

John Ellis, 18/11/11

John Ellis was the co-producer of *Visions* (Large Door/Channel 4, 1982-1985)

Interviewers: Justin Smith, Rachael Keene

JS: Well you know I suppose it would be useful to begin by just sort of uh just by telling you a little bit more about our areas of interest because um as you know there are 2 PhDs on the project, and Laura Mayne is very much looking at um *Film on Four* and its commissioned feature film output and, if you like, as a shorthand it's useful to characterise hers as a film studies PhD if you like, whereas Rachael's is much more an institutional study of Channel 4's broadcast output of film in all its variety of forms, including programmes about film um you know hence her particular interest in *Visions*. But also Rachael is very much involved um uh with me uh and Linda at the BUFVC on the digitization of the Press Information Packs, and another [JE: indecipherable]. Absolutely, well you know her methodology in a sense, a central part of the methodology is very much about scheduling, and using the evidence of the Press Packs around that. I guess to begin with the 2 things that we'd be really interested in talking about are *Visions* and your views on Channel 4 scheduling, which I know you've written about. [JE: Scheduling in general, or scheduling of the movies?] [RK: Both, I suppose]. Yeah, but I guess I should start by asking you for a bit of background in a sense. I mean, before Channel 4 came into existence you were both an academic and a filmmaker, or producer?

JE: Oh no I wasn't a filmmaker at all, no no no, I didn't know anything about it. [JS: Weren't you involved with the IFA]. I was involved with the Independent Filmmakers Association. Basically it comes through being involved with *Screen*, and getting to know people around what was then the London avant-garde, so there was the London Filmmaker's Co-op, but there were also groups like Cinema Action. And...just being around that sort of people, and being interested in...actually, the politics around setting up some kind of subsidies for the film industry, for filmmaking. Which was um at the end of the Labour government, when Harold Wilson came back and so on and so forth. So that was really where I'd started from. There were people in the IFA who were saying...Mark Karlin was one of the principal ones, quite an important figure. Mark was saying we need to pay attention to this new television channel, talking of the opportunities around that and things. A lot of the stuff we did for the kind of proposal for a kind of filmmaking foundation, sort of parallel to the Arts Council, that work got translated into proposals that eventually got put together for...around for Channel 4. And that was traded down, as it were, to a commissioning editor appointment, um in the shape of Alan Fountain, doing independent film, it was called... Which was weird because everything up to that point had been about independent production, and now you had independent film. You could see the two very different notions of the word colliding there [JS: Absolutely]. But '78 – '82 I had a job at the University of Kent, doing film studies there, I was there with Ben Brewster, there was just the two of us. [JS: I arrived just after you left...] The deal was um with *Visions*, I think was that um. I can't remember the exact sequence of events but the outline of it was that Simon Hartog who I knew very well through the IFA he said we should do a cinema programme and he said well we should get someone who knows

what they're doing. So we got together with Keith Griffiths, who was working for a company that was doing commercials. So um we put together a proposal quite naturally as it were, as a television proposal. A proposal saying you need a regular magazine programme that's going to be as unlike the Barry Norman show as you can possibly be, so it would do all these things. We went and pitched it not to Alan Fountain, in fact, it wasn't something he was charged with, it was someone called Paul Madden, who'd been the Television Archive Officer at the BFI before. [JS: He seemed to have a sort of roving commission...] Well a lot of people at early Channel 4 had a roving commission in those days! No-one knew quite what they were doing, so they had some fuzzy briefs.... 'Cos there was John Ranelagh who had religion and Northern Ireland! But you could see the link. Paul Madden had a brief that included animation, cinema programmes. And basically we were the only people who were pitching a regular format show. A lot of people pitched for things that were documentary series of various sorts. So we basically got the commission by default. We did um a pilot show. I had been at Kent long enough to get study leave, so that was the summer term of '82. I got time off at Easter, did a pilot, which – big mistake – we didn't do a pilot for a coherent show; we did 3 different sorts of items. One of which was a fairly major piece on Peter Watkins, who was in the country trying to do a follow-up to *The War Game*...which was another disaster of major proportions...for Central. And then there was an interview – Stuart Hood did an interview with the guy who...I can't remember his name... Eckhart Stein! He ran ZDF's experimental film slot, so there was an interview with him. And the third thing was Ros Coward, my partner, doing a thing on women in TV. A straight piece to camera, to show the kind of thing we were trying to do. But we didn't put it together into a show format. So it was 3 items on a VHS, there you are. And I don't think anybody watched more than the first item, which was the thing on Peter Watkins, which was quite a nice piece of work. Um and um but we got the commission [JS: So you formed Large Door...]

We formed Large Door once we'd got the commission. We must have had a company? No we used the Spectre collective that Simon and Keith were members of. But the pilot Simon and I did because Keith was still working for an advertising company.

[JS: What did you do about studio space and resources? Was the Watkins piece, what about that? 'Cos I haven't seen it, have you Rachael? RK: No...]

No, no-one has seen it [JS: Oh it's not available...] I've got a tape of it as they say it was quite nice. Basically what Simon in particular had worked out in particular was that we should do the programme on tape, we shouldn't use film to do a film programme. And that was the radical gesture at that point, but absolutely correct. Because it was much easier to work on a tape basis, but it was still working location with 1-inch video tape so you've got...Not OB because you made it on tape and you could get a VHS with the time-code on it and you could sit there with a sheet of paper and work out more or less where the cuts were, because it was before those off-line VHS [editing systems]. So you could work out a rough edit and go in and do it relatively efficiently. So that was the sort of route that we had. So we did the Watkins one, not using any studio space at all, um just doing it on location, I remember we... I said it was being done by Central TV, this project. And they had some office space in London somewhere that they were using, and we went in there and said can we use that space there. And along comes a guy who thinks this is his office. And he's a fairly eminent director back then but he felt that he was being marginalised by

Central um, and so it was almost a punch-up. So that was what happened. We did that doing location, and went out and filmed, went to Sheffield, and did David Blunkett chairing the public meeting to recruit people you know all this amateur filmmaking stuff, that Watkins went for, Blunkett...talking about the power of films...So it was...the other 2 things we did do in some kind of studio space but I suspect we...but I suspect we may have used some University's space, perhaps London College of Printing. People had spaces that you could use.

