

# Channel 4 and the Red Triangle: A Case Study in Film Curation and Censorship on Television

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**Abstract:**

This article charts the history of an experiment, conducted during the autumn and winter of 1986–7, in which Channel 4 trialled an on-screen visual warning symbol to accompany screenings of a series of international art-house films. The so-called ‘red triangle’ experiment, though short-lived, will be considered as a case study for exploring a number of related themes. Firstly, it demonstrates Channel 4’s commitment during the 1980s to fulfilling its remit to experiment and innovate in programme form and content, in respect of its acquired feature film provision. Channel 4’s acquisitions significantly enlarged the range of international classic and art-house cinema broadcast on British television. Secondly, it reflects contemporary tensions between the new broadcaster, its regulator the IBA, campaigners for stricter censorship of television and policy-makers. The mid-1980s was a period when progressive developments in UK film and television culture (from the rise of home video to the advent of Channel 4 itself) polarised opinions about freedom and regulation, which were greatly exacerbated by the press. Thirdly, it aims to shed light on the paradox that, while over thirty years of audience research has consistently revealed the desire on the part of television viewers for an on-screen ratings system, the UK is not among some forty countries that currently employ such devices on any systematic basis. In this way the history of a specific advisory experiment may be seen to have a bearing on current policy trends.

**Keywords:** Channel 4; IBA; NVALA; red triangle; special discretion required; warning symbol.

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*Introduction*

This article charts the history of an experiment, conducted during the autumn and winter of 1986–7, in which Channel 4 trialled an on-screen visual warning symbol to accompany screenings of a series of international art-house films. While much has been written about film censorship, the majority of this literature has tended to focus on the policy and regulation of film for theatrical or video/DVD release, usually concentrating on particular causes célèbres. This investigation, by contrast, looks at the regulation of film on television; it concerns institutional policy in relation to a curated season of films. The first section outlines Channel 4's commitment during the 1980s to fulfilling its remit to experiment and innovate in programme form and content in respect of its acquired feature film provision. It also explains contemporary tensions between the new broadcaster, its regulator the IBA, campaigners for stricter censorship of television and policy-makers. The second section focuses on the 'red triangle season' of films which brought these ideological tensions to a head and assesses the resultant audience research and public relations management. The third section surveys subsequent research findings about programme information and reflects on the red triangle experiment in terms of television regulation and the Film4 channel's current commitment to world cinema.

*'More Channel Four Shockers'*

Channel 4 enriched and enlarged film culture in Britain from 1982 not only through its original commissions for *Film on Four* and in the new work sponsored by its Independent Film and Video Department, but also through its broadcasting of acquired film content. The responsibility for building a comprehensive and quite original film library was shared between Leslie Halliwell (whose brief was Hollywood and classic film) and Derek Hill (who handled independent titles). Hill, a vigorous champion of independent cinema and opponent of censorship, had founded the peripatetic New Cinema Club (1967–73), worked as an art-house distributor during the 1970s and went on to run the Essential Cinema Club (1976–80) with support from the Institute of Contemporary Arts (Prothero 2000). He was recruited by Jeremy Isaacs (Channel 4's first chief executive) having met him at a party in Cannes. Appointed two years before the channel's launch in November 1982, Hill was largely responsible for expanding the channel's provision of art-house and world cinema in its early

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years—two critical categories which he did much to popularise with the channel's minority audience through his cosmopolitan tastes and curated film seasons. As Ieuan Franklin notes:

Hill's purchases were immediately exhibited in a regular film strand called *World Cinema* and formed the basis of numerous film seasons, such as the 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 ... 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.<sup>1</sup>

It was perhaps inevitable, amid the prurient attention which Channel 4's programming received from sections of the British press during its first years on air, that Isaacs' interpretation of its public service remit to innovate and experiment with form and content was the subject of frequent scrutiny from many quarters. As early as 30 December 1982 the *Daily Star's* banner headline announced 'More Channel 4 Shockers', and a strapline proclaimed: 'Now they buy gay films for showing uncut.' The titles in question were Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976) and Ron Peck and Paul Hallam's *Nighthawks* (1978). Channel 4's Press Office issued a hasty response stating that they had no plans to screen either film, while an outraged Tory MP called for the IBA to withdraw the channel's licence. The furore was sufficient for the schedulers to sit on both films until the autumn of 1985, when both were shown and the controversy was promptly reignited.

