

Television Will Archive Itself: Channel 4's role in revalorising 'old' TV

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Abstract

A notable feature of Channel 4's scheduling in the 1980s was the extent to which it drew upon repeats of archive television, long-unseen US and UK sitcoms and cult dramas either providing a nostalgic reminder of yesteryear or being discovered afresh by new generations. In addition, the themed archive evenings that began at Christmas 1982, culminating in the extensive *TV Heaven* (1992) season, now seem prescient in an era when digital channels such as GOLD, Yesterday, Dave and Talking Pictures TV draw extensively upon the archive to compile their schedules. Channel 4's use of archive programming receives little attention in academic histories, aside of Maggie Brown's dismissal of its repeats as 'tellyfilla'. This article redresses the balance, drawing upon publicity material from Channel 4's press packs, research into patterns of repeats and original interviews with those involved in the curatorial process to investigate the extent to which Channel 4's decision to revisit the archives was born of economic pragmatism, or was in fact a conscious act of contextualisation, re-evaluation and revalorisation.

Key words

Channel 4; repeats; archive television; television history; theme night

Introduction

One of the key features of Channel 4's scheduling in the 1980s was its repeats of archive television, long-unseen US and UK sitcoms and cult dramas either providing a nostalgic reminder of yesteryear or being discovered afresh by new generations. In addition, the various themed archive evenings that debuted on the channel at Christmas 1982, culminating in 1992's extensive *TV Heaven* season of curated repeats, now seem prescient in an era where

digital channels such as GOLD, Yesterday, Dave and Talking Pictures TV draw heavily upon the archive to compile their schedules.

Channel 4's use of archive programming receives comparatively little attention in academic histories such as *Channel 4: The Early Years* (Hobson, 2008) and *A Licence to Be Different* (Brown, 2007), aside of the latter dismissing the US repeats as inexpensive 'tellyfilla' (146). This article aims to redress the balance. Drawing upon publicity material from Channel 4's press packs, research into the selection of shows and original interviews with several of those involved in the curatorial process, relevant areas relating to the utilisation of 'old' television programmes at Channel 4 will be examined, namely: the policy underpinning the selection of repeats; their promotion, patterns of transmission and reception; the commissioning of new, archive-related content; and finally, the impact they had on subsequent programming of repeat material on UK television. The result is an extended consideration of the extent to which Channel 4's repeats derived from economic pragmatism, or whether – as publicity material of the time proclaimed – they were part of a mission to revive 'classic' archive television. The article will thus argue that Channel 4's activities in this field in fact represent a conscious act of re-evaluation and revalorisation – one that helped define its identity as a broadcaster concerned not only with 'quality' television, but with the contextualisation and historicisation of the medium itself.

Background

As noted above, little academic work has been conducted with regard to Channel 4's early reliance on archival television material, though Brown notes that, 'of the sixty hours a week ... broadcast from the start, a quarter would be cheap films' (2007: 43). While Brown largely ignores television repeats, she notes the part played by imports of new American shows such as *Cheers* (1982-92) and *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87) in helping establish the channel's identity and audience base at minimal cost (102). However, the various older US sitcoms revived on the channel receive little attention. Brown states that the re-use of archive British programming was not easily facilitated, as rights were not available (146). However, as will be seen, the at times expensive requirement of negotiating repeat fees with performers in archive programmes did not always militate against the revival of 'old' UK shows on the channel.

Dorothy Hobson, through primarily focusing on other areas of Channel 4's output in its early years, acknowledges the presence of repeat fare in its initial line-up (2008: 118), and

provides some useful case study research into the viewing habits of various demographics, 16-year-old Mark citing *The Addams Family* (1964-6) as one of the programmes he watches on the channel, alongside *Countdown* (1982-), *Cheers* and *The Tube* (1982-7). This study perhaps indicates that US repeats presented a certain ‘retro’ appeal to the 1980s youth demographic (2008: 140), but otherwise the role of repeat material is not unpacked in any depth. Elsewhere, the motivations underpinning the selection and use of archive programmes are only briefly dealt with in inaugural Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs’ memoir, *Storm Over Four* (1989).

At the time of Channel 4’s launch on the 2nd of November 1982, syndication – by which packages of shows already broadcast on one network are purchased and placed in repeat circulation on another – was common practice in the US, but no equivalent system existed in the UK, where terrestrial channels typically limited repeats to programmes that had either recently ceased or were still in production, and regular re-screenings of shows from previous decades were rare. From 1980, a movement to increase the visibility of ‘old’ TV gained momentum in the form of the Wider Television Access group or WTVA, co-founder Steven Woolley screening archive television content from Britain and the US at the Scala cinema, initially in Charlotte Street (soon to be acquired by Channel 4) before moving to Pentonville Road in Kings Cross. In 1981, several key players from WTVA, including Woolley, Christopher Wicking, Tise Vahimagi, Paul Kerr, Paul Taylor, John Wyver and Dick Fiddy, launched the magazine *Primetime*, which published articles and episode guides relating to rarely seen archive shows from both sides of the Atlantic. Several of the programmes focused upon were among those repeated by Channel 4 when the channel launched the following year.