[JS: So Paul Madden looked at this...]

Paul looked at it and Jeremy Isaacs who made all the decisions at that point, and that was fine, he said yes OK.

[JS: Excellent. So you got a commission for how many?]

...They didn't have any other options...And um Simon Hartog's father - estranged father - was a guy called Howard Hartog, was a friend of Jeremy's. So I think he was on the spectrum [radar]. Simon had worked in *Panorama* in the 60s, so he'd got sort of a track record. I knew Jeremy Isaacs from the BFI Production Board, which I'd been a member of [JS: Yes of course]. So we were kind of sufficiently known to be kind of well you know amongst the sort of people who they thought they could deal with [JS: trusted to do?]. No, I wouldn't say trusted, but thought they could deal with. They thought that 10% of the stuff they'd commissioned wasn't going to come. That was their kind of back of the envelope calculation. Of 10% defaults. And the problem was at the end of the first year was that they'd found that everyone delivered the stuff. There was really kind of negligible non-delivery, so they had too much stuff. And nobody knew what to do, how to do it. The budget format was still to come. And so they said we'll give you, what was it, something like half a million pounds to do a certain number of shows. I can check on all of that, but it was about half a million to do a dozen shows. So OK when do you want them? Oh we don't know. But you're commissioning us to do a show? We don't know that. And this would be you know for November so this is something like um late August early September. And we had to find office space and this was the days when BT would say, you want a telephone, wait 3 months.

[JS: And you had to deal with Kent presumably?]

I said can I take unpaid leave for a year? 'Cos I thought this would go on for a year and I'd be back teaching in a year. I didn't actually resign so my job was there. So we had 12 shows not knowing when they were going to be on.

[JS: How did you put them together then? Did you conceive of them as individual shows or collect things you wanted to do and then try to piece them together?]

Keith was crucial in sorting out how to do it. His first gesture was, get as much money of them as possible as they're probably going to go bankrupt...He said, well look, the only way of doing this is to end-weight it as much as possible, so don't spend much money to start with. Spend the money when you've actually got time to plan to spend it, 'cos it's quite tight. We planned a shoot in the Far East with Tony Rayns for...to yield programmes for the following summer. Can't remember they went probably in February. That was actually shot on film. We couldn't really risk taking....1-inch equipment on that kind of location. And the more, there was Umatic

around but it wasn't very good at that point...Simon took that to Africa in the second year. We planned that stuff for later and decided to concentrate on cheap and cheerful....We knew we had a first date...we knew we had a programme in the 2nd week, mid-November. So we were able to find...What did we have in that first programme? [RK: There was Angela Carter]. Oh yes that's right, we had *The Draughtsman's Contract* in that one. The beginning was a montage on cinema in general, a manifesto kind of thing. And the third item was that...Paul Schrader? So we managed to get tie-ins with cinema releases. Which was the idea of the show, oddly enough. But in all the rush-around, doing the pilot, and then doing the first episode. But it was very hard convincing the distributors, firstly that there would be a new television channel; secondly that there would be a new television channel that would be a bit different; and thirdly that there would be a cinema show that might be interested in what they had. I did a lot of that work, and the distribution world did divide into those who said OK we'll help out and we'll tell you what we're doing. And the others said we're dealing with Barry Norman's show. Because ITV wasn't really doing anything at that stage- we were the only ones. They didn't really grasp it, for some time. And we couldn't tell them what our schedule would be. One of the most helpful people was a lady called Rosemary Goodfriend, fortunately, at UIP, who was really helpful. That was our access [point] to the commercial industry; if we hadn't had her we would have been in real trouble.

JS: Did you have an editorial sense, at that stage of the kind of impression or diversity of film culture and cinema that you wanted to present? Or was it simply...these are the only people we could find to talk to us...

JE: No we had...well the whole kind of Chinese thing was really part of that. We had a very big agenda really, sort of everything that we'd been around for the past decade which hadn't made it to TV at all. Which was a fairly loose agenda, but a big one. So it was to do with world cinema, I mean that was the first thing. Secondly, it was um experimental cinema of various kinds. Um thirdly it was addressing what might be available in the market. So trying to address what people actually could get to see. Rather than...So we did the when things got settled down, we were told we were doing 4 shows very quickly, um you know we were going to work fortnightly to start off with. Um we did a Christmas show that had a piece that I did about *ET* and *Tron*. You could do those things very quickly, just write them, shoot them and run them together, and that's how you had to work. And that wasn't even shot in the studio, that was done in some back-room office space. That's how we worked, we didn't use a studio, we just used spaces that we could get. And in fact I think that was part of the idea, was that we weren't going to be a studio show, we weren't going to have regular presenters. We knew a lot of things we weren't going to do.

[JS: Your budget was presumably set up...you didn't have any additional set up money to start with?]

JE: I seem to remember the sum of 5 thousand pounds, was the kind of...donation to the company for certain costs [JS: pump priming...You had some more questions about the content of *Visions*, didn't you?]

RK: Yeah definitely. I'd be interested to know sort of how closely you worked with maybe people like Derek Hill, or other people in the channel, in terms of organizing

cinema seasons to sit, I mean that was quite a difficult thing, quite problematic to arrange in terms of getting cinema seasons alongside the *Visions* programmes?

