

Channel 4's *Visions*: a European style of film programme?

As a visual medium, television offers an ideal context for reviewing film. It allows the reviewer to successfully 'quote' content and carry out in-depth analysis using clips and trailers. Certainly prior to the development of the internet, television had greater scope for the production of formally experimental film reviews than any other medium. However, British television has always had an inconsistent relationship with this area of programming. During the 1950s there were a number of series about film on British TV. Indeed, programmes about the cinema, and films themselves, lent an air of glamour to television at a time when the new medium's identity was still being established.¹ In subsequent decades film review content received varying amounts of air time and was subject to increasingly hostile critical reception. This criticism tended to focus on the use of film clips, which were subject to a number of restrictions at this time. First of all, it was easier to access clips from new releases, as distributors welcomed the publicity that television brought their films. Secondly, prior to the proliferation of electronic press kits, the cost of film was prohibitively high. As such, film clips were often kept to a minimum in these programmes. Critics and filmmakers commenting on the state of the cinema programme in the 1970s suggested that cost restrictions and regulations imposed by distributors undermined the quality of the BBC and ITV's review series. Some even went so far as to propose that difficulties associated with obtaining and screening clips, prevented critics from carrying out honest analysis of a film's content. As long-running contributor to BBC1's *Film* series throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, Barry Norman has been subject to much of the criticism levelled against British film programming. Indeed, as the only film reviewer to appear regularly on the small screen during this period, it was, perhaps, inevitable that he would become whipping boy for those seeking more diverse film content on British screens. Describing Norman's presentational style in 1988, Peter Richards stated that 'Norman [...] tended to prefer a good anecdote (or a bad joke) to getting the story right'.² The following clip from *Film 85* will give you a sense of the tone of this series. As you can see, the *Film* programme, as presented by Norman, was glib and light-hearted, focusing on the plots of new releases and the activities of star performers, rather than providing in-depth analysis. The series predominantly focused on mainstream film, with a bias toward Hollywood productions. In spite of the criticism levelled

against its host and content, the *Film* programme remained the only regular film review show on British television throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. Other long-running arts series and strands, such as the *South Bank Show* (1978-2010), *Arena* (1975-) and *Omnibus* (1967-2003) did occasionally focus on cinema, with single documentaries devoted to directors and film genres.³ However, their coverage of film lacked regularity, appearing only intermittently throughout this period.

With the establishment of Channel 4 in 1982 came the possibility for a change in British broadcasting. It looked set to become terrestrial television's trendy young upstart, promising 'innovation' and 'experimentation' in form and content to an audience that had become accustomed to the reliable duopoly of the BBC and ITV companies. The fourth channel provided an additional source of funding and a new exhibition space for filmmakers working independently at a time when the independent 'sector', as such, had yet to become fully established in Britain. Channel 4's first Chief Executive, Jeremy Isaacs, was particularly influenced by European broadcasting models, including that of German broadcaster ZDF, which funded and showcased original film commissions in its regular strand *Das Kleine Ferneshpiel*. This paper will examine early film coverage on Channel 4, with particular focus on the broadcaster's first regular cinema programme *Visions*, which ran from 1982 to 1985. *Visions* was innovative because it combined reviews, essays and specially commissioned short fiction films within the magazine format, representing a move away from the conventional Barry Norman formula. For the purposes of this paper I will consider the extent to which aspects of European film culture informed the tone of *Visions*, while also assessing its significance as experimental British film programming.

Visions was produced for Channel 4 by British company Large Door. The founder members of the company, John Ellis, Keith Griffiths and Simon Hartog, first pitched their idea for this cinema series in July 1981 and produced a pilot episode in June 1982. Like many fledgling independent production companies at this time, Large Door was formed as a result of obtaining a Channel 4 commission. Prior to receiving the contract to produce the first series, Ellis, Hartog and Griffiths had each independently played an active role in Britain's moving image culture. Hartog had studied filmmaking in Italy and later went on to direct and produce episodes of *Panorama* for the BBC. He was also a founder member of the London Film-Makers

