



CHANNEL 4: 40 YEARS OF REVOLUTION

Controversy

These screenings will be introduced by John Ranelagh and Rod Stoneman

Jesus: The Evidence (1984)

In 1983 London Weekend Television proposed and I commissioned a three-part documentary series about the historic and archaeological evidence for Jesus. Jane Hewland was Executive Producer, Julian Norridge was Series Producer, David Rolfe directed and produced, Jean-Claude Bragard was the researcher, and Jeremy Kemp narrated. Ian Wilson contributed and wrote a book to accompany the series.

The series was one of Channel 4's first major religious programme commissions. A range of distinguished scholars were interviewed and, at times, also presented their findings. Filming took place in the Middle East, Britain, Italy and the United States. The Council of Nicea was dramatised. It was a big budget production. Simultaneously, another major Channel 4 religious series, *The First Christian*, was in production. We were serious investors in an alternative approach to religious broadcasting.

The intention of *Jesus: The Evidence* was to examine facts without the colouring of faith. Some of the examinations were of outré stories that annoyed and upset some people. But the principal cause of upset was a recurrent graphic of a statue of Jesus exploding whenever a failed fact was exposed. This caused great offence to many people. While viewing the fine cut of the series I had asked about blank spaces and was told they were where a graphic was to be placed, but the producers did not describe the graphic and did not show it to me before broadcast. Assuming I could trust the good sense of an established broadcaster, it did not occur to me that something so silly, vulgar and offensive was intended. Thus hard lessons are learned. In response to remonstrations, the graphic was dropped from the final episode of the series.

The series also proved to be a test of the status and authority of the voluntary Central Religious Advisory Committee that had been generally accepted as an adjudicator of religious broadcasting. The Committee was revealed as dependent upon the broadcasting regulator and I think it is fair to say that *Jesus: The Evidence* marked a decline in broadcasters' direct relationships with the principal Christian Churches.

Together with the LWT producers, I was summoned to an ad hoc Parliamentary Committee where it fell to me as the representative of the broadcaster to defend the series. The upshot was, as far as I was aware, that the series became the only religious programme ever banned by the regulator from being broadcast again.

John Ranelagh

V Versus Tony Harrison: V (1987)

Tony Harrison (b. 1937) page, stage and screen: 'It's all one poetry'
Motto of 'V': 'My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words.' – Arthur Scargill, *Sunday Times*, 10 January 1982

'V' describes the author's visit to his parents' grave in a Leeds cemetery 'now littered with beer cans and vandalised by obscene graffiti'. The cemetery in question is Holbeck Cemetery in the Beeston area of Leeds which overlooks the

Elland Road football ground, close to where Harrison grew up. The poem aroused much controversy when broadcast in film version on Channel 4 due to its extensive use of profanity and racial epithets. The poem uses profanity directly as well as when quoting graffiti.

WR Mysteries of the Organism (Dusan Makavejev, Yugoslavia, 1971)

Derek Hill had bought Dusan Makavejev's film before Channel 4 went on air, and this masterpiece of montage had lain unseen in the basement of Channel 4 as it was assumed to be untransmittable. John Willis's 'Banned' season in the Spring of 1991 was the perfect basis for its screening it but it was clear that there would be a problem with several of the sequences featuring tumescent male genitals. The film's radical juxtaposition of documentary, fiction and archive to articulate the ideas of Wilhelm Reich had constituted a brilliant and iconic film, but this would not exempt it from the constraints of British broadcasting.

The Independent Film and Video Department had a principle that we would not cut or alter a programme without the filmmaker's agreement and when we did we always tried to make the effacement – censorship – evident. When 'offensive' material was covered with a black box within the screen one assumed that the audience could work out what it was that they were not seeing.

The opening sequence of *WR* includes a 1930's Sexpol newsreel with material from the 1930s (actually faked – it was shot on video in Woodstock in 1969). When I suggested that we would have to place a black rectangle over part of the image, Makavejev proposed a more creative solution with a matte of gently undulating goldfish for the opening and covering a later sequence (shot in New York with the editor of *Screw*, as Nancy Godfrey of the infamous Plaster Casters records Jim Buckley's erect penis) with a psychedelic whorl.