As early as 1980, academics were highlighting the potential of repeat programming for the nascent television channel, Professor Brian Winston writing in *The Listener* of the extent to which US cable television was reliant on recycled material:

In New York there are three stations, commanding between them rather more of the city’s audience than does BBC2 nationally here, who in effect simply repeat the offerings of the big three networks. These channels – and they include the major commercial outlets for British products like *The Benny Hill Show* (1969-89) (twice every week-night) and *Edward and Mrs Simpson* (1978) – cater to the rather astonishing faith that every generation of New Yorker seems to have that yesterday’s or last year’s television is better than the current output. On this basis, those who

think CBS's *M*A*S*H* (1972-83) is a sad shadow of its former self can confirm this by watching earlier *M*A*S*H*s virtually for hour after hour, by flicking the dial. It might be the most boring suggestion but, nevertheless, a real case can be made for repeating material. The audience likes it, and it's cost-effective. It might not do much for the creative energy of independent producers, but it certainly makes a lot of sense, especially since our archive (with Hancock, T. and Garnett, A.) has at least as much to offer. (1980, p. 239)

Channel 4's repeats of UK television shows would ultimately be limited primarily to programmes originally shown on independent television, placing BBC productions *Hancock's Half Hour* (1956-60) and *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966-75) out of its reach, along with such cult programmes as *Doctor Who* (1963-89) and *Star Trek* (1966-9), the latter being licensed at the time to the Corporation, which were in great demand when viewers began writing to the new channel with programming suggestions (Madden, 2023). However, Winston's comments demonstrate a growing awareness among academics of the possibilities Channel 4 offered for revisiting the best of British television history. The extent to which the groundswell generated by WTVA and *Primetime* in fact influenced Channel 4's choice of archive repeats has yet to be investigated in any detail. In his memoir, Jeremy Isaacs provides little detail on the decision to utilise 'old' television shows, other than outlining the financial pressures that made such a choice attractive. Channel 4 was to operate at an average cost of £30,000 an hour, compared to £100,000 on other channels, and as Isaacs highlights:

...if one thought of all the channel's output as commissioned programmes, the total cost of whose production was to be covered, it was difficult to make the sums come out. But much of what we would broadcast ... would be acquired material, foraged from the bazaars of the world. And some would be repeat material, picked up at a mere fraction of its total original cost, and still likely to find new audiences (1989: 31-32).

Writing in 1989, Isaacs demonstrates an awareness that many of the then-emergent satellite channels would follow a similar pattern in terms of acquiring cheap repeat content, and justifies his decision to prioritise 'new' commissioning investment in news and current affairs, rather than entertainment: 'I would buy in entertaining programmes cheap, as there was nothing to stop my doing, and save my pennies for the fare that would make the channel's reputation ... Channel 4 could, I thought, be entertaining enough without too lavish expenditure on the canned laughs of conventional 'light entertainment' (1989: 35-36).

In light of these comments, Brown's contention that repeat programming was cheap 'tellyfilla' is perhaps understandable. However, further investigation into the reasons underpinning and the processes relating to the selection of archive materials suggests an alternate narrative – one that reveals the new channel as ready to respond to a growing demand for increased access to 'old' TV, and in the process taking tentative first steps towards meeting the increasingly voluble demands from television historians and enthusiasts (several future media practitioners and academics among them) for the medium to be accorded the same respect as film.

Repeats of 'classic' TV on 4

The content via which Isaacs saved Channel 4's pennies revolved, initially, around US sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s, all of which had previously been screened in the UK (though in most cases not for at least a decade), and home-grown product, primarily drama series of the 1960s and 1970s. Rights to US content already cleared for overseas transmission made them more economically attractive to programmers keen to fill the new channel's schedule than archive UK content for which permissions had yet to be negotiated (Madden, 2023). However, if the motivation for purchasing such shows was frugality, the promotional materials put out by Channel 4 on a weekly basis took a different tack, emphasising instead that these programmes formed part of a mission statement to revisit the best of 'classic' television.