Much must be said for Isaacs' principled commitment and tenacity, both in defending himself and the channel in the media and before the IBA, and in his encouragement of colleagues like Derek Hill. Isaacs wrote to David Glencross, then Director of Television at the IBA: '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.'<sup>2</sup> And in a recent interview Hill recalled Isaacs' trust and largesse: 'He said "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!"'<sup>3</sup> But while Isaacs' devil-may-care attitude may have reigned in private, publicly the press pursued its own vendetta with equal determination. This hostile climate prompted an imaginative response from Channel 4's schedulers.

The year 1985 saw British Film Year and, as part of its autumn season, Channel 4 commissioned *The Times'* respected film critic, David Robinson, to curate and present a season of international cinema selected from Hill's library of titles. The choice included familiar greats such as Yasujirō Ozu's *Tokyo Monogatari* (1953), Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), Robert Bresson's *L'Argent* (1983) and Luchino Visconti's *Ludwig* (1972), but also the three feature films which Derek Jarman had then completed: *Sebastiane*, *Jubilee* (1977) and *The Tempest* (1979). This would be the first time that any of them had been shown on British television. *The Sunday Times* anticipated the controversy with barely disguised relish, provocatively noting on 20 October 1985 that:

Channel 4 has decided to suffer the slings and arrows of outrage and show *Sebastiane*, Derek Jarman's film about the martyrdom of St Sebastian, which features Latin dialogue and homosexuality among Roman soldiers . . . The IBA has approved the scheduling of the film with just one cut, a close-up of an erect phallus. Says a C4 spokesman: '*Sebastiane* had extremely good reviews and the IBA agreed to show it. I expect one or two people won't like it, but that's not an argument for not screening it.'

Robinson's choice this Friday is also controversial: the movie *Nighthawks*, about a homosexual comprehensive school teacher, which was bought by C4 at the same time as *Sebastiane* and has not been screened before either.

Although the screenings were greeted in the tabloid press with the by then predictable degree of opprobrium, what is interesting here is the tactic of employing Robinson as the 'independent' arbiter of cultural value. In a pamphlet produced to accompany the season Robinson wrote: 'In one respect a guest selector has a considerable advantage over the official planners, who have to please week after week and can hardly answer back: "If you don't like it, there's a switch on your set, and you don't have to believe us next time we recommend something"' (1985: 1).

Although Robinson suggests he had a free hand in the film library, one admission is significant: 'I was encouraged to include the four British films in the selection precisely because they and their directors represent an important area of our native cinema that is unjustly and unwisely ignored by the commercial mainstream of production promoted by the current "British Film Year"' (ibid.). It was convenient indeed for Channel 4 that Robinson was 'a long-time champion of Jarman's work' (Peake 1999: 356), for it is clear that his intervention provided a means for the channel to screen 'difficult' films that

they had acquired within the context of an independently curated season. Heavyweight critics of his repute certainly provided a welcome additional line of defence.

Less than a fortnight after *Sebastiane* had been broadcast, the *Guardian* reported on Conservative backbencher Winston Churchill's private members' Bill campaign to bring television and radio under the auspices of the Obscene Publications Act 1959, noting that: 'The Bill will mainly deal with the alleged obscene programmes on TV, such as the recent screening on Channel 4 of *Sebastiane*, which are causing growing concern among MPs. Mr Churchill believes his bill will have all-party support in the House and will win public sympathy.' This cause, which had been supported since the 1970s by a number of Conservative MPs and the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA), had regained momentum in the wake of the passing of the Video Recordings Act 1984, itself the result of a tactical private members' Bill pursued by Conservative backbencher Graham Bright (Petley 2011: 23–32).

