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BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE

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DEPUTY DIRECTOR

Wilf Stephenson  
Director  
BFI  
21 Stephen Street  
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Dear Wilf

At last, I enclose a copy of our Workshop Policy Discussion Document.

We aim to have a new policy in place by the end of June.

I look forward to discussing the document with you and your team.

Best wishes

Handwritten signature of Alan Fountain.

Alan Fountain

enc.

cc: Ben Gibson  
Barry Ellis-Jones  
Irene Whitehead



CHANNEL FOUR TELEVISION

WORKSHOP POLICY IN THE 1990s

A Discussion Document

Alan Fountain  
April 1989

## WORKSHOP POLICY IN THE 1990s

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Channel Four has been funding film and video workshops since its inception. It has been an important part of the Channel's innovative remit.

With several years of experience behind us and in the context of the current debate about the future character of British television, now seems an appropriate moment in which to assess the past and set out a policy for discussion which we believe will be appropriate to Channel Four into the mid 1990s.

Within the broad guidelines set out here, Channel Four is keen to enter into discussions with a range of relevant organisations before finalising a forward looking policy and establishing the details of its operation from 1990/91.

The workshop movement has its roots in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its imaginative ambition was to create a permanent regionally based film and video culture parallel to the established, if always unstable, film industry. At that time British television had little if any relation to independent producers of any kind. The broad characteristics of the workshop movement were aesthetically, politically and organisationally oppositional to mainstream culture.

The main source of funding was seen as the state, via the British Film Institute, Arts Council, Regional Arts Associations and local authorities.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the context for any form of development changed rapidly. The fall of the Labour Government and the policies of the new administration effectively obliterated the perspective of higher levels of state expenditure on 'new' art forms. The arrival of Channel Four with a specific remit to open its doors to a wide variety of new producers and with a commitment to regional production meant that the workshop movement immediately switched its attention to funding from the new Channel.

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It is possible with hindsight to trace some of the subsequent tensions between the workshops and Channel Four to this initial phase. The workshops were not in general knowledgeable about or experienced in television production but were already busily building a separate culture of 'integrated practice' production, exhibition, education and training - outside television. The Channel Four money was seen by many workshops primarily as a contribution to this wider cultural programme with television as a new exhibition possibility.

For its part the Channel believed that funding this wider culture would produce a flow of unusual productions.

This relatively relaxed and in some ways ill-defined relationship might have worked well if the Channel had been one contributor to a heavily multifinanced movement. However, what gradually became apparent was that Channel Four, in the absence of other major longterm funders, became too dominant a funder of the sector. The Channel paid lip service to ideas of the wider culture (and there has been genuine two way benefit to that culture and Channel Four from the Channel's money) but increasingly wanted to see its money on its own screen.

One other tension which began to seriously impinge on the relationship between the Channel and workshops was around the concept of continuity of funding. While the workshops increasingly argued for long term contracts and the importance of these to the continuation of a regional film and television culture, particularly in encouraging other funders, the Channel felt increasingly constrained by the inflexibility, from its own perspective, of long term commitments, particularly in the absence of significant levels of new funds.

There is not a fundamental disagreement between the Channel and the workshops on this issue. The difference in view is mainly attributable to a shortage of money. The Channel also recognises that fairly long term funding has been an integral part of the production success of some of the workshops. Stated simply, without that support some of the best workshop production could not have been made. However, the Channel has increasingly felt that there must be the possibility of its funds going to new workshops. Lack of significant additional funds has made this, when combined with long contracts, virtually impossible.

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2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROBLEMS

In order to learn from our experience so far and to shape the future it is necessary to consider the benefits and problems of the past few years:

(a) Achievements/Successes/Benefits

(i) One broad aspect of the Channel's relation to workshops which is worth recalling is the way that it grew out of a unique collaboration between the Channel, the ACTT, the British Film Institute and the RAAs. Between us we created the Workshop Declaration which is a strikingly original agreement embodying both culture and labour/production relations

(ii) there has been a steady flow of award winning programmes and films which might not have been made outside the workshop or some similar agreement: HANDSWORTH SONGS, TESTAMENT, SEACOAL, BYKER, ROCINANTE, ACCEPTABLE LEVELS, OUT OF ORDER, and others, have all received international recognition

As well as these particularly outstanding productions, the workshops have supplied us with some sharp and unusual documentaries on important issues of the day: eg. NORTHERN FRONT, WELCOME TO THE SPIV ECONOMY, PLEASE DON'T SAY WE'RE WONDERFUL, FAREWELL TO THE WELFARE STATE, NAMIBIA: TELL THE WORLD, BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME.

There have also been some important areas in which workshops have contributed to the formal development of programme making: e.g., GIRO, GIRL ZONE, T DAN SMITH, HANDSWORTH SONGS, PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE.

(iii) Ensuring a small supply of programmes from the regions has also been a vital element of the workshop experience. Perhaps the most important for Channel Four; the experiences, images and voices of the NorthEast, Yorkshire, Northern Ireland, Scotland, the Midlands and Wales.