First to be transmitted was 1960s US sitcom *The Munsters* (1964-6). Originally shown in Britain by ITV between 1965 and 1966, the ghoulish comedy was repeated at 4.45 pm on Friday afternoons from Channel 4's launch week. The press pack hailed this as 'the first of several cult series which Channel 4 is reviving in response to public demand – the shoals of beseeching letters at Charlotte St' (Channel 4, 1982a: 24). The extent to which the channel's headquarters were in fact assailed by requests for repeats from the British public is difficult to ascertain, but if true it indicates that the channel was aware from an early stage of an existing appetite for archive television. Then, at 6 pm on Mondays, 1950s sitcom *I Love Lucy* (1951-7) provided a happy link with the history of another commercially funded channel – a fact underlined in publicity material: 'Lucy was there at the start of ITV, and Channel 4 is delighted to delve back to the earliest shows of this classic comedy series that set the standards for American sitcom' (Channel 4, 1982b: 12).

A similar rhetoric is applied to the other series 'revived' (the word frequently used in press packs) on Channel 4, stressing the creative pedigrees or historic status of the shows being repeated, as when emphasising the involvement of Mel Brooks and Buck Henry in *Get Smart* (1965-70), first shown on BBC1 between 1966 and 1969, and now promoted as 'one of the wittiest of '60s American sitcoms' (Channel 4, 1983a: 23). By the time *Car 54, Where are You?* (1961-3), originally transmitted on ITV between 1964 and 1965, began its re-run in May 1983, the re-screening of 'classic' or 'hit' shows was being confidently promoted as Channel 4 'policy' (Channel 4, 1983b: 25), and now also included US dramas such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-62), initially shown on ITV between 1957 and 1960, which had begun airing in January 1983. These were soon joined by popular fantasy sitcom *Bewitched* (1964-72), originally broadcast on the BBC between 1964 and 1969 before moving to ITV in 1972, which began its lengthy repeat run on Channel 4 in July. Whatever the reasoning behind dusting off these older programmes, critical reception, at least, was favourable. On 2 May 1983, Miles Kington of *The Times* included the 'wonderful repeats and films' as being prime among the things to like about Channel 4 (along with book and pop music programmes) (Isaacs, 1989: 70).

Channel 4's archive repeats were not limited to US programming, though the majority of sitcom content derived from across the Atlantic. Deprived as he was of access to BBC comedies, Jeremy Isaacs felt that repeat options for UK shows were somewhat limited: 'Although [I] would cheerfully repeat *Man About the House* (1973-6), in the best slot I could find for it ... I never really thought ITV's best efforts in the genre were up to the BBC's in quality' (Isaacs, 1989: 166-167). *Man About the House* was indeed accorded a prime-time slot on Monday evenings on Channel 4 from 1984, despite having been repeated by ITV as recently as July 1982. While Isaacs' comment could be read as in line with his economically prudent approach to purchasing entertainment content, it also suggests a willingness – an eagerness, even – to provide a re-airing to old shows he felt to be of sufficient 'quality'. And if suitable UK situation comedies were felt to be less than abundant, the same was not true of home-grown television drama.

The first 'cult' series to be given the revival treatment by Channel 4 was *The Avengers* (1961-9). Although the show had transmogrified during its run from moody crime adventure to colourfully camp espionage parody, its most popular era, both in Britain and the US, had been the two series in which Patrick Macnee's bowler-hatted John Steed was paired with Diana Rigg as Mrs Emma Peel. Though shot on film (a comparative rarity at the time),

series four was made in black and white, so it was the colour series five that was selected to re-launch the programme from November 1982, as heralded by the press pack: 'To round off Saturday nights, Channel 4 is reviving another cult series which enthusiasts have clamoured to see again' (Channel 4, 1982b: 6). The repeats, which oscillated between various weekend timings throughout 1983, proved popular enough for series 6, in which Mrs Peel was replaced by Linda Thorson's arguably less enduring Tara King, to continue the run into 1984. Although these colour episodes had already been repeated on ITV in 1971, 1972 and 1974, Channel 4 then opted to screen the (lesser seen) black and white series four episodes in a 6 pm Tuesday slot until 1985. The fact that Channel 4 initially opted to show *The Avengers* in a late-night Saturday slot, before moving to 7.15pm on Sundays and then back to Saturdays, now at 9 pm, perhaps indicates that schedulers were unsure whether this 'old' series warranted a primetime slot, but the show's popularity on the channel ultimately sparked a mini revival of interest and merchandising, with new books on the series by Dave Rogers appearing in 1983, 1985 and 1989.

Another early drama repeat was *Upstairs Downstairs* (1971-5). Publicity material this time emphasised the programme's international reputation when the serial was launched on Channel 4 in mid-November 1982, reminding the press that the show had been 'successful not only with English audiences but with viewers around the world, not least in the USA, where the stars of the series are almost as well-known as here. Channel 4 is delighted that it can provide the opportunity for viewers to see again the complete saga of the Bellamy household upstairs – and their servants downstairs' (Channel 4, 1982c: 8).