JE: We hardly ever got them to work. Um the um. Derek was having to work very hard to mouth on that, so we couldn't do any planning. The turnaround time for doing items on any sort, especially if you were going to do something substantial, like kind of going to the country concerned and interviewing directors. We only managed to do that on Hungary...So we weren't very able to tie in to their seasons because their lead time was too short, with all the chaos around, and all the assumptions they'd made about *Film on Four*, and then finding they couldn't actually programme any films that had had any theatrical career, they couldn't programme. They had that problem. And generally the sense that um they were going to do, they didn't quite know what their schedule was going to look like until quite late on. They were establishing what worked and what didn't in a context where you have a lot of negative press. Um you had a lot of places which didn't receive Channel 4 in the first place. We had, we set up some kind of advisory board, we had a woman called Angela Martin from Sheffield, she comes at the end of the 1st year, she said we still can't get Channel 4....The rollout of Channel 4 was quite a hard one. So it was pretty chaotic, they were working with a light management, very few people doing an awful lot of things. So there had been very little planning ahead.

RK: Also from what I gather it seems that there was a lot of early film purchases made, you know they went a bit mad, [JE: Yes, what on earth do we do with all these?] and then a year in they were saying we can't purchase anymore. So I get the sense that the seasons that were screened were a way of showing certain films that they'd purchased.

JE: Derek went out and he bought, well basically you were looking at a number of enterprises which needed support. So the very big kind of subsidy in terms of buying back catalogue from Contemporary and Connoisseur and Artificial Eye and so on. Which was a you know a good thing to do but on the other hand left them with a very random catalogue of stuff. [RK: Yes] But on the other hand we were...they were absolutely impervious to us saying, OK we think Chinese cinema, we're going to do this [season]. So, no, partly 'cos they'd already done the buying, you're quite right. Derek had spent the money. It was only just after the 1st NFT season, the discovery that China had been making these movies since the 1920s and nobody knew about them! That was sort of 1981, you know, so it was a really new kind of thing.

[RK: And did you work with filmmakers at all. Obviously you had connections with the film community, was that something that influenced you?]

I didn't really have film connections, I didn't know Alan Parker, didn't know David Puttnam. The people we didn't know was an awfully long list. We weren't really stitched into advance information from the industry, we had to try to make all that for ourselves and it took a long time.

JS: So that made you very strong in a sense, I think in your kind of essay [?] identity, but maybe less so in your kind of responsiveness to what's new and what's happening, very much the thing that the Barry Norman show was about. That seems to me was made you distinctive, that in a sense the limitations of what you could do put the emphasis on the essay type items.

JE: Well the essay type items are there partly because they're cheap. The person talking to camera was a big feature. I remember talking to Nick Fraser, who now runs the BBC 4 documentary strand *Storyville*. His idea was to do a 30 minute straight to camera, man nailed to the floor by autocue.

JS: I remember looking at it and thinking this is like the Open University.

JE: Yes! But the technology was not as flexible as you might want back then. And back then television was still very much, television was studio television. And there weren't the facilities you could do that kind of a show in. You were going to ask something about technology weren't you [Rachael]?

RK: Yes, in terms of showing film clips, because you obviously weren't keen on having the pan and scan clips, what sort of technology was involved in showing film clips?

JE: It was really state of the art actually. What we did was actually say we're going to put everything in a kind of frame. So it's like quotation marks, but you can do a widescreen letterbox much more easily, you can do Academy. We thought there was only those 2 but there was all sorts of stuff in between, that was a bit of a pain. Quite often in the edit we'd make decisions about how to frame this one, was it going to match what went before. [RK: The frame does change quite a bit...] Yes...partly because we were working with all sorts of things, in those days analogue television, you had something called safe area, which was the part of the picture you knew everyone would get to see [despite variations in sets]. But you got a wider kind of field of picture. But what we did do was uh we telecine'd our own material from the films. Um and you know distributors used to cheerfully give us a 35mm print and say OK look at this, if you want to telecine a bit we'll give you the reel. [RK So there weren't big restrictions, 'cos I noticed that some of the clips are very very long, it's fantastic...] Yes it was great, it was before any of the kind of um electronic press packs and things like that, with pre-selected clips. It was a different era, if you wanted a bit you could get a bit. And it was only Disney and *Tron* [that we couldn't get clips from]. [RK: And of course there were no clips from *ET*...] *ET* there was no clips at all, that's right. But we got clips from some pretty big pictures, like *Gandhi*, the item on *Gandhi*. So yes that was right. It was a different sort of thing so um I used to sit in preview theatres spotting the kind of cue marks to change the reels so I roughly knew what reel it was I wanted.

RK: And did you have a particular type of audience in mind in creating *Visions*.

JE: People like ourselves, it was scandalous (!) - we didn't really have an idea of audience, and indeed we were not kind of overly bothered by audience data. Um that comes after, when the re-commissioning came. And the idea we'll do a more regular programme. And we got monthly slots, and um we sort of complained at the monthly slot at 11 o'clock at night, and they said OK we'll put you on at 9pm. And then there we were with the famous item on Hungarian cinema, which we couldn't really get out of. And so the first show, the January show was quite good because that had the thing about, this would be January '84 - no '85 'cos it was *British Cinema '45* - that was the 3rd series of *Visions* then. We had the quickly get us on the air 1st series, which was 15 shows, that's right. Then the 2nd series, they said OK do a series of 6, which were put out during the summer week on week. So then it was very difficult to do any linking in to press. Then they said we'll do a proper magazine format, so we

had monthly round up of the month's films. So we did *British Cinema '45*, we did something else that was quite good, the clips thing was good. Some actually fitted the audience that they were suddenly pitched in front of, and some didn't.