For her part, Mary Whitehouse, who headed NVALA, had already written to the IBA on 2 December 1985, enclosing copies of her organisation's monitoring reports on *Jubilee* and *Sebastiane*.<sup>4</sup> According to *The Times*, 4 December 1985, she claimed that the screening of these films had 'grossly offended against good taste and decency and could incite violence'. Although Churchill's Bill proceeded through the Commons at its second reading with a majority of 161 votes to 31, in order to ease its progress at the committee stage its architect had been forced to give ground on the so-called 'laundry list' of specific 'obscene' content it sought to bring under the law. Ministers clearly had little appetite to impose new controls on broadcasters; as junior Home Office minister David Mellor pointed out: 'Broadcasters were already under stricter obligations than those imposed by the 1959 Act. Their codes of guidance were strong and regularly reviewed, and the Home Secretary had recently reminded the BBC and IBA of the need to see that they were implemented' (quoted in the *Guardian*, 25 January 1986). Nonetheless, the broadcasters and their regulators began a very public show of robust reassurance by way of measured and dutiful response.

Thus the BBC announced in December 1985 that its committee of senior programme-makers responsible for drawing up its 32-page guidance notes on the portrayal of violence was to meet again to review the document in the New Year. On 4 March 1986 the *Guardian* reported that the IBA had let it be known that it would be examining 'all types of violence in its routine monitoring of television programmes'.

On 10 April 1986, it issued a press release reaffirming its commitment to its published Family Viewing Policy and stating its intention to draw clearer public attention to these guidelines by publishing them 'at regular intervals in the *TV Times*', placing 'an article explaining the policy' in the *TV Times* and using 'on-screen publicity'.<sup>5</sup> The IBA also took this opportunity to publish research it had conducted at the end of 1985 into audience responses to the Channel 4 film season Robinson's Choice, which had included the Jarman films. The *Guardian*, 4 March 1986, reported that this research showed that:

Of the 126 people who claimed to have seen *Sebastiane*, 54 per cent said they disliked something about it, but only 29 per cent could explain what that was. Ten per cent said 'homosexuality,' 10 per cent said 'sex,' 42 per cent 'nudity' and 2 per cent 'bad language.' But the main objection to *Sebastiane* and *Jubilee* was that the viewers had not seen what they assumed the film to be. The motivation for seeing *Jubilee* was the wish to see a punk film with the music of Adam Ant. People had been disappointed. The main motivation for watching *Sebastiane* had been to see a period piece epic about Ancient Rome—*I Claudius* or *Ben-Hur* rather than sodomy. But very few people were willing to suggest that even *Sebastiane* should not have been shown as a late night film on television.

These responses were revealing. They showed that viewers (estimated to be 1,198,000 for *Jubilee* and 1,193,000 for *Sebastiane*) were not affronted so much as confused (BARB/Channel 4 1985).<sup>6</sup> Such evidence was sufficient for the IBA to urge Channel 4 to improve the effectiveness of its programme information in helping viewers to decide what to watch. As Barry Gunter of the IBA's Research Department observed, audience research 'indicated that despite on-air announcements and statements in *TV Times* about the content of certain late-night films, around half the viewers of such films reported that they were not aware of the particular nature of the material before they switched on.'<sup>7</sup> Discussions began at Channel 4 about how this might be remedied.

Meanwhile, on 25 April 1986, Winston Churchill's private members' Bill was defeated by a five-hour filibuster, led by Labour's Gwyneth Dunwoody, who, according to Alan Travis in the *Guardian*, 26 April 1986, said during the debate that 'the only evidence which the Bill's supporters had produced were two late-night Channel 4 films, *Jubilee* and *Sebastiane*, and a bizarre list which included many adjectives common on most shop floors'. She concluded: 'We are not here to write on to the statute book our own particular moral hang-ups. We are here

to frame legislation that is sensible and balanced.’ For the time being at least, good sense prevailed.

