

see nothing whatever to be gained by going back and picking up old product after same has been retired and attempting to show same to the public again through some other method, such as television.

Furthermore, in our humble opinion, after you make a few attempts of this kind you will find that the public will laugh at you, as they will not waste their time either in the theatre or by means of television to look at films which are four or five years old.¹

These early warnings of course reckoned without the appeal of nostalgia or the future development of a film-buff culture that television could service. The first major ratings success of BBC2 after it began broadcasting in 1964 was a season called *The Vintage Years of Hollywood*, mainly comprising films from the pre-1949 Paramount catalogue. Over the next few years a great many 'vintage' films were shown for the first time on television, especially but not exclusively on BBC2. But even by the early 1970s the supply of older films considered suitable was running out and by the end of the decade most of those shown on all three channels were reruns; the bulk of those that remained unscreened were regarded as too dated or too minor to be worth reviving. BBC2 remained the most adventurous channel in programming 'classic' films, along with one or two of the ITV regional companies, most notably Granada. As I've already mentioned, Granada's film scheduler was Leslie Halliwell, who made occasional experiments in programming such as recreating a typical 'golden age' evening at the cinema by supporting a feature with a short film, a cartoon and a newsreel. In 1982 Halliwell himself presented a season for Granada called *Home Front*, in which a feature film of the war years was accompanied by one or two shorts made under the auspices of the Ministry of Information. But the advent of Channel 4 provided far more in the way of opportunities for Halliwell, allowing him to programme films for a national rather than just a local audience, to mount more ambitious seasons, and to find a use for some of the older and more offbeat films controlled by ITV along with others that he was to acquire specifically for the new channel.

At the instigation of their regulatory body, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), from the mid-70s the ITV companies were encouraged, in the interests of improving the 'quality' of films shown on the network, to weed out and retire their older titles, except for films deemed to have continuing interest for aesthetic or historical reasons. Halliwell regularly kept a check on this 'archival' list, ensuring that films of value were not disposed of. Once Channel 4 appeared on the horizon many of these were transferred over to its control while Halliwell bargained with the Hollywood majors for additional packages. In December 1981 he told the *Yorkshire Post*: 'I have bought 1,000 films for them already and I haven't even started.'² Five years later in an article he wrote for the journal *Airwaves* entitled 'Rediscovering the Golden Age for Channel 4' he talked about having amassed 'more than 2,000 of them at an average royalty of £10,000 each'.³

Films were from the outset planned as a substantial element of the channel's regular output. At a press conference in December 1981 Jeremy Isaacs promised fifteen hours of films per week – more than for any other type of programme – of which about six or seven would be in peak time. This prompted the CEA – always alert to the threat of competition for audiences – to complain to the Home Office, while Mary Whitehouse and others complained (before the start of broadcasting) about a number of the more recent titles announced for screening, including Sidney Lumet's *Equus*, Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* and Paul Schrader's *Hardcore*. Many Hollywood films of the 1970s that had originally been bought for ITV but could not be played on it for reasons of content were also diverted to Channel 4. In the first week Lumet's *Network*, Halliwell's most expensive single purchase

for the channel at \$150,000 for three runs, and *Semi-Tough*, a Burt Reynolds vehicle which gave the channel the highest audience rating of its opening fortnight, drew a further slew of complaints for their bad language, including one from a caller who asked 'Is this the sort of thing C4 has to offer?'⁴ Halliwell claimed that he only ever received one complaint about the vintage films he had chosen, and that from a 67-year-old woman in Godalming; however the IBA Archives contain a number of letters about 'the incidence of black and white films on television' from viewers who objected to them when they had paid for a colour licence. Responding to one such letter that had been sent to the Home Secretary the month after Channel 4 went on the air, the IBA's Director-General explained to Geoffrey Howe that this was 'in line with its policy to resurrect classic productions of the cinema specifically for those many viewers whose tastes have been less than fully catered for on television in the past. This is a policy which has the full support of the Authority.'⁵ Replying to a later complaint along the same lines in October 1984, an IBA officer stated that 'it is part of Channel 4's policy to show cinema classics to give younger viewers in particular the opportunity to see films that they might never otherwise see'.⁶

