Alan Fountain, 24/02/11

Alan Fountain was Senior Commissioning Editor at Channel 4's Independent Film and Video Department, 1981–1994.

Interviewers: Justin Smith and Rachael Keene

JS: Oh yes, wonderful, wonderful...So...you were involved in the IFA, and you were on the board of the BFI Production Board before...so how did you come to be...was it through Jeremy Isaacs' connection at the BFI?

AF: I think so yes. That's where I met him, because Jeremy became Chair of the BFI Production Board shortly after I went onto it. Jeremy...he can speak for himself but I think he wanted to [join the Board] because he obviously had an incredible knowledge of television but he didn't really know anything about the independent sector or the IFA [Independent Filmmakers Association] or even the AIP [Association of Independent Producers] independent sector really. A smart guy...he really wanted to get that job, and he thought I'll go and learn...so then he met all these people. I think to begin with he thought...we were verging on crazy! We used to have these very interesting arguments and discussions with him. And then when Channel 4 came up, I then applied for one of the jobs....I applied and I got the job, and I'm sure I got the job because Jeremy knew me...the commissioning editors he knew all of them, or he made sure they knew him. There were other people interviewed, but I think in that sense I was lucky really. I'm sure if I'd applied out of the blue and they hadn't heard of me I would never have got it.

JS: So what was your CV, Alan, as it were, before [then]...

AF: Well the reason I think that...my CV before that was that I...my quick life story as it were. I left school at 18, I didn't go to University, and went to do...other sort of things. I then...in my mid-20s, went to University, went to Nottingham, studied Philosophy, and they had at that time they had one of the first Film Studies degrees in the UK. It wasn't actually a degree - it was what you would now call a module, which was run by Robin Wood. By that time I was a sort of crazy Marxist, I spent all my time...I think we ruined his [life]...we were telling him to read *Screen*. Anyway...and then they offered me a grant to do a PhD, and I never finished it. I then got a job as film officer at East Midlands Arts, which was the first film officer [position that] they had...at that time the BFI Education Department was geared towards teachers who wanted to do film and media in schools. We used to do day conferences and summer schools. And then we started to do production, and working with cinemas...And that's where I also started getting involved in the IFA, which had begun by then. This is all in the mid 70s.

JS: And in the East Midlands, was there a commitment to that kind of new work, or were you also exhibiting you know independent feature films or anything like that?

AF: ...At that time, you know the regional film theatre network, run by the BFI mainly, was extremely strong. And the Nottingham film theatre was very strong....So we...did quite a lot with them and their programming. But we also worked with cinemas in Derby, we established something in Leicester, established something in Milton

Keynes...and, in Nottingham...something called The Midland Group, like an arts centre, which was rebuilt and a new cinema put in. And that became a cinema very much for independent work really, a range of independent work and art cinema. We ran quite a lot of seasons in Nottingham and Leicester. The exhibition and distribution side was quite an important part of that, along with education. And then I left there to start up a production company, with one guy in particular, Geoff Baggott.

JS: In a sense you continued to work, at Channel 4, with lots of people that you already knew in that sector. To what extent did it change your relationship with them? To what extent did they see you as the great provider, or conversely, of having moved... [AF: across the board]...

AF: In the early days it was quite collaborative really. The IFA was quite strong then, and also the whole issue of the ACTT and the establishment of the Workshop Declaration. That became quite an important part of the first couple of years of Channel 4, because we had to negotiate all the agreements [with the unions] which was in the end my [responsibility]...and a guy called Frank McGettigan, who was Head of Industrial Relations, we spent quite a bit of time with the unions. There were quite a lot of disagreements but we more or less got over it I think. Because in a way initially a lot of the independents but also Jeremy Isaacs, saw me as...in a sense representing the sector...establishing the workshops and the budgets for *The Eleventh Hour*. My sense was the sector was broadly - particularly in the early years - happy with it...On the whole people were...very reasonable...in terms of accepting that in the end there had to be choices and things like that...It was OK...Inevitably it changes the relationship because you're sitting there deciding whether someone gets to make a movie or not, or get their workshop financed or whatever. So it does change the relationship. One of the strange things that happened that was partly to do with that [which] I felt, even at the time, was a problem, was that as the 80s went on, in a way the pressure from outside [Channel 4] became less and less. So you know...the IFA gradually began to sort of fall away as...a body that could hold Channel 4 to account...Half the people in it were then busily trying to make films and get commissions really, so the political activity which has been quite strong in terms of negotiating with Channel 4 and trying to have a share of the cake began to reduce I would say.

