The Social Art Cinema: A Moment of History in the History of British Film and Television Culture

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British cinema has four reputations and a problem. The first reputation is for a kind of built-in mediocrity, a supposed lack of interest in visual style or formal elaboration which can also be perceived as emotional inhibition. Satyajit Ray's argument was that the medium compels its user 'to face facts, to probe, to reveal, to get close to people and things; while the British nature inclines to the opposite; to stay aloof, to cloak harsh truths with innuendoes'.[1] Ray thought British film-makers lacked the creative imagination to produce visible filmic equivalents of the conflicts, clashes or tensions which may or may not (he was not sure) have existed in British culture. The argument has been advanced in broadly similar terms by many other writers, though with structural or intellectual terms replacing Ray's 'natural' one.

The second reputation is for realism. Many British films from different periods have engaged substantially with some of the conventions of artistic realism. The film criticism of the 1940s and 50s was generally in favour of these engagements, taking them as evidence of seriousness, and seeing some measure of success in their products; the theoreticism of the 1970s and 80s damned them, though without doing much to sort out the extent to which they varied or acknowledging the subtleties of how they worked. British realists could be faulted for trying at all, because realism was a waste of time, or for not trying hard enough, because the versions of realism they dealt in had too many blind spots, were too concerned with finding ways round what the critics took to be the principal issues: sexuality, politics, class-conflict.[2] This strand tended to conflate modes and concepts which had substantial operational differences, reducing them into univocal theoretical entities like 'the documentary-realist tradition'.[3]

Thirdly, we come to the concept of quality, which has different faces in criticism and professional practice. V.F. Perkins, writing just at the time of the (very circumscribed) new wave social realism of the early 1960s, summarised the British quality film as combining an important subject (meaning, at that time, serious human relationships and social problems), a popular story (undefined, but it could mean one which had either topical, available subject-matter or

an exciting shape), a degree of balance ('a fair representation of all points of view'), a thought-compelling resolution, the use of figures of filmic style which were not necessarily motivated by anything substantial in the material, and some personal idiosyncracies. Perkins derided this combination, setting it alongside modes which drew on more assured senses of language, style and creativity.[4] This negative definition of quality set the tone for much discussion of British cinema (until Charles Barr's mid-1970s work on Ealing[5] began to open up the possibility of a broader view), and was further sustained by John Ellis's late 1970s recycling of it to blend critical humanism with some forms of 1940s realism into another unconvincing entity whose name was Quality.[6] These static visions of British film culture can be contrasted with Alan Lovell's scrupulous, differentiated account of how in the middle of the same period its strands resembled and yet did not resemble each other.[7]

The professional face of quality is more sympathetic. It proposes that there have normally been reservoirs of craftsmanship and talent among British film artists and technicians, and that these qualities have found their expression in a range of work of different kinds (though principally mainstream film and television), but without their exponents ever being called into a commanding position or achieving the critical or artistic recognition they merit. These are the famous 'best technicians in the world' who toil away as expensive hired hands on films which originate in other cultures or do their well-meaning bit on serious national productions which don't quite make it, perhaps, as Ray thought, for lack of creative imagination, perhaps because of British cinema's subordination and lack of confidence. From this point of view the professional quality of British film-making is seen as the victim of economic structures or aesthetic and cultural systems inadequate to sustain a national cinema.

The fourth, and to my mind the most significant, reputation of British cinema lies in its social character. This also has two main aspects. To pick up Ray's metaphor and consider the idea it introduced more closely, the apparent aloofness of some aspects of British culture masks an almost frenzied curiosity about social life and its systems, differences and observances. The British are obsessed with social functions and performances of all kinds. They are not thoroughly open about this (much less open for instance than Americans or Australians), nor may they have devised art forms which express or explore the social nature of existence to its fullest or most formal extents. Despite these limiting factors, pronounced commitment to sociality and social usage are evident in many of the representative individuals who have left their marks on British film culture - Grierson concerned with social purpose, Balcon involved with national identity and social responsibility, and Puttnam's version

of responsibility, which has involved combining practices based in advertising, attempts to maintain a British perpective and the development of internatiqnally-based material. Parallel pursuit of elevated conceptions of the social can also be found in some of our best known institutions – in the British Film Institute in many of its incarnations, whether representing traditional views about the dangers (cultural and social corruption) and rewards (good communication) of the medium or, on the other hand, the formalist, experimental anti-realism which still claims to put social function first.[8] These positions, both individual and institutional, are not indifferent to the aesthetic or entertainment values of film, but they prioritise the instrumental values which can be associated with it. The social is not reduced to the instrumental, but it takes on an instrumental face.