However, it was the repeat run of *The Prisoner* (1967-8) – like *The Avengers*, a cult 1960s show – that paved the way for Channel 4's pioneering strategy as not just a reviver of old television shows, but also as curator, placing them within their historical context in a manner that went beyond the celebratory hyperbole of the press pack. The latter was, of course, quick to herald the show's classic status when the repeat run began in September 1983: 'Since it was first shown in the late 1960s, it has aroused more fanatical enthusiasm than any other series and there has been clamour for repeat screenings around the world. A few ITV regions have repeated the series late at night [in 1972 and 1974]. But now, in response to a deluge of requests from fans, Channel 4 is repeating all 17 episodes, running through into 1984' (Channel 4, 1983c: 16). However, what indicated a significant commitment on the broadcaster's part to acknowledging the cultural significance of its repeats was the commissioning of a new documentary, *Six into One: The Prisoner File*

(1984). Made by John Wyver's Illuminations company, and shown immediately after the final episode, this production featured all-new interview footage with series actor and creator, Patrick McGoohan, who discussed this most-talked-about piece of television history on screen for the first time.

It is worth pausing at this point to consider the impact that Channel 4's 'revived' shows were making in terms of viewership. Although, in its launch week, the channel's top ten shows comprised entirely new content (BARB, 1982a: 18), by the week ending 14th November *Upstairs Downstairs* was sharing the number six spot with film *Sitting Ducks* (1978) at 1.75 million viewers (BARB, 1982b: 24). It continued to climb up the charts, eventually reaching peak position by the end of December with 2.15 million viewers (BARB, 1983a: 22). En route, it was joined by *The Munsters*, debuting at the number seven position with 1.35 million viewers in the week ending 21st November (BARB, 1982c: 20), and in January by *The Avengers*, entering at number three position with an audience of 2.05 million (and temporarily overtaking *Upstairs Downstairs*) in the week ending 9th January 1983 (BARB, 1983b: 22). The fact that 'old' TV was successfully competing with more up-to-date offerings – at least on Channel 4 – demonstrates that the faith required for the commissioning of new, complementary content was warranted. Although repeats fell out of the top ten in the summer months of 1983, *The Prisoner* debuted at number nine with 1.25 million viewers in the week ending 25th September 1983, by which time *Bewitched* was ranking sixth (BARB, 1983c: 19). By the start of 1984 *The Avengers'* new, stable Saturday evening slot saw the less acclaimed sixth series move to the number six slot with 2.1 million viewers (BARB, 1984: 19).

Although *Six into One* failed to reach Channel 4's top ten (BARB, 1984: 19) – perhaps due to its comparatively late 11 pm slot – the commissioning of new content to complement a repeat season indicates a level of financial investment by the channel that goes beyond the simple expediency of buying 'cheap' filler. The production of *Six into One*, alongside other new content made to contextualise Channel 4's themed 'archive nights', indicates a desire to do more than simply show 'old' programmes in between the 'new' factual and current affairs. But to what extent was this influenced by public demand, and/or the specialist interests of groups like WTVA?

According to *Primetime* luminary and later BFI TV Curator Dick Fiddy, there was a direct link:

It absolutely wasn't a coincidence. I wasn't involved in that conversation – I forget who was – but [Channel 4] definitely came to people and just asked for advice, and in the end I think we gave them a list of fifty programmes, and I think they took about thirty-eight of those on board. And we had *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*, we had *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner*, and all the ITC stuff. We did *Armchair Theatre* (1956-74), and stuff like that, *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64). We gave them a list of what we thought would be interesting, so there was definitely a connection that way (2022).

Fiddy is of course speaking at a remove of some decades, but it is notable that several of the shows he names were later repeated on Channel 4. US anthology series *The Twilight Zone*, first shown by ITV in 1963 and 1964, became a stalwart of the late-night schedules from December 1985. Due to the cost of obtaining rights permissions, ABC's *Armchair Theatre* had a shorter repeat run in 1987, though this arose out of discussions with former series producer Sydney Newman, rather than as a response to a 'shopping list' of requests (Madden, 2023). The repeat season was launched with another new documentary, *And Now for Your Sunday Night Dramatic Entertainment...* (1987), directed by Laurens C. Postma and featuring behind-the-scenes recollections from such *Armchair Theatre* luminaries as Newman and actor Billie Whitelaw.