Rod Stoneman

Mother Ireland – a story of censorship

When I was working in Channel 4 television I commissioned *Mother Ireland*, a television documentary directed by Anne Crilly, a member of the Derry Film and Video Workshop, one of a network of collectively run, regionally-based film groups funded by the Independent Film and Video Department early in the 1980s. The Workshop was in the nationalist Bogside in Derry, implicitly a political location. I drove Jeremy Isaacs, the station's Chief Executive, there from Belfast airport one day in 1985 to meet the group; there was no question of being less than open about their provenance and politics.

By 1988, two years of detailed research had led the Derry Workshop to make a stimulating and well-fashioned creative documentary. *Mother Ireland* allowed a dialectical argument to emerge between feminism and republicanism in Ireland. By the end it was clear where its heart lay as the programme committed itself to prioritising the national before the gender politique. Controversies surrounded almost anything touching on republican politics which entered the public domain in Britain at that time, as the armed insurrection was creating a sustained challenge to the state; the programme's makers correctly anticipated that *Mother Ireland* might pose problems for British television and a complicated process of negotiation to get it on air was inevitable. But an unexpected and dramatic transformation in the film's fortune occurred because, on 2 March 1988, within days of the delivery of the completed programme, Mairéad Farrell, one of 11 people interviewed in it, was shot dead by the British Special Air Service in Gibraltar. [...]

A number of changes to the finished documentary were finally agreed with Liz Forgan, the Director of Programmes at Channel 4, arguably minor in terms of the

programme's overall line of reasoning, but designed to tone down some of the sharper and more noticeable edges of radical contention. For instance, a short sequence of three images of masked, armed women in the Provisional IRA was softened by replacing some of the photographs. Original black and white video footage of Emma Groves (blinded after being shot with a rubber bullet at point blank range for playing a record of republican songs as a patrol passed her home in Lenadoon, West Belfast in 1971) was excised and Christy Moore's song 'The Unfinished Revolution' was cut from the closing credits. A militaristic poster on the wall behind Mairéad Farrell's interview was removed by enlarging the image electronically. After these changes were made, although no specific date was set, it was agreed in principle that the programme would be transmitted. Despite these alterations, negotiated with the Workshop's agreement, the programme found itself the focus of attention at higher levels in the television station.

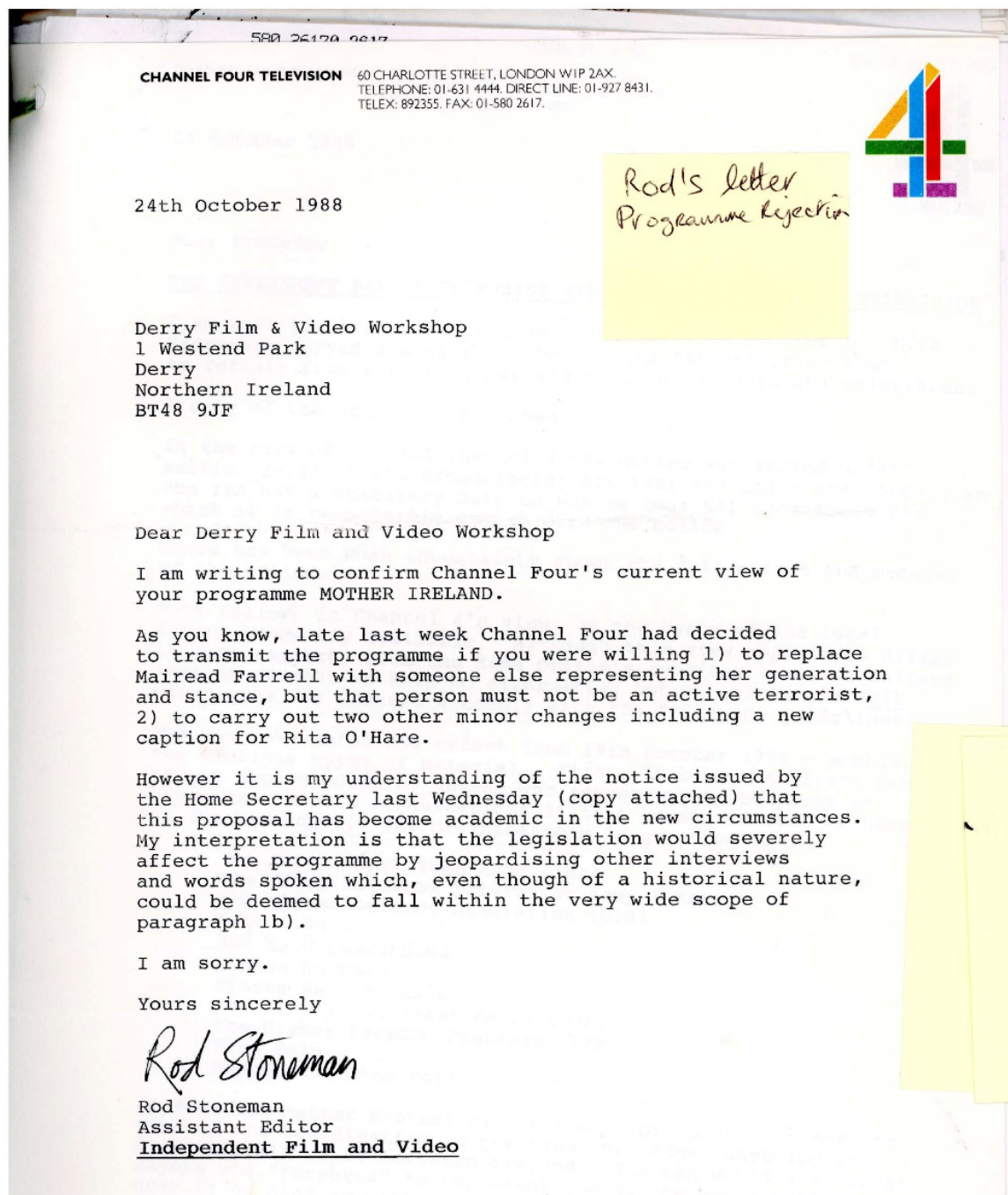
In an unprecedented decision, the Chief Executive, Michael Grade, felt that it should be shown to the Channel 4 board because aspects of an insightful programme that were in the 'public interest' outweighed an undoubted 'public offence' that would be caused by its transmission; any programme on Northern Ireland filled the duty log with the airing of opinion by angry viewers. [...]