The second aspect of this commitment to the social expresses itself quite differently, in the form of a relative lack of interest in the individual or in subjectivity. This is most evident in the mature British feature film (from about the 1930s onwards), which demonstrates a tendency to attempt to build narrative structures around groups of characters rather than protagonists, and where it does have clear protagonists, still normally to attempt to socialise them, to present their emotions, motives and ideas in a version of a social context, which the film usually takes some pains to establish even if it may not elaborate all its details very succinctly. This tendency is very clear across films which have been grouped critically in quite different categories and have quite clear stylistic differences: for instance, Launder and Gilliatt's *Millions Like Us*, Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus*, Relph and Dearden's *Victim*, even Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. This has the effect of implying that what the individual feels or thinks, though relevant and part of the material, is not the primary focus of the work, nor can the narrative structure be articulated essentially around his/her goals or desires, but rather that his/her trajectory will be one element in a broader network of issues. Even when the individual is the primary vehicle, he/she is placed in a context towards which the machinery of the work is also drawn. This constant leaning of the British feature film can annoy devotees of active style and impact, emotional pertinence and centredness, and seem to confirm Ray's judgement by not probing, revealing or getting close to people. My contention is that instead, it actually explores something else, which is either a sense of the social or a set of images (which may be precise, but don't *have* to be) of the social, and that this, by and large, is what British cinema has been and is good at doing. There are artistic benefits as well as drawbacks in this leaning towards social context. Documentary, propaganda and argumentative films are also immediately drawn to a parallel notion of context, indeed often have

one provided by the terms of their material, but this does not mean that the main British tradition is documentary-realist. The main British tradition is social. But to mark the facts that film-makers do not feel compelled to say things that are sociologically accurate, historically stimulating or politically correct, and that they work in a variety of mixed forms to represent and use these perceptions, it may be useful to re-define this social as being social-diffuse in structure and expression. I'll return to its main characteristics a little further on.

The problem of British film-making is also long-standing, but it has become more acute recently. British film-making is caught between Hollywood and Europe, unconfident of its own identity, unable to commit or develop strongly in either direction. On one side an economically and artistically powerful industry, using a broad range of elaborated genres and generic principles, popular with audiences around the world, frequently exercising controlling functions in our own production, exhibition and distribution, expressed in a different dialect of the same language, but with markedly different modes and diction. On the other a number of national cinemas which no longer have strong industrial bases but do in some cases represent perceptible senses of national identity. The strongest link between them is the concept of 'art cinema', which, although born much earlier, acquired critical mass in the 1950s and has since attracted the 'continental' adjective as a sort of generic principle: one can talk of European art cinema or 'European art-type' cinema. The art film deals with issues of individual identity, often with a sexual dimension, and aspires to an overt psychological complexity. Because it sees the individual as more important than the social, the social (which must normally figure in the films, if mainly by way of contrast) tends to be presented in terms of anomie or alienation, from a point of view which has much in common with that of the consciousness of the unhappy doubting individual. It is more interested in character than in the plot aspects of story, which in keeping with the interest in anomie can be allowed to drift and follow each other in a loosely defined episodic fashion. It tends to interiorise dramatic conflicts; in some sense to give us the feeling that they are happening inside the protagonist's own mind. It aims at a distinct, intentional feeling of ambiguity, and its ending is typically unresolved; these lacks of resolution are valued for their 'life-likeness' and provocativeness. At the same time, and as an external mark of the subjectivity with which it is thematically concerned, the art film is expected to bear the marks of a distinctive visual style, which may be associated with the individual authorship of the director.[9]

Cinema in Europe speaks different physical languages. The idea of European cinema has acquired political relevance if not yet any real

political energy through the development of the European Communit and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and in practice European film making now frequently depends on relationships with national anc regional television companies; despite these problems, European cinema has a general shared basis in terms of cultural affinity. To this cultural affinity the British subscribe reluctantly: they are Europeans despite themselves. In filmic terms they have stood confused between a popular culture whose rhythms and vigour they could not espouse (in part because of the comparative diffuseness and decentredness which are the mark of the British social tradition) and a European culture whose forms have been near but elusive.