*‘C4 Unveils Its Sex Symbol’*

The Broadcasting Act 1981, section 4(1)(a), required the IBA to ‘satisfy themselves, so far as possible, that nothing is included in programmes which offends against good taste or decency or is likely to encourage or incite to crime or to lead to disorder or to be offensive to public feeling’. However, section 11(1) of the Act also imposed ‘a duty on the Authority to ensure that programmes on Channel 4 contain a suitable proportion of matter calculated to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by ITV; and to encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes’. Between the devil and this deep blue sea Channel 4 had, the IBA noted, ‘from time to time transmitted important but often difficult films – generally from abroad – which have occasionally pressed very close to the absolute limits of acceptability under section 4(1)(a)’.<sup>8</sup>

The tightrope that Isaacs walked in balancing the terms of the Act became more precipitous in the wake of the controversy over *Sebastiane* and *Jubilee*. On 8 December 1985 he had told Sebastian Faulks, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph* about TV violence: ‘Of course I worry about “accidental viewers” like children, but I think they are their parents’ responsibility.’ However, when he appeared on 29 November 1986 on the channel’s viewer feedback programme, *Right to Reply*, to justify the screenings, he was less bullish in facing parental complaints. What, he was asked, if these late-night showings had been recorded on video in the home, and children had subsequently stumbled across the tape? What if an unprepared viewer accidentally lighted upon such explicit material in the course of channel-hopping? The challenge for Isaacs was ‘how to screen more of the films on our list, which millions of viewers might want to see, without falling foul of the objection that some who ought not to see them or did not want to see them might inadvertently bump into them. I came up with the notion of the red triangle’ (1989: 122).

In developing his idea Isaacs took counsel from the IBA. In an internal memo dated 16 July 1986, Colin Shaw wrote: ‘I have no objections to another trial of use of the Warning Symbol by Channel 4 and the results of the research could prove useful. It would, of course, need to be preceded by a promotion explaining what it was and that might produce more reaction than the films themselves!’<sup>9</sup> As Shaw’s memo indicates, the use of an onscreen warning symbol to accompany

pre-transmission verbal warnings was not a new idea. At Thames Television Isaacs had produced the award-winning, 26-part series *The World at War* (ITV, 1973–4). Under an agreement with the IBA a warning symbol was introduced for the episode which dealt with the horrors of the Holocaust, broadcast on 27 March 1974.<sup>10</sup> And prior to this, a documentary called *Life by Misadventure: A Film about the Seriously Burned*, produced by Southern Television and broadcast on the ITV network, had been shown on 7 August 1973 with a small white outline rectangle in the lower left-hand corner of the screen throughout. A follow-up survey in the ATV area of the West Midlands revealed that ‘57% of respondents thought the scheme was a “very good idea” and another 32% felt it was a “good idea”.’<sup>11</sup> Subsequent audience research was commissioned by the IBA in the ATV area following the ‘Genocide’ episode of *The World at War*. Dr J. M. Wober, deputy head of research at the IBA, reported to Barry Reeve, research and marketing services manager at ATV, that the research found that older people were less aware of the symbol, that fewer women than men disregarded the symbol, that 66 per cent would keep watching next time they saw a warning symbol, and that ‘nearly everybody thinks the symbol is a good idea, which’, he added wryly, ‘may merely reflect how little of a good idea such a question is.’<sup>12</sup>

The red triangle warning symbol experiment ran on Channel 4 from 19 September 1986 to 7 February 1987 and was applied to ten films screened after 11.15 p.m. It took the form of a white triangle with a red border and was shown in a corner of the screen throughout the entire film. The symbol appeared with the words ‘Special Discretion Required’ before a film began and at the end of each advertising break. As David Glencross pointed out: ‘There was no intention that the symbol be used with material that would not otherwise have been transmitted by Channel 4.’<sup>13</sup> But nonetheless, the IBA anxiously previewed all the films selected for the season and insisted upon a number of cuts.<sup>14</sup> For Hill, who curated the season, the symbol became (as Isaacs had hoped) a very useful way of packaging some of the art-house titles he had accumulated: ‘The films were not acquired with such a season in mind. It was Jeremy Isaacs’ idea to put them together in this way and proved a brilliant notion as it provoked controversy, effective publicity and considerably higher audiences than these films might otherwise have attracted.’<sup>15</sup>