JS: In that process of change, with the different scheduling of the different series. Was there a sense of we don't really know where to put them, we'll just put them somewhere. Or was there a sense from Paul Madden or from whoever of their response to what you were doing, and a kind of editorial steer....?

JE: That's a very good question and I'm glad you asked me that, as they say..it was a mixture of the two. The initial pattern was that we would be leapfrogging with *Voices*, which was a studio discussion show with heavyweight intellectuals. And after a while that kind of fell away because there was really very little in common between the two [programmes] even though the titles oddly enough [fitted]. That wasn't commissioned by Paul Madden, that was an arts commission through Michael Kustow. So that sort of...leapfrogging schedule fell away and we were put into the schedule you know after the movie. Which was another scheduling principle, which gave you no fixed start time, it was after whatever the movie was – and very late. Um it wasn't until, you know, the '84, '85 magazine series that we managed...we were getting a regular day at least. But then sometimes the start time was 11pm and then there was a block they put on at 9, then it was put back again because it hadn't worked. But that by '85 you see and there was a much more organized schedule, and scheduling activity which was trying out seeing what shows are going to do in particular slots.

JS: So did anyone talk to you about those decisions and say look this is going to be an after-movie thing now, you might want to think about how you tailor that?

JE: Well they couldn't tell us what the movie was! [JS: So it was well planned then!] Take it for granted, they couldn't tell us what they were doing in terms of movie scheduling [JS: That's incredible.] They didn't know.

JS: What's remarkable now is a sense of a) the breadth of film culture you were able to cover and in a sense I think you know *Visions* for us is one of those landmark series that you know we're interested in the way in which Channel 4 as a broadcaster of film and programmes about film broadened the popular sense of what film was, what film could be, in a sense to a new audience. But [b] it's coupled with an almost Reithian sense of we know what's good for you, and we're going to educate you about it.

JE: Yeah, that's right, that was very explicit, that we were doing that. I wouldn't say it was Reithian, but it was really, you don't know about this, that's what the whole principal address to the audience was – here you are. And the problems of that are legion, not least because um the form, the slots of presentation in the materials is very different. You know, sometimes you've got quite expensive and ambitious voice-over documentaries; other times you're getting very simple pieces to camera; sometimes you're getting things that are quite interesting but strange, mucking about with other people's footage, done by...you know authored pieces; sometimes you've got commissioned short films from interesting filmmakers. You know, so you're getting all sorts of stuff, all bunged together. And there was never really any kind of way of establishing a *Visions* audience or a *Visions* identity across that. As Jeremy Isaacs was always putting it, you know, '*Visions* has not hit its stride'.

RK: I mean did you prefer the magazine format, was that something you would have liked it to always have stuck to, or did you sort of did you like having the longer documentaries as well?

JE: Well, I liked having the longer documentaries because you could really you know...you knew even then those were the things that were going to be important in the longer term, and you could make a bit of money on in terms of foreign sales. The cinema in China one did quite well, and the Jan Svankmeyer one did quite well, and things...Those set pieces...

RK: I think there are a couple of episodes that are produced by other people that were shown in the *Visions* strand.

JE: Yes, that was Paul Madden. That was really annoying, because that diluted the brand even further. Because it was leapfrogging with *Voices*, and because he commissioned some single docs, he didn't know where to put them, and that's where he put them. And that was really annoying, because they were very different.

RK: Yes I'd assumed they'd been some kind of interaction on your part.

JE: None at all. None at all. That was the Commissioning Editor. I mean he was a good Commissioning Editor on all sorts of other levels, because we just told him what we wanted to do and he said get on with it. 'Jeremy doesn't like it very much, what are we going to do?'

JS: Yeah. One of the things that's interesting to us...

JE: Are you going to talk to him at all?

JS: We'd like to.

RK: I don't think we have a contact for him at the moment...

JE: Anyway, he kind of got squeezed out, and it was over the issues of *Questions of Leadership*, the Ken Loach series that he'd commissioned and then it was deemed not showable, that's how he got squeezed out...That was an annoying aspect about it [about documentaries being inserted into *Visions*], him trying to run it...that was part of the chaoticness [?] of Channel 4, he couldn't see any problem with it. No-one knew what anyone else was doing. Um so yes there were other things in the slot as well, that came from here and there. But after the first kind of run he...everybody agreed that that wouldn't be done anymore that you know...

JS: Right. 'Cos there's a tendency that seems from us to looking at the Press Packs...

JE: We bought in items into our show as well. We bought pre-made items...um....I remember...that's it I think *Six Kinds of Light*, which was a really nice series, Italian I think series, about cinematographers, Paul had bought, didn't want to show so sort of said well can you put in...So we had [Vittorio] Storaro...and somebody other else. Yeah.

RK: And there's the feature on the French magazine programme as well, was it Cinema Cinema?

JE: Yeah we did that, that was to bulk out the uh for the 2nd series, again. Maybe we shouldn't have done it like that, but we said well we'd do 4 expensive and 2 cheap. So we did one was *Cinema Cinema* because you know we had used items from that series before, and it had been really very...and we'd pinched the idea of commissioning filmmakers to do shorts and lots of ideas from them. And we did the other one was contrasting um Kino Panorama and At The Movies, very cheap. So that gave us the money to go to Africa, go to Italy, do the Svankmeyer film, and what was the 4th one? Can't remember. Oh that's right the Gina Newson film with Wendy Toy and Sally Potter. [RK: Oh I really like that one...] I produced that, it was entirely mine. Yes [laughs!] I was only learning to be a producer, that was the other thing, which you hadn't asked. I had nil experience. I was learning on the job. And my God, it was such a stressful time, looking back. But by the time I'd got to a year in, of doing all sorts of stuff the most terrifying moment was actually sort of suddenly doing an interview with Jack Lang, in French, which was terrifying enough. And I had that, and then I had to do a piece to camera outside. I hadn't got anything prepared, and it was bloody cold too! So that was quite a bad piece to camera. I hadn't quite worked out what the item was about.