One can summarise this situation by saying that the British, traditionally, had no art cinema, and later no specific equivalent of the European art cinema, no medium in which the leading issues of subjectivity (individual identity, sexuality, personal relations) or of socio-cultural developments and consciousness (history, community and national relationships) could be directly addressed in image-related forms. The nearest substitute was the documentary; but it could not convince in these capacities because (with a few exceptions which tended to demonstrate the main rule) it had downplayed the individual during its first flowering, lost prestige during its local decline between the 1940s and 1970s, and only developed an explicit interface with fiction from the 1970s onwards (by which time the very principles of documentary, though still crucial in the media, had incurred much theoretical displeasure). On one level this lack did not matter, because by the mid-1940s the British cinema had other things going for it. As Charles Barr has put it, 'By the end of the second world war, a positive reading of "mainstream" British cinema for the first time became convincingly available, both in Britain and abroad'.[10]

To my mind this positive interpretation should be attached to the social-diffuse characteristics of British cinema rather than to the realistic or quality domains where Barr, following Ellis, though with nuances, puts it.[11] The social-diffuse is a blend of the following factors: the debating of issues of present social and media concern, often explicitly, sometimes rather maladroitly; elements of observational, cultural and stylistic realism (Ellis was not wrong in seeing realism as an important element, just in misinterpreting its multiplicity and in linking his simplified version with the concept of quality); melodramatic features, which again may be handled maladroitly - lack of punch or conviction; interest in group rather than individual entities and identities, hence the apparent evasion of subjectivity, as I've already suggested. This British mainstream – one which properly incorporates Gainsborough and Launder and Gilliatt, Ealing and Powell and Pressburger and might even, recent work has suggested, be extended to include Rank[12] – certainly existed in the 1940s, was in fact still flourishing in the early 1950s, but after this fell into disrepair. By
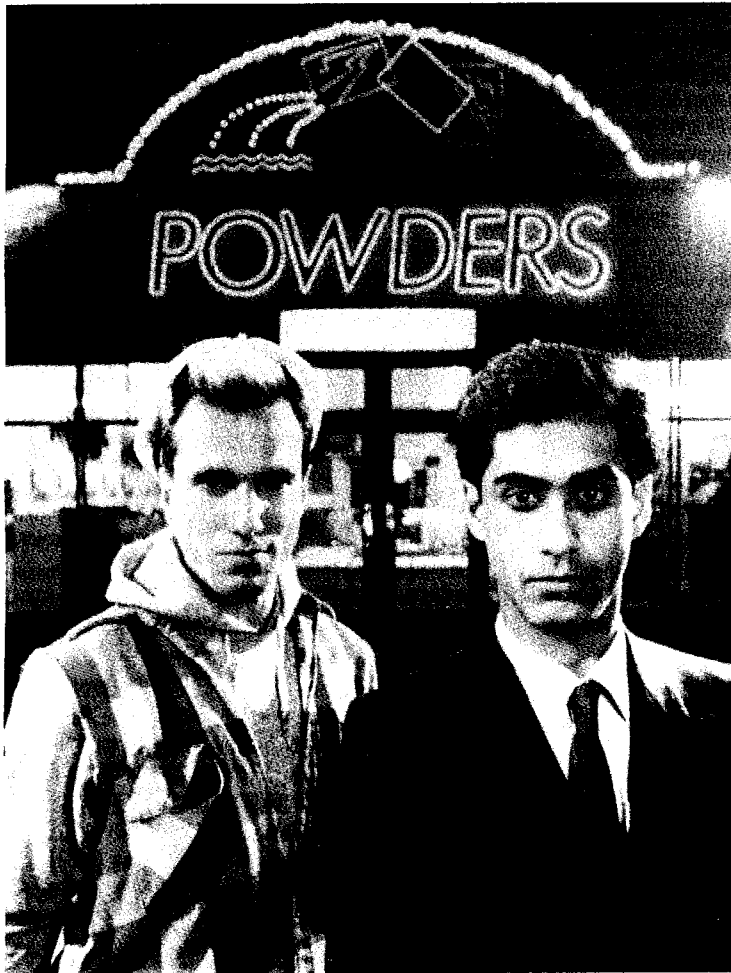
the 1970s a polarisation had taken place: the mainstream had shrivelled up and almost disappeared and so had any trace of broad-based reputation. A portion of the field was occupied by two rival concepts of 'independence', one based essentially on negation (it thought the mainstream did not exist, except as a set of backward-looking ideas and a few surviving decrepit practices), the other on the hope that mainstream ideas could be reanimated in terms of individual expression. Thus the content of independence was a few ideas about individual expression and artistic form, sometimes linked to overtly radical stances (as in the previously cited case of the formalist, experimental anti-realism which claimed to put social function first); but both strands functioned off narrow socio-cultural bases. Between the wasted body which had lost any plausibility as a form of popular culture (an area in which it had in any case never been confident), and the thin, voluntarist whines of independence, British film-making was gasping for air.