The PR campaign, however, was not well managed. In advance of its official launch the news had been leaked to the press, and in the *Standard*, 14 August 1986, Isaacs was forced to defend the channel’s commitment ‘to allowing an individual opportunity to see particular

works of individual artistic vision'. The *Mirror*, 15 August, also got in on the act, chortling: 'Eye, Eye! It's Sex on TV', as did its Sunday stablemate with 'Watch out for the Beasties', on 17 August. Then a suitably measured press release of 21 August 1986 announced: 'The channel is reluctant to cut the work of outstanding film directors, but it is equally concerned to alert viewers who might themselves be offended, or might wish to protect others in their families.' Isaacs was quoted here maintaining that 'viewers are capable of making informed choices themselves about what they watch. This symbol will help them choose and will also serve to warn those who come across one of these films unawares.'<sup>16</sup> But by this time the press response had already built up a head of steam. The *Standard*, 21 August, trumpeted: 'Triangle is TV's New Sex Symbol'; the same day's *Mail* announced 'C4 Unveils Its Sex Symbol'; the *Star*, 22 August, riffed on 'TV's Sex Triangle'; the same day's *Express* chimed in with: 'Warning! It's a TV Shocker'; and also on 22 August *Today* promised: 'Warning: Sex Scenes Will Appear'; and, a little later, on 18 September, the *Telegraph* advised readers to 'Watch out for TV's Symbolic Decline'. As Colin Shaw had anticipated and Hill recalled, the innovation attracted a level of attention (predicated on the appeal of sex rather than the repugnance of violence) that the films would not otherwise have gained, much to Isaacs' embarrassment. Mary Whitehouse immediately condemned the initiative as a cheap promotional stunt. On 15 August the *Mail* quoted her as complaining that 'it is simply a get-out for Channel 4 to enable them to keep on showing such films ... By doing this, they are advertising the programmes to the people whom they are supposedly trying to protect.'

The 'red triangle season' began with Claude Faraldo's critically acclaimed 'surreal black comedy' *Themroc* (1972), 'starring Michel Piccoli as a middle-aged worker who suddenly throws off all sexual, social and political inhibitions'.<sup>17</sup> It was broadcast uncut at 11.30 p.m. on 19 September 1986. Channel 4's press information movie notes remarked upon its novel substitution of conventional dialogue with an 'invented language', and praised the central performance of Piccolo 'who plays with a wildness and refreshing bonhomie that is contagious. But it is Faraldo's triumph in that he creates a memorable and credible universe of his own and brilliantly uses it to explore some of the stranger byways of human behaviour and aspirations'.<sup>18</sup> However, in a report presented to the Parliamentary All-Party Media Group the NVALA described *Themroc* as 'one-and-a-half hours of unadulterated assault on the senses containing the glorification and enjoyment of mindless violence'.<sup>19</sup> And in the *Mail on Sunday*, 21 September 1986,

in an article headed 'Mary Blasts "X" Film on TV', Whitehouse urged advertisers such as Sainsbury's, Cadbury and British Telecom to boycott Channel 4. On 27 September 1986, Isaacs appeared on the viewers' response programme *Right to Reply* to defend the experiment, concluding:

Some do not want the symbol at all because it spoils their pleasure in viewing. I ask them to be patient and tolerant as we try to demonstrate that contemporary work that portrays life honestly and explicitly, and that has previously been thought by everyone else unsuitable for screening on television, can be successfully included in our schedule.<sup>20</sup>

At the IBA, an exasperated Robin Duvall wrote to Colin Shaw, asking: 'How can he say this?'<sup>21</sup> It was not, perhaps, Isaacs' finest hour in PR terms.