Co-op. Griffiths had a postgraduate degree in Film and Television from the Royal College of Art. He had also been deputy head of the British Film Institute (BFI) production board, where he produced many experimental films including Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) and Chris Petit's *Radio On* (1979). Although also a member of the BFI Production Board, Ellis was employed on a full-time basis as a media academic at the University of Kent. It can be argued that Ellis' relationship with academia and Hartog and Griffiths' practical experience were equally responsible for informing the content and tone of *Visions*. The three series broadcast on Channel 4 between November 1982 and July 1985 reveal an engagement with the cultural studies model of film analysis that came to prominence in American and British universities during the 1970s. The critics who contributed to the series frequently engaged with identity politics, analysing texts in relation to feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic and queer theories. The production team employed directors who brought a range of stylistic approaches to their chosen content. Although there was not always explicit discussion of formalist concerns, the chosen style of presentation revealed a heightened awareness of mise-en-scène and editing, which frequently reflected the stylistic traits of the films and directors under discussion. It can be argued that in combining cultural studies discourse with aesthetic nods to formalist theory, *Visions* offered a point of contact between seemingly disparate schools of academic thought, encouraging viewers to engage with both visual and thematic aspects of film texts.

Although broadcast in the early 1980s, prior to the proliferation of High Definition, digital and large-screen technologies in the home, *Visions* actively interrogated the conventions associated with the screening of films on television. Notably, every film clip shown as part of the series was framed with a white border and formatted in its correct aspect ratio. Although the small screen could not recreate the cinema experience, this format did arguably allow each shot to appear as the director had intended. Often, films broadcast on television during this period were edited using the pan and scan technique, wherein widescreen images were adjusted to match the aspect ratio of a standard television screen. When panning and scanning, the periphery of the image is lost and the viewer is unable to see any action that occurs towards the edge of the shot. Although the letterbox format used in *Visions* left a border around the film clip, this technique revealed the series editors' fidelity to the cinema screen as an exhibition space for film. Pan and scan involves modification of

the film image, in a process that transforms it into viable television content. Conversely, letterbox framing allows film to be faithfully and accurately reproduced (albeit in a small screen context). If returning to the notion of the television screen as a space in which film can be 'quoted', the *Visions* technique may be understood as an accurate citation: a direct quote that stands in opposition to the limited paraphrasing facilitated by the panned and scanned film clip. Indeed, when describing the framing of film extracts in *Visions* Ellis stated that the white line around the image acted as 'a kind of audiovisual quotation mark'.⁴

The pilot episode of *Visions* was structured in a magazine format, with three features on unrelated aspects of film culture. The first piece was a 25 minute film about British director, Peter Watkins. The second 20 minute feature was entitled 'Alternative Film Production and Television' and included an interview with Eckhart Stein, the ZDF commissioning editor responsible for *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel*. And the final feature was a 20 minute piece about developments in women's cinema. It is particularly notable that Large Door chose to include a feature on *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel* in this initial episode. It can be suggested that this inclusion revealed their hopes for a symbiosis between film and television in Britain, reflective of the *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel* model. This subject was returned to throughout the three series of *Visions*, being broached in discussions and interviews with a range of filmmaking personnel. Furthermore, although primarily a review programme concerned with recent cinematic releases and industry developments, *Visions* also showcased specially commissioned short films, produced by both British and European directors. As such, it reflected the activities of ZDF. Ellis, Hartog and Griffiths were also influenced by French film magazine series *Cinéma, Cinémas*, which was broadcast at that time on French national television channel Antenne 2. While producing *Visions*, they corresponded with personnel working on this series and even devoted an episode to *Cinéma, Cinémas*, screening a compilation of features from the French programme in an hour long episode broadcast on the 23rd May 1984. Although *Visions* did not always follow a magazine format, Ellis has since stated that many of the formal aspects of the programme and the decision to showcase original film commissions were heavily influenced by *Cinéma, Cinémas*. In showing both film reviews and showcasing short films, *Visions* sought to revolutionise film programming on British television, inhabiting a creative hinterland between established fiction and non-fiction formats.