A measure of help -- which was also part of a real cultural change – was at hand. It came about through the establishment, after 1979, of Channel 4 Television, with an active commitment to cinema and film-making, and the specific forms this commitment took. Jeremy Isaacs, who was to be the Channel's first Chief Executive, had already signified an interest in film by making the series *Hollywood* for Thames Television and chairing the BFI Production Board. In his letter of application he formulated the following as his ninth and last aspiration for the new channel: 'If funds allow, to make and help make films of feature length for television here, for the cinema abroad.'[13] The involvement of television companies in the production of films for cinema screening had already been successfully pioneered in Germany and Italy. Of Channel 4's £80 million start-up budget, £6 million was committed to film production and a further £2 million to other film-related activity, such as the buying of rights and measures of funding for independent and regional film workshops and other groups.

The principal vehicle for film production was the programme slot *Film on Four*, for which David Rose, Commissioning Editor for Fiction, commissioned quite a wide range of film projects. The initial aim was to 'make or help make' twenty films a year and to spend an average of £300,000 on each. In practice fewer films have been made (about fifteen per year), and usually with greater expenditure. The huge majority of these films have been co-financed, in partnership with such bodies as British Screen, other television companies both British and international, independent film companies (in some cases with a more or less continuous production activity, in others set up to make a specific project), or the British Film Institute. We are thus talking essentially about co-productions, in which Channel 4 is evidently a major, often the principal facilitator, but the substance of its aesthetic

or cultural contribution may still be debatable. Its percentag
contribution to budgets is spread out fairly evenly between the sma
(6% of *Hope and Glory*), the perceptible (19% of *On the Black Hill*), th
substantial (50% of *The Draughtsman's Contract*), the major (75% o
Wish You Were Here) and the total (100% of *My Beautiful Laundrette*).

The development of *Film on Four* heralded two important structura
changes in British film and television culture. Firstly, it marked a
pronounced step towards the intensification of the relationship between the two media. Hitherto television companies had depended on film to fill large slices of its entertainment and some of its cultural slots – buying the TV rights to large quantities of film company product. Film companies had become used to regarding the accumulation of these sales as a significant proportion of their potential income. But now television companies were actually making films, and the intention was for them to be shown in both media. Isaacs' original proviso that they should only be shown in cinemas abroad was reversed when it was realised that a successful screening in British cinemas could lead to increased public interest and audience for national TV screenings. And films which were not commercial enough to secure cinema release could be shown on TV without delay,

My Beautiful Laundrette,
1985

so long as they cost less than £1.25 million. Secondly, the success of
Film on Four accelerated the trend to do away with the institution,
popular and respected over the previous two decades, of the single
television play, typically performed in a TV studio, with film or video
inserts made on location when appropriate. Films made for television,
perhaps showable in the cinema, and grouped under a loose series
title, came to replace single untransferable television plays (also
grouped under such titles). Television drama remoulded itself into the
formats of series, serials and soap-operas. Television lost and gained
by this development: losing (or putting on hold) one of its characteristic
forms, but gaining a dynamic, participatory relationship with the
world of cinema. Cinema regained a portion of the ground lost as a
result of social and economic change, but acquired important new
production and diffusion possibilities. Neither medium lost its identity

through the change, but its effect was to make them less extricable from each other.