Apparently, some board members felt that *Mother Ireland* should be transmitted because it constituted precisely the 'limit case' of a democracy that is able to listen to those who oppose it forcefully and, in fact, with political violence. For others, including the deputy chair of the board, it clearly risked giving credibility to 'an avowed enemy' and potentially, for him at least, constituted a matter for resignation. Michael Grade, who had initially and cautiously supported the showing of the programme, clearly did not feel it was worth a public row on the Channel 4 board and began to back off. Underneath the moral expressions given to such emotional reactions may be discerned a fierce, defensive response to an insurrectionary challenge to the British state. An unpredictable compromise emerged; Channel 4 proposed to the Derry Workshop that they should hypothetically turn the clock back, replace that one interview which had been filmed unwittingly, with another 'equivalent' political activist who could be a member of Sinn Féin, but not of the IRA. Douglas Hurd, Britain's Home Secretary, had recently introduced an extension to existing legislation, a censorship Notice that enforced the ludicrous dubbing of members of proscribed groups (including the legal political party Sinn Féin), so the voice would have to be substituted. Not surprisingly, the Workshop refused to comply and the programme then sat on the shelf, untransmitted. The television station rather forgot the controversy, while the Workshop distributed the uncut programme around the world by videocassette.

Three years later Channel 4 was planning a season about censorship to be called 'Banned'. I noticed that this included a Canadian programme called *Death of a Terrorist*, substantially using the interviews with Mairéad Farrell recorded by the Derry Workshop for *Mother Ireland*. It seemed ironic, even hypocritical, for the Channel to import and pay for this foreign programme as an example of the limits of television censorship while it had forgotten the untransmitted original documentary in its own vaults. I suggested the substitution of our programme to John Willis, the Head of the Factual Department; the Derry film was a much more complex and well-made piece and it would have been ridiculous to buy a new programme while one we had rights to show sat unseen in the basement. The board's previous stipulation of substitution was quietly dropped, although under the new broadcasting legislation Mairéad Farrell's voice had to be partially dubbed by an actor, although her image remained intact. Shown on 11 April 1991, it was watched by over a quarter of a million people. As usual in such cases, there was little public response and nothing dramatic happened. The broadcast could even be described as something of an anticlimax; television's boundary keepers, in

their diligent expertise, generally over-anticipate the dangers of showing 'controversial' programmes.