Complaints such as these were clearly in a very small minority. Leslie Halliwell reported an overwhelming show of support from viewers, manifested not just in correspondence but in viewing figures. His biographer Michael Binder quotes him as saying: 'When you can show Conrad Veidt in *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* to an audience of five million you really feel that you have achieved something.'⁷ *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* was a British film of 1935 that had long been thought lost. Halliwell stated in his occasional column written for the *TVTimes*, 'Film Clips', that he had been able to trace a copy held by a collector only some time later to receive a brand-new print from the Rank Organisation, which had hitherto denied having any material on the film. It was the channel's preferred policy to strike a new 35mm print of each film it acquired from the best available negative; if that was not possible then the best existing prints were located, sometimes via the National Film Archive (as it then was), and transferred to tape. In many cases, according to Halliwell, films whose rights were available or had actually been acquired could not be shown because no usable print could be found; he claimed that one in four prints had to be rejected as below acceptable quality. Nevertheless, over 1,000 new prints were made specifically for Channel 4's use; these still exist and occasionally turn up at BFI Southbank or in film festivals – including *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* and another Conrad Veidt vehicle, *Nazi Agent*, both of which I saw at Bologna.

So what other old films were shown by Channel 4? I have looked in some detail at its next two years and two months (up to the end of 1984). This was to some extent an exercise in memory-jogging: I turned 18 on Channel 4's seventh day of operation and, already a committed cinephile (or, as I prefer it, buff), made a particular point of seeing as many films on 4 as I could, of all kinds. My departure for university one year later got in the way of this, but with the aid of VHS I was able not only to see a great deal of Channel 4's film output but to keep it for future use: tapes numbers 1 and 2 in my off-air video collection comprise the two halves of Abel Gance's five-hour *Napoleon*, first broadcast in November 1983 and one of eleven silent features shown in those first two-and-a-bit years. Seven of these, including *Napoleon*, were part of the Thames Silents series that sprang from Kevin Brownlow and David Gill's documentary series *Hollywood*, which had originally been broadcast on ITV in 1980 but was repeated on Channel 4. Though Thames Television (the London weekday ITV franchise-holder, headed by Jeremy Isaacs) had financed the premiere presentation of the restored and reconstructed *Napoleon*, with a live orchestra, at the London Film Festival, later theatrical

presentations of silent classics by Brownlow and Gill were co-sponsored by Channel 4, which subsequently transmitted them with recordings of the scores specially composed by (usually) Carl Davis. Two of the films broadcast in 1984, *The Wind* and *Broken Blossoms*, were preceded by video introductions by their star, Lillian Gish. Most of the other silent films Channel 4 showed in these years starred Buster Keaton, including both features and shorts, many of which had not previously been televised in their entirety, along with Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* and *Tillie's Punctured Romance*.

Other films shown for the first time on British television in this period included two on the channel's opening weekend, *Hell's Angels* and *Scarface*, both produced by Howard Hughes; James Whale's *The Old Dark House* and *The Invisible Man* (plus a season of the latter's sequels); Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross*; Samuel Goldwyn's *Bulldog Drummond*, *Whoopie* and *Arrowsmith*; and Tod Browning's *Freaks*, which inaugurated a season hosted by Halliwell himself called *What the Censor Saw*, comprising key films in the history of film censorship. Several films Halliwell had wanted to show as part of this season were themselves prohibited by the IBA, including *Straw Dogs*, *Last Tango in Paris* and *The Exorcist* (the rights to which were acquired but not – ahem – exercised). The older films mentioned (all made between 1929 and 1933) had been kept off television partly by virtue of their age and partly due to contractual and copyright problems that had also kept some of them off cinema screens for years.

Repeats of films previously shown by the BBC or ITV comprised the bulk of Channel 4's classics, but among them were many that had not been televised for a decade or more, particularly the MCA Paramount films and those from Twentieth Century-Fox. To take one example to stand for many: the first Hollywood 'A' picture by a major producer to be shown in its entirety on British television was a David O. Selznick production called *The Young in Heart*, made in 1938. It was shown by the BBC on Christmas Eve 1947 and three more times over the next three years. It was later reacquired by the BBC as part of a batch of Selznick films in 1959 but along with several other older films in the package it was not repeated. Halliwell remembered it fondly and acquired it for Channel 4, scheduling it in a peak slot on the evening of Sunday 9 September 1984, almost thirty-four years after its last UK TV screening. In his book *Halliwell's Harvest*, he records that 'at the end, the off-screen announcer said "What a nice film," and said it with every indication of genuine enthusiasm, while over the next few days a dozen or more people told me how much they enjoyed it and what a find it was'.⁸ (Halliwell himself was, however, disappointed by the film's failure to live up to his memory of it!)