Nevertheless, in their October/November 1983 issue the editorial board of *Primetime* were quick to make a connection between several of the shows screened at the Scala by WTVA that were now receiving a second lease of life on Channel 4, including *The Avengers*, *I Love Lucy*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Prisoner*:

We don't point this out to blow our own trumpets (well, just a toot or two...) – and anyway there may be a degree of coincidence or serendipity in the air – but to congratulate the various TV companies in question for recognising television's heritage and history at long last; one of the causes which WTVA was formed to promote. There is much still to do, of course – and, in conjunction with TV companies and programmers, WTVA will continue to fight the good fight. (Wicking and Douch, 1983)

Whatever the incentive behind the selection of repeat material at Channel 4, it is clear that the choices made by Cecil Korner of Programme Acquisitions (Isaacs, 1989: 42) were finding

favour. However, Channel 4's delving into the televisual archives was not limited to the bulk purchase of 'old' TV.

Archive nights on 4

In addition to series repeats, Channel 4 soon became known for its Christmas and New Year 'archive nights', which were curated between 1982 and 1988 by Paul Madden, formerly Television Officer at the National Film Archive. It was also Madden who was responsible for commissioning new archive-related content for Channel 4, including *Six into One*. While at the BFI, Madden had scheduled a 1976 NFT season on *British Television Drama*, later followed by a 1980 Dennis Potter retrospective, and he was also involved in the founding of the Edinburgh Television Festival:

I was involved from '76/'77 onwards, and I remember one year – which I think was '79 – my partner and I, Mairede Thomas ... put together two compilations, one called *1959* and one called *1969*. What annoyed me about when people used clips in modern television programmes [was] they never allowed them to breathe; they used them to make points, but in a way it was a bit of wallpaper. And what we wanted to do with these compilations was to give them a proper weight, which of course we had the luxury to do, because we were showing it at a television festival. And I do remember Jeremy [Isaacs] coming out of the screening of, I think, the *1959* one and saying to me, 'That was brilliant! Love it.' (Madden, 2022)

Described by Isaacs as 'an informed enthusiast with an independent mind' (Isaacs, 1989: 43), Madden was subsequently invited to advise on the use of archive programmes at the new channel:

I was involved in the debates about Channel 4 ... My association with screening stuff, showing stuff, rescuing stuff from the archives, trying to find stuff that people said didn't exist any more, and getting hold of it ... I was obviously well known for in that period. So, when Jeremy got to Channel 4 ... he rang me up and said, 'I want you to come over and see me' ... One of the first meetings we had with the Board, very early on – which I think was in '81 – we all gave papers to say what we might and might not do. I remember giving a speech about archive programmes, and what we could do, and ... one of the things I intended to do was, yes, we would pull stuff out of the

archives, and yes, we would show it, but we'd also have some way of re-evaluating stuff. (Madden, 2022)

Madden's 'archive evenings' commenced in December 1982 with *Fifties to the Fore*, which recreated for modern viewers the experience of watching an evening's television from decades before, programming a mix of comedy, drama, light entertainment and factual television that combined *The Arthur Haynes Show* (1956-66), *Dragnet* (1951-9; 1967-70), *Oh Boy* (1958-9), *The Larkins* (1958-60; 1963-4), *Armchair Theatre* and current affairs compilation *Fifty Paces* (1982): 'What those things do, of course, is they give you the excuse – if that's what you need – to show a variety of programmes. On all of those evenings, I tried to balance them, i.e. you'd have a comedy, you'd have a drama, you'd have a bit of documentary They weren't all one sort of programme' (Madden, 2022).

As the decade progressed, the archive evenings became increasingly specialised, and particular channels or creatives began to be focused on. Granada and ATV each received their own events, the former concluding with a special compilation produced by Leslie Woodhead, and the latter augmented with a new documentary, *Just a Song and Dance Story* (1987), about industry mogul Lew Grade. Sometimes the themes for these evenings would originate with Madden, while for others he would source and commission content based on suggestions from colleagues (Madden, 2022).

Madden's last archive project for 4 was in December 1988, by which time Michael Grade had taken over as Chief Executive. *The Cotton Collection*, celebrating the career of recently retired BBC Managing Director Bill Cotton, was the first time the channel delved into the Corporation's archives. According to Madden, the idea for this tribute originated with Grade who, having appeared in the Lew Grade documentary the previous year, now envisioned something similar for his former BBC boss. Once again, Madden selected shows based on Grade's initial suggestion (Madden, 2022). This precedent of Channel 4 repeating BBC programmes on Channel 4 to commemorate a particular creative was soon repeated when, in 1990, the *Film 4 Today* season assembled works that had been produced by outgoing commissioning editor David Rose while Head of English Regions at BBC Pebble Mill, including several *Play for Today* entries: David Hare's *Licking Hitler* (1978), Mike Leigh's *Nuts in May* (1976) and Alan Clarke's *Penda's Fen* (1974) (Andrews, 2014: 60-1).