RK: That particular interview deals with the issue of the exhibition of film, and comparisons of the French and English...

JE: That programme was...suddenly it's a fortnightly show, we haven't got anything for 3 weeks time!

RK: But yes with concerns about exhibition spaces available for filmmakers. That seems to recur throughout *Visions*. Was that something that particularly mattered to you?

JE: Yes I think it was. And there's a sense that um partly to say why you can't see...to to a potential audience, why it is that it's not easy to see this kind of stuff.

RK: And sort of stressing the importance and potential of television as an exhibition space for the future, and what that can achieve as well.

JE: Yes but people we were quite dubious about that...The other thing that was going on was that we started doing work for Alan Fountain as well. 'Cos he suddenly said, Keith comes kind of wandered past and said he'd seen Alan and Alan has asked if we could do a show on Steve Dwoskin. And of course we knew Steve Dwoskin. 'Cos he was one of the collective that both Keith and Simon belonged to. But also on this Indian filmmaker Anand Patwardan, can we do this...

RK: I was going to say...

JE: 'Cos he had people who were certainly going to deliver but were going to take a lot longer....

RK: *The Eleventh Hour* is a really mixed bag...

JE: Channel 4 was full of mixed bags in the early days. You had a slot and so you filled the slot.

JS: You...when you began to write about scheduling in a sort of reflexive way [JE: Due to bitter experience!] Yeah quite. But you were a big advocate about the

possibilities of themed scheduling and yet ironically the very freedom that Channel 4 seemed to have allowed for effectively a kind of chaos, with the description you're giving, which actually negated that sense. I mean to explore themes you've gotta have a plan.

JE: Yes. There was a pretty regular schedule on Channel 4, the news, the Brookside slot and so on. Mid evening was quite tightly scheduled. Um. But beyond mid-evening anything went. *The Eleventh Hour* was always Mondays. So there were certain fixed points even then. And but but within that the rest of it was pretty chaotic.

RK: I'm really interested in this sense of authorship, and getting to grips with who was making these decisions. Obviously there must have been schedulers, people involved in the schedule at that time. [JS: Paul Bonner...]

JE: Paul Bonner was ultimately in charge of it. There was – what was his name? There was a woman called Sue Stoessl. There was really no-one who was that much in charge of scheduling at the start. Sue Stoessl was involved in audience research and so on. She fed a lot back in terms of how to make a schedule. Jeremy had come famously came with a grid and asked how are we going to fill this grid with stuff we've commissioned. And others...thought about it. And um had you know got standard things. Like Cecil Korer, his obituary was this week. The Light Entertainment guy...

JS: One of the things that's quite surprising is the alignment that *Visions* had, with, I mean maybe it's not surprising given where you all came from, but with what one might call the radical independent sector, as opposed to the independent filmmaking sector that David Rose in Fiction was fostering. [JE: Yes]. And there's a real sense in my mind that, in a sense, *Visions* wasn't really talking about what *Film on Four* [was doing] [JE: No we didn't...we couldn't?] and was almost typically avoiding, a tactic of avoiding...I don't know...

JE: Um...it wasn't a tactic of avoidance, it was a zero information flow.

JS: So you had a relationship with Alan Fountain but you never had a relationship with David Rose.

JE: Well David didn't know, basically, what films he was going to get when, and he didn't know what films he was going to be able to film when. Initially, yes. I seemed to remember we talked to possibly not to David, who was working with him at the time? [JS: Karin Bamborough]. Karin. We talked to Karin and she shrugged her shoulders. So you know you could get to people and ask them and they wouldn't know in terms of our plan. And we were on such a tight budget- everything we made we showed. With one single exception. We got um um what's his name, Haroun Farocki, it was about the Straubs. Straub and Huillet making a film, it was them working on set. It was a very interesting piece of work. That never got shown. But everything else um we got little extra bits, you know like we did a day sort of shooting in Shanghai animation studios, that eventually pops up somewhere. So there's a lot of kind of basically kind of scraping around and making do and making the budget stretch. Because the kind of budget we got was not the budget...I mean absolutely bloody mindedness, was not the budget that was appropriate for the major overseas shoots that we did. There wasn't much of a margin so we had to plan ahead, and arguably we were planning to rigidly. But there was actually a um there was a hands-

off on *Film on Four* now I remember it. They did not want, they couldn't work out, what the proper form of critical review address should be on Channel 4 to films in which Channel 4 had an investment. So rather than let us decide it for them, which would not have been a good idea! They said well really Channel 4 films are off-limits for *Visions* when they're in theatrical exhibition. [JS: That's very interesting, I wondered if there might be something like that. In a sense it's where the freedom to self-critique has to have kind of limits.] Well it does because what are you going to say? [JS: Here's another great new *Film on Four*...] Yes, you can't not say that, with a film that Channel 4's got money in.

JS: I mean moving on slightly both in terms of chronology and in terms of programme planning and scheduling. You wrote a piece for the IPPA Bulletin, it was on the occasion when Liz Forgan was promoted to Assistant Controller I think, and um began intervening in...there was almost an element of self-denial about Channel 4's output and a sort of avoidance of controversy. I think you mentioned there was a season of gay films which they didn't call a season of gay films; it obviously was, but it wasn't advertised as such. And in this piece you say you know Channel 4 are doing the IBA's job for them now because they're impose....Was there a sense of change?

JE: When was that?

JS: I think that was '86 – it was before Michael Grade.

JE: Before Grade came. But was it at the point when Jeremy decided to leave?

JS: Possibly.

JE: That big wobble moment.