RK: So did it feel as though that there wasn't the same cohesive filmmaking culture with sort of an agenda as there was in the 70s?

AF: Definitely...yes I would say so really...I mean the thing is if you haven't got anything...which uh in a way the independent sector didn't really have until Channel 4...I mean of course it was quite a...of course there were lots of arguments and people didn't like each other's films sometimes...but that was fairly minimal. So the IFA was quite an organization which sort of spanned sort of...political realist workshops across to sort of very experimental people...so you've got Cinema Action and Amber, Malcolm Le Grice and co. - all in the same room. Everybody shared a view that they wanted to see independent films on television, to see finance for that and try to fight for that with Channel 4...That unifies...and then when the money's there...it inevitably kind of changes things. And people sort of switch a bit more to a mode of just getting on with the work. The IFA...in the end it was [composed of] a relatively small number of people who really did most of the [creative] work...like any of these organizations...The union debate went on...the ACTT side of it...that sort of

went on longer really, in the end [it] was a more bitter thing when Channel 4 decided to stop funding the workshops...that was quite a big issue I'd say. What happened with the ACTT and the workshops was that a guy called Roy Lockett was the Deputy General Secretary then, he became very interested...a very unusual guy because he was a strong trade unionist but he was also very interested in culture, and cultural policy. And he got the idea of the workshops and saw that that could be very interesting, a new sort of...cultural policy and regionalism creating jobs...with trade union agreements. He was very supportive of all that and continued to be. My feeling was that what happened with the workshop movement...it's complicated but...[regarding] the funding side, a number of the funders under the pressure of Thatcherism, began to pull the money out of...left-wing councils...the BFI was under pressure and was never really fully convinced about the workshops. We'd sold workshops to C4 in a way in terms of saying C4 is the major funder but it's not the *only* funder...it began more and more to look like C4 is the only funder or close to it. It got to the point where the channel wanted to move on really, and I think also that in the Department, Rod Stoneman, Caroline Spry and I found ourselves in a tricky position because we were sitting with a budget and we were also dealing with a lot of independents who weren't in workshops. And often programmes and films we wanted to finance, we couldn't because quite a big chunk of money was going into the workshops. We began to think can we continue [like this]? Neither we nor the workshops were able to think flexibly enough about how you could change [the] workshops, how you could rethink what it was all about. There are lots of complicated reasons why it stopped, why the funding stopped. The strange thing is...a lot of the people who were in workshops are still working...in the long-term we produced really good people...they gave a sort of space to people. The ones that were really successful were people who were really clear about what they were trying to do...Amber, Black Audio, Sankofah. They all had a real agenda about why they wanted to make what they were making, what sort of films they wanted to make, why they wanted to make them. Some of the other workshops...didn't have that cohesiveness. Some of the workshops were more...based around a group of filmmakers within a community more than sort of having a thriving sort of political aesthetic cohesion about them. And the ones that did have that, really good work came out of I think.

JS: You were in a unique position as a Commissioning Editor...among your peers in that you had money for that grant-based investment as well as a commissioning budget. Am I right in thinking, based on what you just said, that in a sense it was your decision what the split of that would be, in terms of how much of it you put into...direct grant-aid and how much of it you used to commission individual projects?

AF: The way that it worked then was that there was sort of like an annual budget round, so we would then put together our proposal for what we wanted to do which was, on the whole, like most people's budgets, slot-related. So the budget was related to what sort of things you wanted to do with *The Eleventh Hour*, what we wanted to do with *People to People*. Obviously we began then to develop other slots, like *Cinema from Three Continents*, which was the third world cinema [strand]. Or you know *The Media Show*...in each case in advance we would make the argument for a budget. The money for the workshops was one [separate] section of the overall budget and it was a locked-up budget...So part of it was commissioning, part of it was buying, a lot of pre-buying. The Third World cinema [season] for example. So

we had a very free hand...certainly under Jeremy Isaacs' regime, we had a free hand in terms of what we wanted to invent, and what we wanted to support.

RK: And with something like *The Eleventh Hour*, did you feel that you wanted a slot particularly you know that late night slot, did you feel that that was the right thing for Independent Film and Video, or was that something that the schedule demanded of you?