Although originally employed to advise on archive content, Madden soon found himself taking on additional responsibilities, including single documentaries and animation.

By the time he stopped working on the archive evenings, Madden had set up his own production company, Red House, later renamed Screen First: ‘From my point of view, I was sort of half in and half out of Channel 4 in that period, and I didn’t want to do that any more, I wanted to be completely independent. I wanted to be able to pitch other stuff to them, and I couldn’t really pitch stuff to them that might conflict with me doing this other role’ (2022). For Madden, the impulse behind the archive evenings was ‘basically to show people things that they might remember and [that they] valued at the time ... With all those things there’s always the nostalgia value; there’s always the value of looking to see whether it was as good or bad as you always thought they were’ (2022).

The next archive event, broadcast on New Year’s Day 1990, provided a marked departure in terms of revisiting ‘old’ television. *The A-Z of TV*, a three-hour compilation of archive clips, each presented in newly recorded links from a different television personality, was produced by Linda Zuck for Illuminations, from whom Madden had commissioned *Six into One*. Zuck, writer and archival consultant Dick Fiddy and executive producer John Wyver were keen to distinguish their production from what had gone before, as the latter explains: ‘I think we thought that there was an approach that could be both more entertaining and more, sort of, culturally responsible, I guess, and that’s why we put *The A-Z of TV* together’ (2022).

The A-Z of TV moved determinedly away from Madden’s concept of screening complete episodes, as Dick Fiddy explains:

I suggested the idea of *The A-Z of TV – The A to Zee of TV* (if you’re American, it works a lot better) - in which way you can pick and choose. So, A would be for *The Avengers*, B maybe for *Batman*, C for *Callan* – that sort of stuff. And John, I remember, came up with the idea, he said, ‘It shouldn’t be linear’ So, our A to Z allowed us to go anywhere. A was for Alexandra Palace, you know, and Y was for Yeti, so we could look at strange phenomenon on screen. So, we used the idea of the A to Z to actually give us carte blanche to tell any story. And then we had the very ambitious idea of getting each of the letters introduced by a different personality. So we wrote to Equity and got an Equity waiver; we paid everyone the same price, so everyone got £150 or £100 - I can’t remember exactly how much. Because otherwise, if we were going to pay the going prices we could never afford to make something that ambitious. (2022)

Linda Zuck was also enthused by the originality of the approach, and the consideration it provided of aspects of television not covered in previous archive evenings:

We had a lot of old ads as well, I remember ... and we also found some hilarious BBC education programmes, schools programmes from the 1950s. I remember there was one called *I Want to Be a Dentist* ... So we juxtaposed archive from different sources in surprising ways ... I think the crucial thing was, we were the first people to go to Channel 4 and say, 'We want to put these clips together playfully and make unusual connections,' and I don't think anyone had done that before. (2022)

Dick Fiddy concurs:

We didn't just concentrate on one thing. We wanted to give this broad overall picture: the sprawling mass that television was. That it wasn't like film, which can be very compartmentalised. Television by its very nature throws all these things together, one after another. If you look at an evening's viewing from the '60s or '70s, you get drama followed by high comedy, followed by a documentary, followed by a medical programme ... So, we wanted, within that, to explore the great range of TV, and what it could do. (2022)

Twenty-six thematic sections were presented by personalities including Beryl Reid, Rodney Bewes, Katie Boyle, Michael Hordern, Joan Bakewell, Raymond Baxter, George Melly, Shaw Taylor, Johnny Morris Lady Penelope from *Thunderbirds* (1965-66), and even the Cadbury's Smash Martian robots, and encompassed such areas as 'Derring Do' (i.e. the swashbuckling ITC series of the 1950s), 'Gourmets' (television chefs) and 'Polling Day' (coverage of local elections) (Channel 4, 1989:73-4). Such was the programme's success that Channel 4 commissioned a follow-up, 1991's *1,001 Nights of TV*, an equally popular compilation, leading Channel 4 to commission a third trawl through the archives from Illuminations. However, though arguably more extensive than anything thus far attempted, 1992's *TV Heaven* marked a move back to curated evenings, rather than clip compilations. Over thirteen weeks, a different year would be examined each Saturday evening, programmed in a non-chronological trawl of both complete episodes and surrounding ephemera such as advertisements, all hosted by writer and raconteur Frank Muir. The dates covered were, in order of transmission, 1967, 1963, 1974, 1965, 1971, 1978, 1970, 1960, 1969, 1976, the 1950s, 1966 and 1968, and while some re-use was made of shows included in

previous Channel 4 repeats or Madden's themed nights (e.g. *Oh Boy!*, *George and the Dragon* (1966-8) and *The Prisoner*), several of the items included had not been seen since their original broadcast, such as Elsie Tanner's wedding on *Coronation Street* (1960-).