While *Visions* was predominantly broadcast late on Wednesday evenings⁵, single episodes appeared in a range of time slots with different start times across each series. These varied from 9pm in the evening through to 11:30pm, with episodes commencing at varying increments between these two points. Although Ellis challenged Channel 4's late-night, irregular, scheduling of *Visions* during the course of its third series, suggesting that its late-night position adversely affected viewer ratings, it can be suggested that this allowed Large Door to maintain an academic tone that may not have been acceptable in an earlier viewing slot. Ellis critiqued the style of presentation used in the programme, commenting later that a 'seriousness' of tone pervaded the much of the content.⁶ I would argue that *Visions* maintained this seriousness of tone throughout its three series, speaking directly to an audience of academics and filmmakers. Indeed, when interviewing Ellis last year, I asked him if Large Door had an intended audience in mind when producing *Visions* and he confirmed that it was made primarily for 'people like ourselves'.⁷

Throughout its three series *Visions* included regular features on French film festivals, interviews with French filmmakers and evaluation of French film legislation. It can be argued that French models of film funding and the critical discourses of French theory informed much of the programme's content and pervasive ideology. Initial evaluation of French cinema was carried out during the third episode of the first series⁸, which included two half hour features on French film funding and popular exhibition spaces. One of these features, entitled 'French film policy', examined the funding structures and bodies responsible for supporting French film production in the early 1980s. It included an interview with French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, who suggested that state support was integral to the cultivation of a healthy national cinema. Throughout the interview Lang speaks directly to camera, drawing comparisons between the film industries of Britain and France, while suggesting that the British government (under Thatcher) had been responsible for renouncing the UK's national cinema. The role of French television as a funder and exhibitor of film is also discussed throughout the course of the interview and French broadcasters are praised by Lang who states that 'our television does more than any other country for films'. The inclusion of this quote in the programme's final edit arguably served to emphasise Large Door's opinions regarding the future of British film production, particularly in relation to the support of public service broadcasters. Here, the French system is held up as an exemplary model; the implicit suggestion being that the

British film industry would benefit from similar levels of state intervention and a heightened symbiosis between small and large screen cultures. Later episodes reinforced the series' relationship with France, with the inclusion of two features dedicated to the Cannes film festival.⁹ When Cannes is discussed in these episodes, interviewees refer to the increasing commercialisation and Americanisation of the festival. It can be argued that implicit to this criticism was an idealised memory of Cannes' historic past as a showcase for innovation that witnessed the birth of momentous cinematic landmarks such as the development of postwar 'art film', the birth of the French New Wave and auteurism.¹⁰ As such, France is invested with near-mythic status as the site of an elevated film culture, which has repeatedly been threatened by potentially damaging external forces. This was reinforced by the inclusion of an acerbic interview with Dirk Bogarde in an episode broadcast on 29th May 1985, in which he discussed his role as the Cannes festival president in 1984. Throughout the course of this interview he discusses the increasing involvement of American money in the festival and suggests that the competition results are commonly fixed to please Hollywood. In both of the *Visions* features on Cannes, the festival is depicted as an entity under threat from the pressures of commerce.

Throughout *Visions*' three series there was, both implicit and explicit, suggestion that 1980s British cinema had succumbed to the pressures of commercialism and populism. In her recent monograph, *Je t'aime... moi non plus*, Lucy Mazdon discusses the implied dichotomy that commonly influences evaluation of these two national cinemas. She suggests that academic discourse depicts Britain as a country 'where the films of Hollywood are allowed, indeed encouraged, to dominate, where the director is just a figure on a budget-driven conveyor belt where state support for film is unreliable and often more or less nonexistent. France, on the other hand, is a nation of cinephiles, a country in which film is taken seriously'.¹¹ This attitude was reinforced throughout *Visions*, as French film culture and funding practices were repeatedly depicted as superior to those of Britain.