- (iv) The workshop method has enabled groups to gradually grow and flower in a way which would have been difficult under a straightforward commissioning process. To take three examples: the growth of the black workshops (Ceddo, Sankofa, Black Audio) has been an important component of the development of a black production sector; the relationship between young people and the Birmingham Film & Video Workshop over five years resulted in OUT OF ORDER - it would not have happened in the absence of that gradual process; the development of Red Flannel as a womens' workshop dedicated to working with women in the Welsh valleys would not have happened without workshop funding.
- (v) By contributing to a wider culture, particularly in supporting training and equipment resources, the Channel has helped to create possibilities for directors, producers and technicians new to television
- (vi) Last, but perhaps the most important, the Channel's involvement with workshops has widened the choice on the screen for viewers. Many of the workshop productions have made a valuable contribution to the political and aesthetic diversity of Channel Four.

(b) Problems

- (i) The fundamental difficulty facing the workshop sector at present is coming to terms with a changed political climate and the impact it is having on the original aspirations of the movement. Financial standstill at the British Film Institute and Regional Arts Associations, the demise of the Greater London Council, the financial and political pressure on local authorities and the difficulties faced by the regional ITV companies, has made the objective of creating a permanent parallel sector impossible at present on the scale originally envisaged.

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Two cases are instructive: both the GLC and the local authorities in the North East have played a crucial role in the development and sustenance of workshops. The GLC was abolished and the North Eastern authorities find it difficult under the present political conditions to continue their level of involvement.

From Channel Four's viewpoint these have been essential partnerships as have those with the British Film Institute. There are still significant partnerships in place but in almost every case the Channel is the dominant financial partner.

Channel Four has little option but to recognise the reality of the situation. We can no longer behave as if the Channel is a partner in the long term development of a permanently established, well funded sector. The workshops cannot look to Channel Four as the major funder of this admirable wider cultural enterprise.

It is doubtful whether such a sector could be built in the absence of considerable levels of continuing state support. In the new era of private enterprise support for culture, the workshop sector, as it currently defines itself, may seem less attractive to private sponsors than many other art forms.

This does not mean that Channel Four cannot make a contribution to funding but it does mean that the understanding under which it does so has to be clearly re-defined.

- (ii) Following on from (i): in the economic situation described above the pressure from workshops has been for the Channel to adopt long term funding in each case. This tends to tie the Channel into contractual relations which often exceed its on screen requirements and prevent the Channel from funding workshops new to the movement.

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We recognise that this is not a simple question since in some cases support over several years of uneven production has been necessary to achieve excellent work and has been beneficial to the Channel's viewers. Continuing to make this possible must be an integral part of a new policy.

However, it also suggests the necessity for a very clear understanding with workshops and similar groups that the sole criteria for funding at any point in the process can only be related to the programme production needs and judgements of Channel Four.

- (iii) One of the difficulties which flows from (i) and (ii) is that it has produced a fairly static workshop production sector. Because there is too little money in circulation for the growth of the sector, movement of workers between the groups or the possibility of fresh blood entering workshops is remote. While perfectly understandable this is a cause of concern to Channel Four since it is precisely to workshops that we look for a fresh/tough/experimental/innovative outlook. Too many workshops are gradually becoming small institutions unable to accommodate or seek the next generations of creators. Some of the workshops and their modes of practice are indistinguishable from many of the production companies who work on commissions for Channel Four. There are of course notable exceptions to these comments.
- (iv) In terms of flexibility there are some features of the Workshop Declaration which rule out some groups from workshop funding as agreed within the Declaration. This can apply to groups who have less than four permanent members and to much larger groups where collective method cannot fit within the Declaration. This is a serious cause of concern to Channel Four since many long term projects cannot easily work within the Declaration.

Having said that it is important to recognise that the Declaration has enabled forms of flexible and creative work which no other agreement affords., but with the industrial relations changes taking place within the industry, it is now questionable whether the Declaration as it currently stands is the most appropriate way to maintain such forms of work.

- (v) One of the most worrying aspects of the Workshop Declaration as it stands has been the apparent reluctance of others to finance production within it. This has been true of commissioning editors at Channel Four, British Screen, the BFI Production Board and other UK and foreign tv companies.



The problem is in part misunderstandings and fear of the Declaration method of work but also three specific difficulties:

- (a) the lack of direct editorial influence
- (b) the question of ownership
- (c) the difficulty for workshops to enter into up front rights and profit share agreements

There is no reason from our viewpoint why these issues could not be confronted within the Declaration. Indeed, in our view some reforms are needed in order to open up to other sources of finance.

There are some complex and deeply rooted issues at stake here: editorial independence, the retention of ownership and the whole buyback mechanism were at the heart of the original negotiations around the Workshop Declaration, but these questions have to be confronted now if the Declaration is to survive. We believe that greater flexibility relating to a number of issues within the Declaration would be possible, by which the Declaration could represent a broad framework within which different arrangements for particular projects could be made.

If a new innovative cultural agreement which is attractive to other funders can be reached it will be a significant achievement for the next decade.