According to the Illuminations team, this change of format originated with Channel 4, and in particular Chief Executive Michael Grade:

[Michael Grade] approached us with the idea of a run of big Saturday archive evenings across thirteen weeks. He wanted his chum Frank Muir across it, and I thought that was a slightly odd choice, because at the time Frank Muir – who was, by the way, a very, very charming man, one of the nicest presenters I've ever worked with – wasn't a kind of cool figure. But he did it very well. So we put that all together, and we used clips in between the full programmes ... We looked into the years, and some years were a bit fallow, and so we thought, 'We'll just make sure we choose the best years across the thirteen.' And we thought we'd mix it up a bit - there was no reason to do it chronologically – to keep it surprising. (Zuck, 2022)

According to John Wyver, the selection of years focused upon was also partly a result of no longer being granted access to full-length BBC content:

First of all, we went to the BBC and said, 'Can we acquire some of your programmes for this project?', and as I remember it, Alan Yentob said, 'No, absolutely not. If anybody's going to do this, we the BBC are going to do this. We will not licence any BBC programmes to Channel 4' ... So, we knew we could only work with the ITV archives, and I think we started to make a list of the things that we really wanted to show that we knew existed and which we could access and licence, and then we built the years around that. I'm sure it came from finding key programmes that we wanted to work with and then making the choice of the years from those. (2022)

Ten years on from Channel 4's launch, the non-BBC fare that made up *TV Heaven* did not perform quite as well as earlier repeats in terms of competing with new content, though viewing figures tended to be comparable or higher – an indication of the increased audience share that the channel had by now built up. Some years proved more popular than others, with three programmes apiece from 1971 (BARB, 1992a: 23), the 1950s (BARB, 1992c: 19) and 1966 (BARB, 1992d: 23) making the top thirty, while four of the shows selected for the closing night of 1968 also ranked (BARB, 1992e: 21). The only individual show to reach the top ten was the opening episode of *Randall and Hopkirk Deceased* (1969-70), 'My Late

Lamented Friend and Partner’, which was watched by 3.56 million viewers as part of the 1969 evening (BARB, 1992b: 21).

As mentioned earlier, the cost of acquiring permissions compromised several of the planned elements in Madden’s archive evenings, and according to Dick Fiddy also put paid to a further series of *TV Heaven*: ‘Sometimes we couldn’t get something, because one of the actors were holding out, or something like that, and Michael Grade would phone them up and say, ‘OK, how much do you want?’ and then pay it, and so it pushed the budget up ... There was a huge appetite, I think, to do more, but when the facts and figures came in, I think Channel 4 baulked at it. It was just too expensive’ (2022).

Linda Zuck, however, remembers being approached by Channel 4 for further archive-related productions:

I’m pretty sure I remember John and I going into a meeting with [Mike Bolland, commissioning editor at Channel 4] and he said, ‘Do you think there’s any more mileage in us doing more archive nights?’ And I think because we’d done those three, I seem to remember we both said, ‘No, I think people are up to here with nostalgia for archive TV now; I think it’s been done to death.’ And he said, ‘I’ve got a hunch, maybe it would still work,’ and we were, like, ‘Nah, I don’t think so’ [laughter].

Then, maybe a year or so later, that’s when all those BBC clip shows started. (2022)

Zuck’s comments indicate an awareness that the work conducted by Illuminations and earlier by Madden had paved the way for a new appreciation of ‘old’ TV in the UK broadcast environment – a fact the BBC were not slow to act upon.

Impact and legacy

While Channel 4 was pioneering new approaches to the archive throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the BBC had also demonstrated a growing awareness of the benefits of revisiting its archives. The 1981 repeat season *The Five Faces of Doctor Who* was designed to bridge the gap between departing lead actor Tom Baker and the full debut of new arrival Peter Davison the following year, and made rare (for the time) use of monochrome material with 1960s stories ‘An Unearthly Child’ and ‘The Krotons’. Then, in 1986, *TV50* provided a week of archive television on BBC2 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the medium, combining children’s programming, drama, comedy, documentary and current affairs. The Corporation was also quick to spoof *TV Heaven* with the one-off *TV Hell* (1992) evening, but

later in the decade BBC2 began revisiting the archive in a more serious manner via their own themed Saturday evenings, *Doctor Who Night* (1999) and *I Love Blue Peter* (2001) providing reappraisal and re-contextualisation of much-loved shows via the commissioning of new documentary segments alongside repeat material. For Linda Zuck, these BBC archive evenings represented imitation as a form of flattery:

We were massively copied, of course, because the BBC obviously thought, ‘Hang on, we own most of this archive, why aren’t we getting in on this act?’ Because it was very, very popular; it was hugely popular. People loved watching this stuff, because it wasn’t readily available. Everybody remembered it from their childhood, you know - just the signature tunes. That would get everybody going, wouldn’t it? It would tingle the hairs on the back of your neck because you’d grown up with that stuff. They massively copied us, which was a bit irritating, but I suppose it’s inevitable. You have to take it as a compliment. (2022)

Illuminations colleague Dick Fiddy agrees:

We’d demonstrated that, if you looked at this stuff in a different way, if you went in through a different window, that you could use that footage to tell different stories, and it wasn’t just reiterating the same four or five very popular programmes. It was a deep archive trawl. And I think the Beeb did a good job, as well. A lot of their archive shows that came out were really clever, and they started to take it seriously (2022).

Like Fiddy, John Wyver is pleased that the BBC later built upon the work Illuminations began at Channel 4: ‘Michael Jackson, when he went to the BBC [as producer, before later becoming Chief Executive at Channel 4], picked up some of those ideas and saw that it was a good thing to exploit and develop. *TV Hell* was an initiative of Michael’s, and there’s no question that what we had done contributed to some of what the BBC then did. So, I’m pleased about that’ (2022).

Conclusion

This article has aimed to challenge some of the preconceptions surrounding the use of archive television repeats in the first decade of Channel 4’s existence. While the US sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s that predominated in the late afternoon slot were rights-free and cheaply available, the fact that Channel 4 approached WTVA and *Primetime* for a ‘shopping list’ of the most desired television shows of yesteryear – not to mention press pack rhetoric of

bulging postal bagfuls of viewer requests – demonstrates both an awareness of the growing desire to review ‘old’ television and a willingness to satisfy it.

The commissioning of new content designed to place archival shows in context, whether in the form of the documentaries that complemented Paul Madden’s archive nights in the 1980s, or the painstakingly researched compilations put together by Illuminations in the early 1990s, demonstrates a response to the rapidly developing feeling that television is a medium that needs to take itself seriously – and to be taken seriously by viewers and critics. Channel 4’s early commitment to the revisiting of archive content helped define its image as a broadcaster that valued the medium of television for itself. From the perspective of an era in which digital channels built around repeat programming have become an industry standard, Channel 4 proved a standard bearer for improved access to and recontextualisation of archival content, developing trends and approaches that were swiftly imitated by its competitors.

Although we live in an age of much-improved access to archive television, those who helped inspire this move at Channel 4 believe there is further work to be done. While Television Officer at the BFI in the 1970s, Paul Madden was often frustrated by the fact that television content was not only inaccessible, but often not even preserved:

My view was that it seems crazy that people were paying good money to make some really excellent programmes that no-one could see again. I can turn on the radio and hear a song that was made thirty, forty years ago, but I can’t turn on the television and see a programme that was made five years ago, or two years ago, or ten years ago. And I said, ‘I’m looking forward to the day when people can just see the vast heritage that we’ve got of programmes.’ And I wouldn’t put it down to what we did [at Channel 4], but what I would say is that we were part of what would become a trend towards making things more available. And part of that is technology, obviously, because now we’ve got multiple channels; now we’ve got the internet. All these things have helped make things more available. What it hasn’t done, in my view, and has never really been properly done, there’s never been a proper way of re-evaluating television; programmes that actually look at stuff and look at the way that television dealt with things ... I always thought we need to look more seriously at the way television operates – the way it works, its aesthetics – all of those things. These are not necessarily popular things – they’re not going to get huge audiences, or anything – but they’re a way of re-evaluating the past, which is all of our history. (2022)

John Wyver concurs:

I think we contributed in a not insignificant way to bringing archive programming into the schedules in a way that was both responsible and economically productive for the medium. We didn't invent that – there had been modest initiatives – but I do think that we contributed significantly to that becoming a core part of what British television did ... And clearly we've come a long, long way; there is so much more access to that archival history now than there was before; so much more awareness, so much more writing and historical engagement. We're still a long way from an optimal engagement and exposure of the television archive there's still a lot more that could be done imaginatively, and in ways that make that culture live and be relevant again. (2022)

While these comments indicate that there much remains to be done with regard to making full use of the television archive, what is clear is the extent to which the archive-focused activities of Channel 4 under Jeremy Isaacs and later Michael Grade helped pave the way to increased access to – and understanding and appreciation of – 'old' television as a cultural and historical artefact.

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