Extracted from: Rod Stoneman, *Seeing Is Believing: The Politics of the Visual* (London: Black Dog, 2013)



John Ranelagh began his television career as a Researcher on BBC TV's *Midweek* and was Associate Producer of *Ireland: A Television History*. He joined Channel 4 with Jeremy Isaacs and was Special Assistant to the Chief Executive, Secretary of the Board, and a Commissioning Editor. He developed the commissioning system, created the *Equinox* strand, and was responsible for *Jesus: The Evidence*. He was the first television professional appointed to the Independent Television Commission.

Rod Stoneman is the Director of the Huston School of Film & Digital Media at the National University of Ireland, Galway. He was Chief Executive of Bord Scannán na hÉireann / the Irish Film Board until September 2003 and previously a Deputy Commissioning Editor in the Independent Film and Video Department at Channel 4 Television in the United Kingdom. He has made a number of documentaries, including *Ireland: The Silent Voices*, *Italy: the Image Business*, *12,000 Years of Blindness and The Spindle*, and has written extensively on film and television. He is the author of *Seeing Is Believing: The Politics of the Image*; *Chávez: The Revolution Will Not Be Televised; A Case Study of Politics and the Media* and the co-editor of *'The Quiet Man'... and Beyond: Reflections on a Classic Film, John Ford and Ireland* (with Seán Crosson) and *Scottish Cinema Now* (with Jonathan Murray and Fidelma Farley).

JESUS: THE EVIDENCE

Director: David W. Rolfe
Production Company: LWT
For: Channel Four
Executive Producer: Jane Hewland
Producer: David W. Rolfe
Series Producer: Julian Norridge
Researcher: Jean-Claude Bragard
Narrator: Jeremy Kemp
C4 tx 8.4.1984
51 mins

V

Director: Richard Eyre
Production Company: LWT
Producer: Sue Birtwistle
Script: Tony Harrison
Camera Operator: Roger Pratt
Voice: Tony Harrison
C4 tx 4.11.1987
10 mins

MOTHER IRELAND

Director: Anne Crilly
Production Company: Derry Film & Video Collective
Producers: Anne Crilly, Stephanie English, Jim Curran, Margo Harkin, Tomas Maccoilean, Geraldine McGuinness, Brendan McMenamin
Script: Anne Crilly
Engineer: Brian McAvoy
Editing Consultant: Annie Goldson
Editor: Mike Shirra
'Ireland, Mother Ireland': Larkin
'Four Green Fields': Maura Stackie
'Coast River': Donal Lunny
'What a Wonderful World': Helen Brady
'Give an Irish Girl to Me': Eamonn Toland, Malcolm Wray
With:
Mairéad Farrell
Pat Murphy
Bernadette Devlin
Nell McCafferty
C4 tx 11.4.1991
51 mins

CHANNEL 4: 40 YEARS OF REVOLUTION**Music & Youth: The Tube + Discussion & Q&A**

Fri 2 Sep 18:20

Comedy: Discussion & Q&A**+ The Comic Strip Presents: Five Go Mad in Dorset**

Tue 6 Sep 18:15

Channel 4's TV Drama Revolution: Discussion + Q&A

Sun 11 Sep 14:15

A Very British Coup + intro by author Chris Mullin

Sun 11 Sep 16:30

Diversity: Handsworth Songs + Q&A with John Akomfrah + Panel Discussion & Q&A

Mon 12 Sep 18:15

Out and Proud: Veronica 4 Rose**+ Out on Tuesday + intro by original****Channel 4 Commissioner Caroline Spry**

Thu 15 Sep 18:15

Access / Direct Speech: The Work They Say Is Mine**+ Women of the Rhondda + Face of Our Fear**

Tue 20 Sep 18:15

Channel 4: The Television Revolution

Fri 23 Sep 18:20

Controversy: Jesus the Evidence + V + Mother Ireland

Sat 24 Sep 18:00

Who Needs Channel 4?

Wed 28 Sep 18:20

Channel 4 Then and Now conference

Fri 23 Sep 10:00–17:00 and Sat 24 Sep 10:00–17:00

Regional screenings and events will be taking place at these venues across the UK (please go to [bfi.org.uk/whatson](https://www.bfi.org.uk/whatson) for links): Arnolfini, Bristol; Filmhouse Edinburgh; Queen's Film Theatre, Belfast; Y Drwm, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

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