JS: I mean what was your memory of that, and that transition and how things were changing at 4? 'Cos you were still making *Visions* then, weren't you? [JE: No] No, sorry, the end of *Visions*...

JE: No that was the end of *Visions*, so that was not a comfortable moment for us, and probably the moment not being comfortable for us was dominant in my mind...

JS: And how did that happen, sorry let's just backtrack, how did *Visions* come to an end?

JE: Um well first off Paul Madden left, 3 year contract up. While we were still running. So um *Visions* was given to Alan Fountain. Um and Alan Fountain didn't make it clear that he didn't want us to go on. But made it clear that he didn't know what he wanted to do. It was very much an Alan Fountain lack of clarity moment. Also I think in Channel 4's eyes the 3rd series had not been the success they wanted it to be. [JS: In terms of ratings?] Not so much in terms of ratings. I think in terms of their perception of the show as an entity. Jeremy's thing of not hitting the stride. So Jeremy Isaacs was basically in favour of killing it off, as well as Alan, so there was a sense of not wanting to do it. But they didn't know what they didn't want to do instead. So we said OK shall we put our bits and bobs in the remaining shows at the end, keep us in the work while they decided. And we scrabbled round for something else to do. That's what happened for 3 shows which happened in the Autumn of '85. And Alan Fountain eventually decided that he wanted to do *The Media Show*

instead, and I don't think...well I wasn't...there was a whole big issue about whether you tendered things or not. [JS: Right, was that at board level? Was that a policy? How did that come about...the tender argument?] Um it had always been there because I remember after our first run there was another group of people who put together a proposal for a cinema show which was going to be more a more commercially based kind of idea. And Paul Madden turned it down. [JS: Who was that, can you remember?] Scott Meek was one of the people involved in it. I can't remember. [JS: Were you shown it?] Yeah I'm not sure they didn't actually send it! [Laughs] [JS: Look we've got this, what are you going to do about it?] Yeah that kind of thing. Channel 4 had to work out renewal, and the whole idea, because it had been a passive commissioning organization. And that was the thing about tendering, putting ideas out to tender was a real moment of editorial shift where they would say, OK we're not going to deal with what the market is offering, 'cos it's not a real market it's like other things...so we ought to say what it is we want. Because people were saying, tell us what it is you want. So that was a real moment when the issue of whether Channel 4 tendered, when C4 said to production companies, hundreds of them, we'd like something in this area, give us something. And certainly by sort of '87, I can't do the dates...I did a series for education called *Opening Up the Family Album*, that was what I did immediately after the end of *Visions*. And after that there was a, no that's completely wrong. It was after, it was '89, '90, I did a show, a first series called *The Food Programme*, during 1989, put out 1989, and then we were invited into the tender for [a] consumer show on Channel 4.

JS: But presumably your company had evolved by then as well...was it the same people?

JE: Yes it was the same people. Keith Griffiths had left after a year. He said I can't stick this, I've got better things to do with my time. Which was doing films with the Quay Brothers, and all that kind of thing. But he still made a number of um programmes um for *Visions* and also a couple of different shows um which were single docs made for Alan Fountain I think. One on Robert Breer [Five and Dime Animator](#) it was called, and the other one is on...and he did a film called *New York Framed* [project has copy of this on VHS] about filmmakers in New York. Very nice piece programme actually, he did really good shows, took care and so on. The rest of us were more slapdash but [laughs]. And then he did for the 2nd series of the Jan Svankmayer thing with 20 minutes of animation. Incredible. So that was about tendering and so on. It was Alan Fountain who wanted to do a media show, and looking backwards it was a shrewd decision. At the time, because everything was going on, things which have come subsequent to Channel 4, which was an extension of analogue television. You suddenly had all sorts of things happening. Technology was shifting fast, there was something called BSB and Sky and all that kind of thing going on, there was breakfast TV. Arguably you know breakfast TV saved Channel 4 by taking the press hit. If you really want to see a disaster you turn your TV on early in the morning and watch ITV, you don't watch any more watch Channel 4 for that..you know car-crash television. Um but there was um there was a huge amount going on in that period. Sort of '87 onwards.

JS: I guess also, you may disagree with this, but that monolithic if I can call it that, sense of cinema as art form itself had changed and to some extent Channel 4 was responsible for having altered it.

JE: You could [argue] on one level *Visions* was entirely retro. It was about the culture that pre-existed Channel 4, and gave you Channel 4 and so on. We always felt pretty kind of explicitly amongst ourselves was that what we were doing was a kind of catch up. That what was going on was different.

JS: We spoke to Alan Fountain some months ago and there was a very real sense from Alan that in a sense this was a generational thing at the beginning of Channel 4's life. Caricaturing it, in a sense the 60s Marxists had got hold of a TV channel at last and could do what they wanted for a bit. That sense of those values and interests that certainly hadn't been on British television before.

JE: There was the 60s generation but then there was the 70s and the early Channel 4 comes out of the 70s, which was the kind of very polarised society. Very sort of stuckist society in a way. I mean I've written about this, which was the mid to late 70s. The whole thing is a throwback and it's remarkable that it's something that came out as late as '82 in a way. But those were the people, that was a hard decade. So the fun part of the mid 60s was a long way away.

JS: Yeah. Yeah. You've also said that by the time of the Broadcasting Act in 1990 and Grade having taken over and done this clever bit of quick change around the issue of privatisation and so on, that paradoxically once you'd got something which looked more like a free market, the independent sector that Channel 4 was too big. In a sense it had fuelled this sector that...without any cultural policy the sort of free market had not kind of steer, or it had a steer in a different direction, perhaps towards the youth audience or whatever. Because Grade as scheduler that was his...

