

Cable for Film Geeks

The Z Channel is keeping the IFC edgy

By Sarah J. Coleman

Imagine a cable television channel that serves your every need as a lover of independent film. When you want to see the best contemporary foreign movies, they're right there for you, along with eclectic and provocative fare from all over North America. This is a place where forgotten masterpieces are restored, directors' cuts prevail, and Jacqueline Bisset gets her very own festival. Or perhaps you're in the mood for a blockbuster? That's there, too. And as a subscriber, you get a programming guide filled with commentary by some of the sharpest film critics around.

If that sounds too good to be true, it probably is—these days anyway. But from 1974 to 1989, the Z Channel in Los Angeles was all of the above. Perhaps the ultimate film geek's cable channel of all time, Z offered its subscribers programming that ran the gamut from the far fringes of obscurity to the heart of Hollywood. On any given night, viewers might tune in to find films by Luis

Buñuel, Henry Jaglom, Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Altman, or George Lucas. Movies with tarnished reputations, like Michael Cimino's epic *Heaven's Gate* got a new life when they were shown on Z as directors' cuts. In its 15 years, Z Channel inspired what was almost a cult following (no subscriptions were ever canceled)—that is, until its troubled head programmer Jerry Harvey killed his wife and committed suicide, hastening the channel's end.

The documentary *Z Channel: A Magnificent Obsession*, airing on IFC May 9, explores the crazy brilliance of Z Channel and traces the tragic arc of Harvey's life. Written and directed by Xan Cassavetes (daughter of John), the documentary illuminates a pivotal era in the history of independent films—a time when audiences had a thirst for movies from all over the globe, when directors like Nicolas Roeg and Henry Jaglom found that even if they couldn't get a major distribution deal, they could find

an audience on Z.

Z Channel was “an unpretentious, eclectic, beautiful view of all kinds of film. It wasn't elitist, it was for the people,” says Cassavetes, who has fond memories of watching the channel as a teenager, after being grounded by her father for sneaking out to punk rock clubs. The punishment didn't seem too harsh when she got to discover directors like Kurosawa and Buñuel, or watch an edgy movie like Roeg's *Bad Timing* in the comfort of her own home. “Kids were able to see a movie like *Bad Timing*, [and get a] serious glimpse into the lives of adults,” she says. “These days it's so hard even to find a movie with adult themes for adults, let alone for kids to sneak into.”

Along with the documentary, IFC viewers will also get a chance to see some of the films that had their destinies altered when they were shown on Z. Immediately after the documentary screens, IFC will be showing Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986), whose star,



Heaven's Gate was panned by critics before its Z Channel showing (United Artists)



The IFC will show Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986) as part of their Z Channel tribute

James Woods, credits his Academy Award nomination and subsequent career to the film's exposure on Z. Then, on May 14 and 15, a whole weekend will be devoted to classic films whose destiny was influenced somehow by the Z Channel. Chief among these is *Heaven's Gate*, a western that went massively over-budget and was initially panned by critics as being un-American and a general mess. When Harvey found a single print of the director's cut languishing in a London warehouse and showed it on Z, critics reappraised the film positively. The director's cut now prevails on video.

All of this programming seems particularly fitting for IFC, Executive Vice President Evan Shapiro says, since "without Z Channel there probably wouldn't have been an IFC." Though times have changed since the Z Channel's heyday—back then, says Cassavetes, "it was possible to license films for less than trillions of dollars"—Shapiro says that IFC is

working hard to replicate the kind of cutting-edge, eclectic programming that Z pioneered. Just as Z Channel organized a slate of programming around a particular actor, director, or movie, Shapiro says, IFC creates its own mini "festivals"—the "Z Channel Weekend," for example. And no matter what the FCC says, you'll never see IFC cutting or censoring live broadcasts such as the Independent Spirit Awards. "In a world where even Chris Rock can be boring on the Oscars, we let Sam Jackson and everyone in Hollywood have control of the stage, live, without commercials," Shapiro says. "That's pretty ballsy. The same is true of our programming. We don't alter the art; content is always king for us."

All of which explains why a documentary about a troubled programmer from a small cable station in Los Angeles who killed himself and his wife found a home at IFC Productions. "Even HBO might have looked at that and said, it's a small

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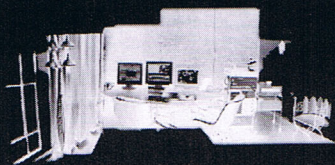
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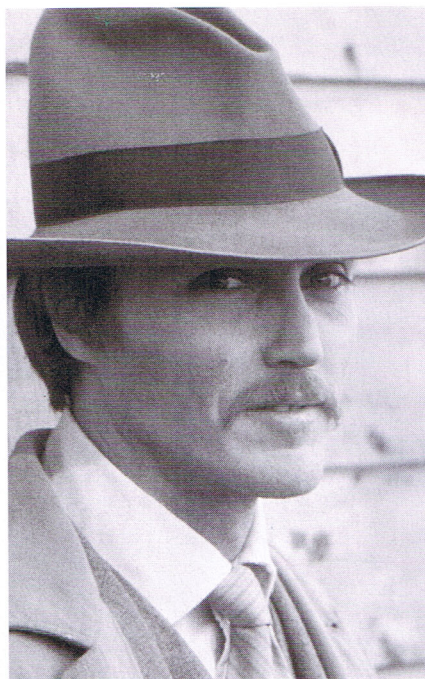


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**Christopher Walken in *Heaven's Gate*
(United Artists)**

story for a small audience," Shapiro says. "We thought it was bigger than that. We saw the legacy of Jerry Harvey being tied to the legacy of independent film. He furthered the cause of independent film and auteurs in a way that few others have."