AF: In the run up to Channel 4, I remember going to a thing...I think it was at the LSE, it was like a discussion about this new channel. And I remember that Eckhart Stein, a Commissioning Editor from Germany, was there. He had run a slot for quite a while which actually still exists interestingly enough, on ZDF, which is called *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel*, which is very similar to *The Eleventh Hour* - it was, then, an eclectic sort of slot, which was all independent, and a late-night slot. So when I began at Channel 4 my memory is that that was what I was presented with...along with the workshops - then there was a debate about how much money to give to them...there wasn't a discussion about that [whether to fund them in the first place]...that had already been agreed. The workshops had proposed, they'd written a thing to C4 proposing that C4 establish a sort of foundation, an independently funded thing, but C4 didn't agree to it. So anyway they said we won't do that but we'll have a budget for workshops. And then I was presented with the workshops and *The Eleventh Hour* slot – to be defined, but more or less like the German thing- and then *People to People* which was a slot that I shared initially with uh Paul Madden and Sue Woodford...So those were the 3 things that I had. And then over time we began to invent these other things....It's ironic really, one of the big tussles with Jeremy was, you know because his stance would be to say (in a way it was very good but it also had its downside) - I'd go to the budget meeting and always the accountant would be sitting there and Jeremy would sort of say - 'I declare we're going to give this amount of money and the slot's going to last a thousand years and there's nothing else to talk about'! And that would be the end of the discussion! It wasn't always like that, but once or twice it was like that. That was his sort of attitude which of course was very good and very supportive *but* you were in a nice prison...When we said 'OK we want to get out of *The Eleventh Hour*', he said, 'Well let's do 'The Best of *The Eleventh Hour*' at 9 o'clock at night but it never quite happened. But it's sort of debatable really because you could argue that had we fought to the death and kept *The Eleventh Hour* and it was still there then you would still have a slightly crazy slot which could do things that no-one else on British TV was going to do. In a way it's a pity that Channel 4, between us all, didn't manage to do that. *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel* is still valuable, it still funds a lot of first time filmmakers, the stuff that no-one else is going to finance. So it does have a real value and there isn't really any equivalent in the UK now...When Grade came, Grade said, 'I don't like *The Eleventh Hour*, it's ghetto rubbish, I don't understand it and what you should do is come up with ideas which will go into the peak time and if I like them I'll give you some money and if I don't I won't'. It's like you've got to grow up and be real. His attitude was that he would professionalise the channel. Because Grade certainly hadn't been Head of the Production Board - he knew *nothing* really about [independent film]...a nice guy, I always got on well with him, talking about football but I never had one serious conversation with Michael Grade about what I was doing at Channel 4 or what we were aiming to do. I think he sort of slightly feared even getting involved with it, or even talking about it, because it was unknown to him really...his idea was 'What's this crazy stuff? Why don't you want to make some decent television programmes?'

That was his offer - which was OK up to a point because we then could do some hopefully interesting, more mainstream stuff, when you're still working with the independents. But the price was [that] *The Eleventh Hour* went. And then of course once you're fighting over slots you can disappear very easily, it becomes tricky really.

JS: And it becomes ratings-driven.

AF: In a way more...more pressure on that. I can't say I was ever that 'done over' by the ratings. It was never really an issue for *The Eleventh Hour*. When you look at the ratings for *The Eleventh Hour* they were amazing, and some of the ratings for things like *Cinema from Three Continents*, which went out very late on a Sunday night [were also very good]. People used to say the ratings aren't very high and I used to say fine – when did you last fill Wembley Stadium 4 times [over] to watch an African feature film?

RK: Did you sort of...get any response directly [from the audience] or did you get a sense of what viewers were thinking about *The Eleventh Hour*, about Independent Film and Video?

AF: It varied a lot actually...You don't mean from the producers, you mean from the audience itself? [RK: From the audience itself] Sometimes...it's one of the problems of television really, sometimes there's a deathly silence...When you look at the feedback that came back from the audience – it might be more now there's e-mail and social networking, there's more ways that audiences can respond - in those days every morning you'd get the phone responses and some letters and there wasn't much, unless it was something controversial. There was always someone who said 'Thank God you've showed that programme it was the most amazing thing I've ever seen'. You'd get the biggest response from political subjects I'd say. Where, for instance during the miner's strike where we were showing broadly pro-miner programmes you'd get a bigger audience, you'd get a bigger phone-in response to those....It was true of all of Channel 4 at that time, it was only if there was something controversial or political [that people contacted the Channel].

JS: I want to sort of ask you a bit more about your Commissioning Editor role...were you a hands-off producer? I know, for example, that David Rose, as far as feature film was concerned was quite involved in some of the films he commissioned. But was there a sense of...promoting the integrity of the independent sector and its independence?