Subsequent films in the series continued to provoke criticism from the NVALA, while the response in the press became more muted as the season progressed. Shuji Terayama's *Sho o suteyo, machi e deyo* (*Throw Away Your Books, Let's Go into the Streets*) (1971) was broadcast on 10 October 1986. Adapted from Terayama's own stage play, the film, his first feature, was shown on Channel 4 the week after his 1974 film *Den-en ni shisu* (*Pastoral Hide and Seek*). Both had been subjected to minor cuts for violence at the request of the IBA.<sup>22</sup> Channel 4's movie notes championed Terayama's auteur status:

Like *Pastoral Hide and Seek*, this film is semi-autobiographical, again scripted by Terayama and based upon his play and book of essays of the same name ... Fascinatingly, the film version contains echoes of the stage original, including the collage-style construction, unpredictable changes in tone, and direct address to the audience.<sup>23</sup>

Matters of aesthetics cut no ice with Whitehouse, however, who observed that this rite-of-passage drama 'had the recurring theme of anarchy, both moral and physical, and contained the prolonged and graphic attempted seduction of a virgin teenage boy by a woman prostitute.'<sup>24</sup> Another kind of teenage angst was the focus of the Dennis Hopper-directed *Out of the Blue* (1980), which was the penultimate offering in the season screened on 10 January 1987, in which a rebellious fifteen-year-old kills her dysfunctional and abusive parents.

The imaginative schedule also included three films by the German director Helma Sanders-Brahms. *Deutschland bleiche Mutter* (*Germany, Pale Mother*) (1980) and *Flügel und Fesseln* (*The Future of Emily*) (1984) were shown either side of *Die Berührte* (*No Mercy – No Future*) (1981), only the latter attracting the red triangle treatment for its stark

examination of a female schizophrenic's alienation and abuse. It had won the best film award at the BFI London Film Festival in 1982 and was subsequently shown at the ICA. Institutional exposés of a different nature were provided by David Stevens' comedy-drama set in an Australian VD clinic (*The Clinic*, 1982), and by the concluding film in a short season of work by the late Turkish director Yilmaz Güney, *Duvar* (*The Wall*) (1983), which is a harsh indictment of the penal regime in Güney's homeland.

The radical Yugoslavian director Dusan Makavejev was represented in the series by his anarchic Anglo-Swedish comedy *Montenegro* (1981), starring Susan Anspach and Erland Josephson, notable for its use of Marianne Faithfull's bittersweet anthem of liberation, 'The Ballad of Lucy Jordan'. But Mrs Whitehouse was more preoccupied by a 'prolonged scene where a woman is entertaining everyone by singing and gyrating naked while a radio-controlled model tank, with an erect plastic penis sticking out of the barrel, is driven around her while she gyrates'.<sup>25</sup>

The Channel 4 press packs reveal that the red triangle films, which included the celebrated Antonioni's *Identificazione di una donna* (*Identification of a Woman*) (1982), were interspersed with other international offerings of equal stature which did not require the warning: Yaky Yosha's *Ha'ayit* (*The Vulture*) (1981), Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (Sweden, 1966) and Yannick Bellon's *L'amour violé* (*Rape of Love*) (France, 1977), though the latter avoided the triangle presumably only because a gang rape scene was cut on the recommendation of the IBA. It is interesting to note here (as with the Terayama films) that despite Isaacs' claim that the symbol aimed (in part) to defend the integrity of auteurs by enabling their work to be shown uncut, the IBA continued to exercise its own judgement.

The IBA's caution, however, failed to avert criticism, not only from those of the Whitehouse persuasion but, under pressure from the NVALA, from advertisers too. *The Times*, 21 October 1986, reported that 'Bank of Scotland, Kelloggs, Hill Samuel and Sainsbury have ... banned their products being advertised during the screening of such films.' Meanwhile, to liberal opinion the application of the symbol seemed equally ill-judged. The majority of complaints received by the IBA and Channel 4 concerned the intrusiveness of the on-screen symbol to the viewing experience. And, ironically, the symbol may well have been responsible for *The Clinic* and *Montenegro* (both sex comedy-dramas and the 'lightest' films in the selection) attracting viewing figures of 2.7million each—double the ratings for the David Robinson season.<sup>26</sup>

No sooner was the season over than the inquests began, on all sides. Channel 4 and the IBA produced their own market research reports, while the NVALA prepared a video of extracts together with screening notes for a presentation to the Parliamentary All-Party Media Group on 17 February 1987.<sup>27</sup> Isaacs responded by denouncing the showing of selected extracts out of context, and offered to re-show the films for MPs in their entirety. A *Times* headline noted on 12 February: 'Sex Films Draw Record Interest from MPs'. In the event a special screening of *Montenegro* was organised at Channel 4's Charlotte Street viewing theatre on 18 February 1987.<sup>28</sup> Channel 4 issued a carefully worded press release to accompany this Parliamentary scrutiny:

The detailed information which Mary Whitehouse gives about such scenes tends to generate precisely the kind of sensational publicity that the channel itself has always responsibly avoided in its own information about the films. And while the channel needed to inform viewers, through press releases and on-air announcements, about the 'red triangle' experiment when it started in September, the sensational publicity surrounding the symbol was generated not by Channel 4, but by Mary Whitehouse's advance protests.<sup>29</sup>

While the double-edged sword of publicity remained the unwieldy weapon—if not of choice then of necessity—in the ongoing battle between freedom and censorship, behind the scenes the survey data was sifted and interpreted. The responses from the separate Channel 4 MAS Omnibus and the IBA BARB Top Panel surveys were collated and the following observations made. Firstly, 86 per cent thought the symbol was a good or very good idea. Of those who thought it was a bad or very bad idea, the majority objected on the grounds that it was 'an infringement of liberty rather than it encouraged people to watch unsuitable films (although this was the second most stated reason)'. Secondly, the research suggested that the symbol 'should be retained although confined to films rather than extended to other programmes'. Thirdly, 'the majority of people "use", or say they would use, the device of a symbol to switch away from the programme for the sake of themselves or others.' Finally, there was the problem that 'a significant proportion of people saw a film as a result of seeing it billed as an SDR . . . i.e. it attracted them to a programme they would not normally have watched.' In particular, the IBA survey found 'that there is a problem of 12–15 year olds viewing films in this way'.<sup>30</sup>

On 2 April 1987 Sue Stoessl, Channel 4's Head of Marketing, prepared a report on the findings for a meeting with the IBA on 1 May. Her conclusions were simple. The warning symbol should be

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retained for certain films on the basis of the survey support. The warning symbol should not be extended to other programmes since films were a special case: 'The low frequency of viewing suggests that gradually the viewing of SDR would reduce to that of other films in the slot. With programmes this would not happen as each one would be seen as a different possibility to view salacious material.'<sup>31</sup> Concerned by the adverse publicity which the symbol's use had attracted for 'difficult' material which was arguably only of minority interest, the IBA favoured dropping the warning pending further research. Isaacs, with the support of his board and figures that showed strong public endorsement of the experiment, was minded to retain the symbol, but 'to attempt to devise procedures to limit gratuitous publicity'.<sup>32</sup>

The IBA respected Channel 4's position, although David Glencross (1987) warned that reducing press attention was 'likely to prove difficult'.<sup>33</sup> That challenge is evidenced by no fewer than five drafts of a press release revealing the outcome of these deliberations in the Channel 4 archives. On 5 August 1987 the *Guardian* reported that a Channel 4 spokesman had conceded that while 'the symbol would be retained throughout at the top left-hand corner of all films whose sexual content, language or violence might offend some viewers, the triangle would not be shown in the *TV Times*, or on the screen until immediately before the film started.' And although Channel 4 'would still do its best to describe such films in pre-publicity', it had 'no plans for screening any such late night films in the current year's schedules'. In the event, temporary self-censorship appeared to be the best remedy for unwarranted press attention. Certainly, in the wake of Gerald Howarth MP's abortive 1987 attempt to revive the Obscenity Bill, various journalists wondered if broadcasters had lost their nerve. Taking the long view, Isaacs recalls the 'damned red triangle' as one of Channel 4's more ignominious innovations, 'which fortunately we could get rid of fairly soon'.<sup>34</sup>