JE: As an independent producer and by that stage being involved in the politics of the independent sector, it was very clear that um the kind of one-to-one relationship, you know the only market being Channel 4, was very unsatisfactory. It was unsatisfactory because you got the sort of experience that we got, of actually how am I going to earn anything given that we'd lost our commission. And there was only one commission per company because they wanted to spread their work around. So there was the whole issue of renewal that was a big one that was experienced by Channel 4 in one way, and by the independent production sector in another. There was the whole sense of us, they pay us to make it yeah *but they own it*. That sense of entitlement. And there was the sense that, well, other broadcasters are kind of pinching our ideas or moving in and we can do better than that. And a lot of people did do better than that, it was true, which was part of the whole thing of independent production. So the whole push was for independent companies to get access to other markets and that was written into the 1990 Act. The whole experience with Channel 4 was one where you grew up very quick. Because they had fostered a sort of almost in loco parentis relationship to begin with and then walked away from it. Because they needed that stuff, when it was a joint project and all the rest of it. But before the year's end, almost, um it felt different. They had gotten to that issue of what do we do about the people who...we've led on, and you know quite a lot of them of course have left particular jobs, have left their BBC pensions behind and all the rest.

JS: Yeah. Yeah. And I mean you know Grade on the one hand as a scheduling was his forte to some extent but you know ultimately his populist instincts in this new

market-driven climate kind of won out. In a sense you think that 1990 was a great missed opportunity to re-find its roots and origins?

JE: [Pause]. What at the time or... [Pause] At the time I think I thought there should still be a radical Channel 4. Um and you know I'd learned quite a lot about how television works and but [pause] and I'd always been a person who was quite kind of quite interested in Channel 4 doing those you know big populist things and I really liked the American long series buy-ins, and all that kind of stuff, you know, that's what I was watching. So that wasn't a problem with that kind of shift in the channel because it wasn't a playground for filmmakers, it was a TV channel. And behind the whole *Visions* thing was, it's not a playground for filmmakers, it's a TV channel! So you need a regular show that's addressing the current context. And our frustration was always...or my frustration was that we couldn't quite pull that off. Keith was quite happy, I think. And Simon also being a bit...having a big journalistic kick to what he was doing. But you know we did get, once we'd got shot of *Visions*, you know, and realised there was life after, we were making some really good stuff. The best things we did are post-*Visions*. So I'd say This Food Business was a really important current affairs show. Simon's programme on TV Globo was really important. I really liked the programme we did or I did about Whisky Galore. Um and there were all sorts of other nice things that kind of got lost here and there. Nobody in their life would remember a half hour show for...well I did 2 things for Without Walls, which was an arts magazine show. One fairly well known about was Angela Carter's thing, *The Holy Family Album*. The one nobody would know about is called *The Man Who Ruined the British Film Industry*. Do you know about that? [RK: No]. A half-hour show which was about John Davis and the Rank Organisation, a nice little piece, which I actually directed. [JS: Wonderful] Yes [RK: And when was that shown?] Oh that would be the mid 1990s. We'll get a copy, '95, '96. [JS: We could get that from the BUFVC] No I don't think you would, they don't go back that far. I've got a copy anyway. So there's that which is looking back at the Rank Organization walking away from the film industry. And we interviewed bloody everybody – Tony Havelock-Allen, Betty Box.

[RK: Yeah I need to look more into the 90s, I haven't got that far in my research...obviously I'm aware of the film programmes like *Moviewatch*...]

Yeah but there was still no film season attached to that, it just went out one night when he was a bit short of things to put into his show. There was still no co-ordination going on. Whisky Galore – you know that was for the same Commissioning Editor - Waldemar Januszczak - and it took a bit of shouting to get them to show Whisky Galore. But the commission was nothing to do with whether they had film holdings or not, they commissioned because it was a good story, it had a hook...it was all driven by current stories. But we did a lot of nice things, 2 series about Hong Kong...all sorts of interesting things. There was life after *Visions*.

JS: I mean I think we must probably...what's the time...how are you doing, are you alright? [JE: I'm fine...] When we look back we see *Visions* in terms of film programmes on TV entirely unique. Was there any sense...of its influence or have we returned do you think to the Barry Norman status quo.

JE: The show that I would love to have produced and you know once had a go at producing um is now on air. Which is [RK: The Mark Cousins programme...I was

taken aback by that]. The Mark Cousins show [*The Story of Film*] ...It's amazing! For the centenary of cinema, interestingly, I pitched, because it was me on my own by then because Simon had died. I pitched a series that had a large budget for a series that looked at this history of cinema, thematically, and was going to use material from around the world to get around the copyright issues and so on. And it began to emerge that there was a competing idea elsewhere in Channel 4, and it was one put forward by the BFI, and that's the one they went for with Colin McCabe producing, with getting filmmakers to do something about cinema in their own countries. The Scorsese was good but the rest were a bit lame, possibly, so that was the early 90s. I spent most of '93, '94 doing that. It was actually while Simon was dying so it was a difficult thing to do. But the Mark Cousins series, do you know, it took them 5 years. They have done it using fair dealing, which is why there is so much talking over the footage. Um and I think his voice carries it off. [RK: Yes, because you think to start with – is it going to work?] Yes and it works because once he's done a clip, and you know his voice and the soundtrack actually work together, because they're so contrasting. And you know it's bloody brilliant – 13 hours of it. [RK: Yes his narration is quite stream of consciousness and poetic...] It is absolutely wonderful. And also um you know...it's so well informed, and not making the obvious mistakes. Looking for the strange and the unusual examples. So there you are, that's the answer to your question.

JS: But to what extent do you see the success of that series, that commission as a feature of a multi-channel environment through. The ability to do something like that, and in a sense I wonder whether that is something where innovative programming can be, to some extent, renewed and re-energised.