How should we assess the films which have been produced out of this change? They need to be set alongside the other substantial British films of the same decade: the work of Puttnam, Parker, and Bill Forsyth and the bulk of the films directed by Stephen Frears, Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman, which were produced elsewhere. A reasonable proportion of the *Film on Four* work is at the same level, and two of them, Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) and *My Beautiful Laundrette* (directed by Frears, 1985) seem to me to rank with *Chariots of Fire* (produced by Puttnam, 1981) as the three defining British films of the decade. In his account of his stewardship at Channel 4, Isaacs struck two deprecating notes while laying claim to a measure of achievement:

> 'Some talk, though we [Rose and himself] do not, of a 'renaissance' of British film. In my view, reports of that birth are somewhat exaggerated. Film-making in Britain remains a chancy business. There is no conceptual framework [in *Film on Four*] to which I can point that defines a body of work. Yet something of substance has been done.'[14]

To my mind Isaacs was too modest. There was a conceptual framework of sorts, and it developed out of the relations between the social and the artistic – static, antithetical forms of which had contributed to the stifling of British cinema by the end of the 1970s. Although criticism has been feeble in developing generic classifications or principles appropriate to British film-making, I think it possible to devise some rough and ready categories (part thematic, part stylistic) to classify the output of *Film on Four*.[15] In the first 10 years (1982-91) of the series, 138 feature-length films were transmitted. Of these, seventeen (12%) were primarily concerned with addressing political issues. *The Ploughman's Lunch* (directed by Richard Eyre, 1983) and Karl Francis' *Giro City* (1982) are good examples of this. A further sixteen (12%) can best be described as Human Interest dramas – films which seem to have taken over many of the attributes of the serious, socio-culturally concerned single television play. *Good and Bad at Games* (directed by Jack Gold, 1983) and *The Good Father* (directed by Mike Newell, 1986) can represent this tendency. Eleven films (8%) were conspicuous literary adaptations. There were nine films representing observational forms of realism (including Mike Leigh's *Meantime*, 1983), nine thrillers and nine films addressing primarily historical topics (6.5% in each category). Eight films (6%), including *Experience Preferred But Not Essential* (directed by Peter Duffell, 1982) were part of *First Love*, a sub-series which originated with Goldcrest. Seven (5%) were comedies, thirteen (10%) are unclassifiable (Leigh's *High Hopes*, 1988,

the most notable of these), a further five (3.5%) seriously weird, an two avant-gardish (quite a lot of avant-garde material was shown on Channel 4, but not in the *Film on Four* slot). But the largest single category is that of the art film, as defined above: individual identity, sexuality, pyschological complexity, anomie, episodicness, interiority, ambiguity, style. It accounts for 33 films (24% of the total), of which the most prominent examples are Neil Jordan's *Angel* (1982), Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986), Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Chris Petit's *Flight to Berlin* (1983), Jerzy Skolimovski's *Moonlighting* (1982), *My Beautiful Laundrette, Reflections* (directed by Kevin Billington, 1983), *Letter to Brezhnev* (directed by Frank Clarke, 1985) and David Leland's *Wish You Were Here*. These last two are debatable.

Some necessary comment on these categories. They are not mutually exclusive, and some films could probably be categorised under several of them. The *First Love* material could be reclassified as Human Interest, realism or comedy. The 'primarily political' category clearly corresponds to the perception that Channel 4 was expected to provide radical and/or socially committed material. The number of films which I regard as unclassifiable may bear witness to the further expectation that the new Channel was to be fresh, different and attempt to pull within the frame 'what had previously been either excluded or treated in a bland or simplistic way.'[16] The real but modest proportions of literary adaptation and historical evocations simply continue long-standing sub-traditions in British film-making. The relative paucity of thrillers is not surprising (the genre was never strong here and has been in decline for a long time); the lack of comedy may seem so, but can perhaps be explained by (a) the seriousness with which film-making took itself in the context of a new, innovative channel, (b) the institutional tendency within television to think of comedy in terms of light entertainment, and (c) the presence of some humour in the Human Interest, realist and even unclassifiable categories.