### *A case study in television regulation*

It may be fruitful to reflect upon this episode as a case study in television regulation. In 1995 the Broadcasting Standards Council commissioned new research, at an estimated cost of £60,000, which, as the *Guardian* reported on 8 December, found that '92 per cent of viewers wanted more information about programmes, and 40 per cent suggested on-screen symbols would help guide viewing decisions. Thirty-eight per cent wanted warning symbols in listings magazines.' But Colin Shaw, by then the Council's director, argued

that broadcasters should proceed with caution, pointing out in the article that ‘the red triangle and an earlier “black dot” experiment by the now defunct ATV were abandoned because they became a “turn-on” for viewers attracted to sexually explicit material. In an increasingly fragmented and multi-channel television environment it would be difficult to produce uniform standards and symbols.’ In his own book on the subject of media ethics, Shaw produced fresh research from the United States, conducted in 1998, which ‘indicated that the use of symbols can contribute to a reduction in the audience of the numbers of younger viewers watching a marked programme’ (1999: 78). A joint report by the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission published in 2003 produced survey findings which indicated that a majority of respondents favoured the modification of current programme information by the addition of ‘pre-transmission warnings and on-screen warnings’ (Millward Hargrave 2003: 20). In 2006, Ofcom, the current UK media regulator, produced Programme Information Research about ‘current attitudes and behaviours towards programme information’ (Ofcom 2006: 32). It found that while opinion was divided about the adequacy of current UK television programme information, half the sample surveyed were attracted by ways of improving warnings about content. Three systems were compared, including text-based information, warning symbols and age ratings. It was felt by 46 per cent that text-based systems provided the best detail about programme content, but 30 per cent of respondents favoured the use of symbols particularly in relation to children’s viewing.

### *Conclusion*

Two conclusions emerge from this body of research. Firstly, the frequency with which broadcast regulators have returned to this agenda since the 1980s reinforces the concerns at the heart of this debate. Secondly, there are consistently significant levels of support – notwithstanding the transformation of television culture and technology – for enhanced programme information to provide viewer (and especially parental) guidance. Given these conclusions, why then is the UK not among the 40 or so countries which currently have such systems in place? Can anything be drawn from the lessons of Channel 4’s red triangle experiment to help answer this question?

One answer might be that the quality of programme information has improved since the 1980s. Firstly, the end of the *Radio Times* and *TV Times* duopoly on television listings in March 1991 gave rise to

an increase in the number of print sources for content information. Secondly, digital television technology has since enabled a range of programme information to be accessed on screen, and certain subscription services now operate their own ratings systems. Thirdly, in 2004 Ofcom published its consultation document *Strategy and Priorities for the Promotion of Media Literacy*, which saw the establishment of the Audio Visual Content Information Working Group, with the aim of improving the provision of programme information.

Another observation might be that the polarised terms of the ideological debates around television regulation, freedom and censorship which characterised the 1980s have since receded, giving way to more pragmatic responses to such matters. However, a different position on this might be that the power of the UK's tabloid press, which did much to fan the flames of the red triangle furore, continues to militate against any mature public debate about freedom and censorship (except, of course, when it affects their own practices – vide its uniformly hostile response to the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry).

Finally, a cynic might conclude that regulation is now managed to some extent by the economics of the multi-channel market. Channel 4's proportion of foreign-language films shown remains higher than any other UK broadcaster.<sup>35</sup> However, can anyone seriously imagine the unremittingly harrowing account of Turkish prison life documented in Yilmaz Güney's *Duvar* being shown on the Film4 freeview channel? While its difficult themes of abuse and corruption remain all too relevant, it is hardly entertainment. If rank populism (and consumer access to a diverse film culture via DVDs and downloads) has squared the circle of the cinema-on-TV debate, this should not be seen as a victory for moral crusaders like Whitehouse. But it is a defeat for the idea of a curated film culture which, in the hands of enlightened enthusiasts like Isaacs, Hill and Robinson, broadened our access to and appreciation of what cinema could be, and educated a generation of cinephiles and cineastes. At a time when the BFI (2012), the UK's lead body for film, and the DCMS Film Policy Review Panel (2012) are united in putting film education at the forefront of priorities to increase and broaden the UK audience for film, this conclusion ought to give pause for thought.

In the light of this transformation, and by way of a postscript, Channel 4's recent nostalgic resurrection of the red triangle symbol in a marketing campaign entitled *Born Risky*, was ironic indeed.<sup>36</sup> Channel 4 may still be innovative in its programme commissions, but I don't see many risks being taken in the schedules of Film4.

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