As I have already mentioned earlier in this paper, *Visions* provided a platform for the screening of short fiction films. Notable examples included Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman's twelve minute film *J'ai Faim, J'ai Froid* (1984), which received its television premier as part of the third series.¹² A second short by Akerman, *A Family Business* (1984), was directly funded by Large Door and screened during the following episode. It can be suggested that this focus on experimental French

language cinema reflected the producers' shared interest in both European and Anglo-American critical theory. *J'ai Faim, J'ai Froid* playfully engages with French post-structuralist discourse, as the film's dialogue alludes to the shifting meaning of language and the possibility for multiple textual readings. The inclusion of Akerman's work may also be seen as indicative of American (and British) scholars' growing interest in French women directors during the 1980s, which developed alongside the broader proliferation of French critical theory in American and British universities during this period.¹³ Akerman's films invite both the formalist readings typical of European academia at this time and the feminist and gender studies methods of analysis typically associated with US cultural studies departments in the 1970s and 1980s. These theoretical binaries arguably reinforced *Visions'* intellectual locus at an intersection between French and Anglo-American modes of film criticism, embodied by the series' repeated shift from cultural studies to formalist critical frameworks.

To conclude, *Visions* represented a significant, yet short-lived, innovation in British broadcasting. It was both formally and conceptually experimental, combining elements of the film showcase and the film review programme in a way that was previously unfamiliar to British audiences. It drew successfully on the models established by *Das Kleine Ferneshpiel* and *Cinéma, Cinémas*, bringing European styles of programming and modes of thinking to British television. I would argue that the series was indicative of its time, both as a reaction against Barry Norman's *Film* programme, and a response to the new opportunities for experimentation offered by fledgling broadcaster Channel 4. Although incredibly innovative, it was at times wilfully obscure in its mode of address and ultimately failed to attract significant audience numbers, being aimed at the cineaste, or academic viewer. Its failure to attract a large audience can also, in part, be attributed to late-night scheduling, which was only really capable of attracting a limited, niche audience. In the late 1980s, arguably as a result of increasing commercial pressure, Channel 4's film programming would undergo a stylistic and conceptual shift, moving away from the notion of the perceived cineaste viewer that was central to Large Door's vision. Subsequent film programmes would cultivate a new audience, targeting the implicitly youthful figure of the geek film fan, whose taste encompassed the popular and cult ends of the cinematic spectrum. Although European film would still feature in subsequent Channel 4 cinema programmes, the tone and style of presentation would

shift, becoming more accessible and audience-friendly as the broadcaster entered the start of its second decade on the air.

¹ Su Holmes, *British TV and Film Culture in the 1950s: Coming to a TV Near You*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2005); p. 10.

² Peter Richards, 'Flim flam: The trouble with Barry (and others...)', *The Listener*, 119(3056), 1988; p. 35.

³ John Ellis, 'Visions: a Channel 4 experiment 1982-5', in Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton (eds.), *Experimental British Television*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 136-145; p. 139.

⁴ John Ellis, 'Visions: a Channel 4 experiment 1982-5', in Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton (eds.), *Experimental British Television*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 136-145; p. 139.

⁵ Apart from two 1983 episodes which were broadcast on Thursday evenings, appearing on Thursday 3rd March and Thursday 31st March.

⁶ John Ellis, 'Visions: a Channel 4 experiment 1982-5', in Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton (eds.), *Experimental British Television*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 136-145; p. 139.

⁷ John Ellis, personal communication, November 18, 2011.

⁸ This was transmitted on 8th December 1982 at 10:45pm.

⁹ Broadcast respectively on 25th May 1983 and 29th May 1985.

¹⁰ Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It's So French!: Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007); pp.57-8).

¹¹ Lucy Mazdon, 'Introduction: Franco-British Cinematic Relations: An Overview', in Lucy Mazdon and Catherine Wheatley (eds.), *Je T'aime...Moi Non Plus: Franco-British Cinematic Relations* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 1-15; p. 7.

¹² Broadcast at 10:50pm on 17th October 1984.

¹³ Phil Powrie, 'Four Decades of Teaching and Research in French Cinema', in Will Higbee and Sarah Leahy (eds.), *Studies in French Cinema: UK Perspectives 1985-2010*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), pp. 355-371; p. 359.