JE: That's what you hope, that the multi-channel environment is going to deliver it. But probably to the same extent that the 4-channel environment did. It's better quality because the whole thing costs less. The kind of expenses that we had in terms of physical plant, the amount of money you had to spend on um hiring the cameras and the people and paying for the on-line editing and all that. It's radically transformed. The unit cost, technically, of shows has really dropped. Your ability simply to put sound and image together, that's the real transformation. That was always our problem, because revisions with sound were always difficult... Since sound is really important in television [JS: Absolutely].

JS: Well I'm sure Rachael would be interested in whether you've got any production files or any material you might be willing to let her have a look at, because I think *Visions* is very much a key part of one of your chapters of your PhD.

JE: ...Yes, I have all production files. They sit in the basement somewhere in Bournemouth University library – I know they're still there and there are...I've got all the production files from Large Door and there are about 60 boxes which contain 3 or 4 lever arch files [each]. [RK: Have they been catalogued or anything or are they just there...] No [but] it's fairly clear what they are, there's one file per show, that kind of thing, for *Visions*. So maybe sometimes there's a big item file – there's a whole box relating to *The Holy Family Album*, because I've got all the press for that. [JS: Have you ever written about that?] About? [JS: about the Holy Family Album?] No. [JS: It's a landmark piece]. I don't know what land it's marking. For me, that whole period in the early 1990s is overshadowed by a number of people dying, Angela being one, Simon, Jo Spence who I'd worked with, a whole number of people, my

father died at that time. A really hard time. So my recollections are very much coloured by that. No I've never written on that but Charlotte Crofts has, in her book [on Angela Carter]... I've got loads of stuff, indeed I did put in a bid with the BUFVC, to a big JISC call for digitization, to digitize those documents. Quite a lot of it is simply workaday things like transcripts and programme as complete [broadcast] forms, all that kind of stuff. Which, if you really want... [RK: It would be great to have a look at anything really...] If you said what you wanted to know I could probably find it, because I can't remember... [RK: So it's probably best if I go off and have a think about what sort of thing I need and then get in touch and then you can maybe point me in the right direction]. There's things like budgets and all that kind of stuff...financial information probably sketchy on the first series of *Visions* and then it gets much better [RK: Any financial information would be very helpful]. [JS: It would be enormously helpful]...And you'll get yellowing telexes, and faxes that have disappeared. [RK: Yes in the BFI archive they have the Derek Hill collection which is uncatalogued, and to be honest I know very little about what happened to Hill, how it ended up being there....] Do you know what happened to him? [RK: I've never found out what happened to him, I assume he's dead now, I don't know anything about how he stopped working with Channel 4...] God, I can't remember. [JS: There must be an obituary of him...] If you find the obituary and work backwards...I used to meet him on Clapham Common occasionally...I was going to talk to you about Paul Madden...Another person you should probably talk to is Janet Walker, she was Head of Finance, she put the budgets together, she worked in film as well as TV...She's worth talking to...

JS: Did you have any relationship with the BFI on *Visions*. Did the BFI do any work for you on *Visions*?

JE: Certainly not...um... [JS: You say certainly not, was there some distance there?] well we did, when you say the BFI, that's always the problem with the BFI, it's not an organization... And especially then, it was a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and um we worked quite closely with Pete Sainsbury, in terms of promoting, in a sense, *The Draughtsman's Contract*. He was never interested in making anything for us, um so there was no production relationship. We used the archive regularly to get material, had a good relationship with David Meeker and Scott Meek...In that sense, yes. We never accessed any BFI events and things to make items around them I don't think. Let me think...Susan Baraclough we did an item, she was working there. So lots of individuals at the BFI but as an organization there was no relationship to be had really. And then you know later on in the '90s they wanted to produce and so they kind of became producers, pitched stuff and all the rest of it.

JS: It's interesting given in the pre-Channel 4 days the BFI Production Board was a kind of nexus, loose though it was, for all those kinds of people, yourself included who were operating in the independent sector. And how once again probably missed an opportunity with Channel 4 that they ought to have had a more productive relationship...

JE: I don't know how they could have done. I can't remember now, did they co-finance any stuff? [RK: The Workshops stuff...] Yes they funded films through the workshops but they never did anything with David Rose, did they, with *Film on Four*? There was always kind of, I can remember one of the fun moments on the BFI Production Board was around the idea that it might put some money into the film that

Marc Karlin wanted to make called *For Memory*, which was going to be made with the BBC, and using BBC material. And um I seem to remember I walked out of the meeting 'cos I got fed up with Alan Fountain saying oh we can't possibly do anything with television. I seem to remember that...So there was a real kind of thing you couldn't the BFI wasn't...it wasn't morally right to do [anything for television]...Then it was through the Workshops later on with Channel 4, but it was not through any more major um filmmaking, and anyway their resources were dwindling by that point, and that's really what happened. It suddenly came that the only show in town was Alan's. There was no other money about. Because the regional arts money disappeared, the BFI's money disappeared. [RK: And that's why the workshops dwindled, it wasn't meant to be Channel 4 as the main funder...] It was the '80s, what can I say, it wasn't a good time for [the] public sector. There was...nobody was able to, apart from Amber, was able to build any other links...Scotland's a bit different...

JS: Have you got access to...have you seen all the *Visions* that you want to see? We might ask John if he's got any viewing copies if there's anything you'd like to watch.

JE: What I'm trying to do is, before that VHS packs up, I'm going to transfer them to DVD. So if there is anything you want to watch...

RK: That would be fantastic. There are some gaps, there are some things that the Archive can't find or may need to copy.

JE: I know what you need...a souvenir publication [goes to get list of *Visions* programmes] There you are...

RK: Ah, this looks amazing...I've never seen this before.

JE: No, you wouldn't have done. It was done...Yeah that's right....this one was the banned programme. So it's accurate up to here.

RK: This'll be a really big help.

JS ...Thank you very much...