In the film, Harvey comes across as a complex character—brilliant and driven, but spiky and pessimistic, haunted by the suicides of two older sisters. A former assistant programmer at Z Channel remembers being summoned to his office one morning and being told, "I don't like the air you breathe; I don't like the ground you walk on." But Harvey's total devotion to film is obvious, and he is warmly remembered by friends and Hollywood luminaries alike. Director Stuart Cooper, who was plucked out of obscurity by Harvey and given a "Stuart Cooper Month" on Z, remembers how Harvey was sensitive to "how someone had been slighted when they shouldn't have been slighted, or beaten up when they shouldn't have been beaten up."

Z Channel's fortunes began unraveling when the stock market crashed in 1987, and the channel's owner, a small media company in Seattle, was forced to bail out. Harvey attempted to save Z's prospects by accepting a merger with Spectacore, a sports channel. At around the same time, Z became entangled in a

complicated lawsuit, and Harvey found himself in court, giving lengthy depositions against colleagues at other cable channels. The end was nigh: a week after Z plus Sports was launched in April 1988, Harvey shot his wife to death and then turned the gun on himself. Z plus Sports limped along for another year before going off the air forever.

Shapiro says that there's a lesson to be learned from the Z Channel's trajectory, and IFC will never make the kinds of compromises that drove Z Channel off the air. "Remaining independent in an era where it's much easier and more profitable to do otherwise is probably the most courageous thing we've done," he says of IFC's 10-year history. Of course, "independent" is in the eye of the beholder. IFC is part of Rainbow Media Holdings LLC, which also runs AMC, Fuse, and the WE (Women's Entertainment) channel, and is a subsidiary of the cable company Cablevision. "Cablevision is not a small, teeny-tiny company, but when you look at the convergence of media messages out there, we are considered independent," Shapiro says. "We're a small, independent television channel that's part of a small, independent corporate parent."

Recently, IFC found what it felt was the perfect voice to express its spirit of independence: Green Day's "Jesus of



James Woods, (in *Salvatore*) credits his Academy Award nomination to the film's exposure on Z

Suburbia," the 9-minute-plus anthem that anchors the band's Grammy Award-winning *American Idiot* album. In March, IFC and Green Day inked a deal that will see IFC using "Jesus of Suburbia" in its on- and off-air promotions for the coming year, as well as giving the song repeated exposures on the channel. It will become "our audio calling card and the voice of our vision," says Shapiro, who likes the idea that "you could get a 45-year-old professor in Amherst, Massachusetts to listen to a little Green Day because it's connected to an independent film and an 18-year-old tech-head who loves Green Day to be enticed by a title he might not otherwise have seen."

Given that *American Idiot* has been embraced by people with a grudge against the current occupant of the White House (at a recent Green Day concert in London, the audience joyfully chanted "Idiot America!"), partnering with Green Day could be seen as a political statement on IFC's part. Shapiro insists, however, that the album is essentially nonpartisan: "It speaks about not wanting to be a conformist—about things that every independent free thinker in this country probably feels at one time or another."

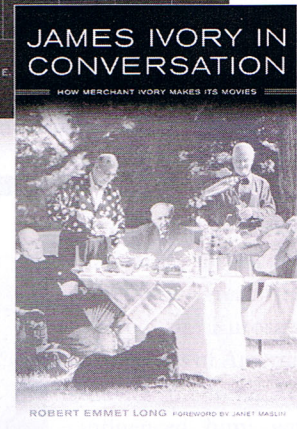
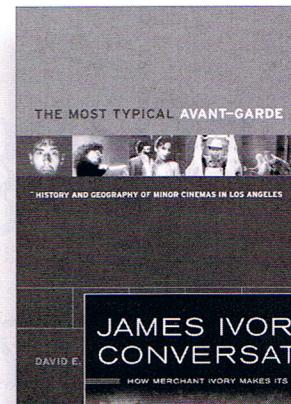
And where Z Channel employed legendary critic F.X. Feeney to write reviews

in its programming guide, IFC has Henry Rollins, whose "Henry's Film Corner" debuted last December. Formerly the lead singer of the punk band Black Flag, Rollins is an explosive personality who's as likely to hold forth on why he doesn't like dating southern Californian women as he is to launch into a diatribe about the lameness of *Terminator 3*. "We love Roger Ebert and all the film reviewers out there, but sometimes when you've been working in the film industry for many years, it's hard to see the forest for the trees," Shapiro says. "Henry won't be edited, so he's probably not going to get a show on a major network. We feel he belongs on IFC for that very reason."

"Henry's Film Corner," Green Day, the "Z Channel Weekend"—they're all ways of keeping IFC relevant, edgy, and viable. But Shapiro says IFC will never lose sight of its core mission, or "shake free from the moorings of our beginnings" as the home for independent film on television. The station's new tagline—"TV, uncut"—expresses what Shapiro sees as IFC's promise to viewers: "No crap, no clutter, just kickass shows and kickass films."

Wherever it is, the troubled spirit of Jerry Harvey can rest in peace. ★

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