These are all American films, and British classics were at first scarce on Channel 4. Many from the 1940s, particularly, were still embargoed by FIDO covenants (the last did not expire until 1986, though they could be bought out, as often happened) while others were tied up either with rights problems or print problems. But gradually British films were acquired in vast numbers, including many that had never been televised before or not since the early days of television in the 1940s and 50s. Among them was *The Seventh Veil*, which had been networked by ITV in January 1958 and then shown locally in various ITV regions before being withdrawn in 1960 and its TV rights ceded to FIDO in 1962. It was not seen on British television again until Channel 4 revived it, twice, in 1984 (the second time was to mark the death of its star, James Mason).

Perhaps Halliwell's most remarkable scheduling achievement was one that built on his earlier experiments at Granada. After mounting two Channel 4 seasons about the Second World War, including one entitled *The Gathering Storm* that focused on films with pre-war settings, he embarked on a magnum opus: twelve weekly programmes, commencing in the autumn of 1984 and continuing after Christmas, under the title *The British at War*. The series brought together no fewer than forty-nine British films of the war years, including both fiction and documentaries, features and (mainly) shorts, some of the latter only a couple of minutes long. He introduced and linked them himself, the first programme going out on the afternoon of Thursday 25 October 1984 in two two-hour sessions, broadcast on either side of *Countdown*. The features in the season had been televised before, though most not since the early 1960s, but many of the shorts were not only new to television but had probably not been seen publicly since the war itself. The series was such a success that it was followed by two further, related seasons, *America at War* (which included the first television showing of Frank Capra's documentary series *Why We Fight*) and *Yesterday's Britain*.

I did not need to work hard to research this series because I watched it myself at the time and recorded many of the films. I was part of that generation of younger (and older!) viewers who, had it not been for Channel 4, might not have seen hundreds of films that have never been available on video and which are once again unavailable now except to those with the resources and the opportunity to order films up from the BFI Archive. In acquiring and programming these films the channel performed what for me remains its most valuable function in furthering film culture in the UK: that of an enlightened and imaginative curator, guiding the receptive viewer to unknown corners of film history and bringing out rare artefacts that, once seen, are never forgotten.

I'd like to end with some statistics and some clips. Of the 701 (by my count) pre-1980 feature films shown by Channel 4 in its first twenty-six months of broadcasting, no fewer than 411 were made before 1950, 189 of them before 1940. This does not, of course, include the many short films of the 1920s, 30s and 40s used as afternoon 'fillers' or supports to its features. Finally, three short extracts from *The British at War*, including Leslie Halliwell's introductions and the two shortest shorts of the series – neither of which appears in their respective actors' filmographies on IMDb (as you will no doubt check for yourselves)!

Decade	Number of films on C4, 1982-84
1910s	2
1920s	11 (inc. 2 sound films)
1930s	176
1940s	222
1950s	90
1960s	66
1970s	134
Total	701

¹ Letter, J.C. Graham to Gerald Cock, 26 October 1937.

² 'Halliwell's screen test', *Yorkshire Post*, 19 December 1981.

³ Leslie Halliwell, 'Rediscovering the Golden Age for Channel 4', *Airwaves*, 1986; online at <http://www.lesliehalliwell.com/tv_film/index.html>, last accessed 31 October 2012.

⁴ Record of telephone call from Mr E, 9 November 1982.

⁵ John Whitney (Director-General, IBA) to the Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Howe, MP, 20 December 1982.

⁶ Anne Nethercott (Television Administrator) to PMW, 25 October 1984.

⁷ Leslie Halliwell, quoted in Michael Binder, *Halliwell's Horizon: Leslie Halliwell and His Film Guides* (Lulu Publishing, 2011), pp. 215-6.

⁸ Leslie Halliwell, *Halliwell's Harvest* (London: Grafton Books, 1986), pp. 296-7.