Letter to Brezhnev, 1985

It may be possible to amalgamate the Human Interest and realist categories into one larger grouping (18.5%), roughly equivalent to the 'social-diffuse' category that I have argued is the traditional core of British film-making. It might also be possible to stretch a point by

ırther adding the primarily political grouping to create a larger 'social
iffuse-and-oriented' category which would then, at 30.5%, become
otionally the largest category. But the most important point is that
ıe art film grouping (a new feature in the early 1980s) is the single
ıost substantial element, and that more traditional combinations of
ıe Human Interest, the realist and the political (in which perhaps
ıly the form of the political is rather new) carry about the same
eight. Films like *Angel, Caravaggio, Distant Voices, Still Lives, Flight
ı Berlin, Moonlighting, My Beautiful Laundrette, Reflections* address
ıe principal concerns of the European art film – loneliness, who am
', social and moral confusions, the importance of the stylish exterior,
ı ways which are both direct and hitherto unknown in British film-
ıaking, but they also begin to shift these concerns toward the group,
ıe context and the social-diffuse, to some extent through using
ıction drawn from television. This seems most evident in *Laundrette*,
ı which central questions of sexual identity are mixed with
ıscussion of race, economics and generation difference and where
ıe action constantly swings back and forth between the social and the
ıdividual in a manner which may not always work (in terms of
ılations between the parts) and in which the ideas may be rigged to
ıme extent, but which compels admiration for its vigour and attempt
ıcomprehensiveness.

Wish You Were Here is rooted in a classic Human Interest theme: a
enage girl's sexuality and its problems in a social and familial world.

Wish You Were Here,
1987

Leland's treatment grapples with combining all these elements, tryir to say things (artistically) about sexuality and society in general befor subsiding into art images of a less satisfying kind: *Soave sia il vento* o the sound-track to get us over an unconvincing plot point, cute image of defiance rather than addressing a tragic situation. There i something postmodern about this choice of language rather thar substance, as there is also in *Letter to Brezhnev*, which is a successfu combination of social realism (treated in a rather broad, shallow fashion), popular romance and political fantasy. Unlike *Laundrette* or *Wish, Letter* opens up the possibility of a relationship between British film and popular culture. But all three attempt a blending of the British social-diffuse with some of the concerns of the European art film. This social art cinema was a new formation. It also provided the conceptual framework which defined the substance of Channel 4's contribution to British film-making.

NOTES

1. Satyajit Ray, *Our Films Their Films*, Orient Longman, Bombay, 1976, p. 144.

2. See John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, BFI, 1986.

3. See, for example, Andrew Higson, 'Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film: the documentary-realist tradition', in ed Charles Barr, *All Our Yesterdays*, BFI, 1986, pp. 72-97.

4. V.F. Perkins, 'The British Cinema', in *Movie*, no. 1, 1962.

5. Charles Barr, 'Projecting Britain and the British Character', *Screen*, vol. 15, nos. 1 and 2, 1974; Ealing Studios, Cameron & Tayleur/David and Charles, 1977, 2nd revised ed., Studio Vista, 1993.

6. John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality: Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and Seventies', *Screen*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1978.

7. Alan Lovell, 'The British Cinema', *Screen*, vol.13, no. 2, 1972.

8. See for example eds Rod Stoneman and Hilary Thompson, *The New Social Function of Cinema* (the Catalogue of British Film Institute Productions 1979/80), BFI, 1981.

9. This summary of the characteristics of European art cinema draws on the accounts in David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', *Film Criticism*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1979 and in Steven Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution', *Screen*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1981.

10. Charles Barr, 'Introduction: Amnesia and Schizophrenia', in ed Barr, *All Our Yesterdays*, p. 11.

11. ibid., pp. 13-26.

12. See Geoffrey Macnab, J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry, Routledge, 1993.

13. Jeremy Isaacs, *Storm over 4: a Personal Account*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989, p. 25.

14. ibid., p. 158.

15. The factual information for my account of *Film on Four* draws on John Pym, *Film on Four: a Survey 1982/1991*, BFI, 1992. The generic categories have evolved from discussing British film culture, art cinema, realism and genre with students of the M.A. course in Film and Television Studies at the University of Westminster.

16. Sylvia Harvey, 'Channel 4 Television: from Annan to Grade', in ed. Stuart Hood, *Behind the Screens*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1994, p. 117.