### 3. PRESENT AND FUTURE

Given the conclusion we draw from the past few years it seems vital to set a course of reform which will retain the best and most useful features of the past while also seeking to broaden the productive possibilities of the workshop budget at Channel Four.

It is also worth bearing in mind the probable context for a policy in the 1990s. After the White Paper it appears that British television will enter a new phase of fierce competition for audiences and advertisers. It is difficult to envisage a Channel 3, Channel 5, BBC1 or satellite which will be hungry for product from the workshop sector, although there is always the possibility of surprise and a continuing or even developing 'regionalism' within ITV as presently constituted. There might be other regionally based opportunities if locally based systems develop further.

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However, Channel Four, and in all probability BBC2 will be the only companies willing to continue to follow adventurous policies in substantial programme making and scheduling. Indeed, this might well turn out to be one of the primary roles for those companies.

A reformulated workshop policy - one clearly centered upon on screen productions complementing the rest of the Channel can be an important component of the future of a Channel Four with its existing remit protected. Obviously such a policy would continue to benefit the development of a regionally based independent and workshop movement.

While we are keen to open out a reformulated policy for discussion and modification the crucial aspects of that reformulation should be along the following lines:

- (i) A clear project-product lead policy. This would be the Channel's sole criteria of funding.
- (ii) But production which by its nature cannot easily be commissioned. The needs of the production process would entail longer periods of time and/or unusual methods of work. This would vary from project to project but would include, for instance, working closely within a community over a long period or working in an experimental and unconventional way. There are numerous examples within the workshop movement but also outside where some programme making methods have often fitted badly within the commissioning system.
- (iii) The encouragement of experiment specifically in relation to television and televisual forms. So far the existing workshops have in general failed to take up this particular challenge. Indeed, the anticipated formal experiment which it was thought Channel Four would bring into being has been largely absent across the Channel.

This, we hope, will be an area of work which will attract new producers and established producers who wish to take some space to experiment and is of potential interest and benefit to commissioning colleagues across the Channel.

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- (iv) Assuming the proposals are good enough, we will specifically encourage a strong regional bias in the allocation of funds, in particular financing projects which seek to work with people in the regions who are able to articulate feelings, thoughts, images, not already found on television. This should continue to be an important role of this sector for the Channel.
- (v) We would retain a strong commitment to developmental projects, although these should take a small percentage of the total budget. This is an important area because it represents a door to broadcast television for people new to production. Particular effort should be made to attract new young producers.
- (vi) Length of contract should be decided in relation to the needs of each project or production. These might vary quite considerably. Again it is important to stress that relatively long term support can often lead to the right productions. We would normally envisage a minimum of one year. We would not create any necessary expectation of renewal of contract. We will hope that wage rates and other conditions would be along the lines of the current Declaration.
- (vii) Funding would be by a completely open process of application. Workshops as they currently exist would be one, although by no means the only, sort of entity which could be funded. The expectation is that a variety of types of producers and production entities would be financed depending upon the requirements of individual projects.
- (viii) In order to fairly administer the projects, many features of the Workshop Declaration would be usefully retained. These issues should be the subject of further discussion within and outside the Channel. The more flexible the Declaration is, the more groups within (vii) above will be able to work within it.
- (ix) We would in all probability substitute the buyback with a production fee.

#### 4. RESOURCES, CAPITAL, REVENUE

One way in which the Channel can both play an important role in regional development and help to provide facilities for existing and potential Channel Four producers is by continuing and strengthening its involvement with regional resource centres.

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Well equipped and managed centers provide the possibility of production for a wide range of producers as well as technical and production support and training courses aimed at a variety of levels.

The example of Sheffield Independent Film, jointly financed by Channel Four, the Sheffield City Council, British Film Institute and Yorkshire Arts, provides an excellent case. Used by Channel Four funded workshops and commissioned producers, it also makes equipment, training and support available to a variety of experienced and new producers. It is of direct benefit to Channel Four as well as demonstrating the Channel's real commitment to one facet of a sustainable regional development.

Working in conjunction with the British Film Institute, Regional Arts Associations and other funders both public and private, we should seek to expand this area of financing from the workshop budget.

5. CONSULTATION

The Workshop Declaration was developed in partnership with the ACTT, BFI and Regional Arts Associations. Since we hope to continue in practical financially related partnership with the BFI and RAAs and would like to continue the original cultural partnership. It is important to enter a phase of discussion before coming to a final detailed new policy.

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6. CONCLUSION

This paper suggests a process of reformulation and modification of Channel Four's goals and methods in the 'workshop' area.

Increasing access to this form of funding should widen the range of productions, make new forms of production possible, and attract a diverse range of producers to widen their own production horizons.

In a year or so one could envisage a culturally diverse range of producers working within this area in which they would be expected to be bold, imaginative and experimental, taking a specific interest in changing, challenging and developing televisual forms.

This sort of development should also make such a form of programme project financing more attractive to other funders and of wider application within Channel Four itself.

It will be one means by which Channel Four will be able to honour its special remit in a vigorous way for viewers and producers at a time when other channels are making rather more conservative plans.



Alan Fountain

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