AF: I think Isaacs in a way was quite strong in saying 'You're not producers - you're commissioning editors letting people who make films make films'. What we'd do was argue if we didn't like something or thought that something should be changed, or end differently or whatever. We might spend a lot of time arguing about it but in the end the decision would be left to them. Once we really got going we were handling a lot of different kinds of programmes and films, a lot of which were made in different parts of the world. It was very difficult to have a kind of [hands-on approach]. Nowadays with technology it would be much easier. But in those days we were waiting for a kind of scratchy rough-cut from Argentina and by the time it arrived they would have moved on anyway. So we...sat and watched it being translated, so in some ways that was quite difficult. I wouldn't say we had a hands-off thing, [even with] the workshops, because we would always look at fine cuts or rough cuts and

have relationships. By the time I stopped I felt differently because I felt that we left people too much to their own devices, where we should have been more helpful to them...What I learnt subsequently by doing it all, and then certainly through later work with EAVE [European Audio-Visual Entrepreneurs] and getting to know a lot more producers in Europe...working on preview scripts and developing people. If I started that job again [with Channel 4] with what I know now what I'd try to do would not change the power relationships but just be more enabling – why don't you work with a script editor, why don't you do that, why don't you do this? To try to help people go further [rather] than just saying 'here's the money, get on with it'. I think we did that too much. People left because often they didn't have professionalism...

JS: Was that particularly true of the workshop structure? It created an autonomy?

AF: The workshop structure was very much about arms-length funding really, and people having a high level of freedom. I'm not sure really because...I think the quality of the workshop work was amongst the best work we ever did...Quite a lot of people were making television programmes for the first time ever. Part of what the whole Department was about...you could say that *access* to television, both to produce television, and for the audience to see more...was the one word that in a way covered everything we did, whether it was grassroots groups working in *People to People* or some Latin American director, or a group of women that wanted to work together on a feminist documentary. Everything was about people who'd never got their work financed or shown on British television before. In a way that was one of our criteria. So if somebody showed up with a film that we thought, there's no reason...for instance, why David [Rose] couldn't finance it, then we'd say look go down the corridor - he's your man, or if the Education Department or the Documentary...We'd say go to them – we are working with people who will not be worked with by anyone else!

JS: That's a great ethos...I mean were you driven, for example, by...video as a nascent technology [AF: Yes, absolutely...] and I know you had a commitment also to setting up production facilities in the regions and so on too. There were some over-arching drivers to your commissioning ethos?

AF: With the workshops, obviously part of the idea of the workshops was to have these regional centres and obviously we needed to follow up with that...to equip them by buying Steenbecks and things like that, and then as you say, video. A lot of them were buying video cameras and editing stuff. So it was partly about creating the facilities in the regions, but it was also partly about the whole idea of the regional voice, and having programmes directly from people living in different parts of the country. Because part of what I was doing in Nottingham - and the IFA was very strong regionally - when I went into C4 I had a very strong commitment to the regions. You could say the politics of the department, and you could say the channel as a whole up to a point, was we felt, a political analysis – who are the people who haven't had access to television? The working class, women, black people, gays...it was the rainbow coalition really, and so OK - these are the people that we want to have a voice in British television in different types of programme. And again probably you could say a Third-World-ism as well, which came up through the politics of the 60s and 70s. That's what got us into the Third World filmmaking. I always feel in a way what happened at Channel 4, was at the beginning of Channel 4, it was sort of 60 politics finally hit television but it was like, you know...10 to 15 years later! And if

you look at a lot of my colleagues at Channel 4 - Carol Haslam, Sue Woodford, Paul Madden, Michael Kustow – these are all people who are '68 people in various different ways. Carol was sort of a big Stuart Hall fan, do you know what I mean? A lot of those feelings and politics a lot of us we shared in different ways. But they tended to be – Michael wasn't – but the others tended to be more conventional in terms of television. A few like Carol, Sue and Paul had worked in state TV, and they had more television production experience, and they were more...I saw them as more conservative aesthetically, in a way, than we were. But the politics we shared.

They were very predictable issues that came up with us. The technical issues were generally OK because they broadly accepted the argument that, it's a new channel - people make things on Super 8 or this or that and it's our duty to show it. And they would say OK – show it. It was the politics, whether it was issues of Ireland or issues of sexuality which were more difficult – issues of balance...across the whole schedule, or series or slot. We were sort of protected so we'd be quite militant and say we'd do this or that and say we're here and we feel it should be possible for someone to come and express a particular viewpoint, and that could be balanced across the TV schedule or the TV system. We'd tie them up in knots! I can't claim that it was a big fight, there were odd programmes that [had problems]. There were some programmes where we had to do some re-edits but not so many...Often it wasn't them...it would sometimes be heavyweight politicians who'd be on the phone...in the case of Ireland it might often be top politicians ringing up Channel 4 and saying what on earth are you doing putting on this pro-IRA stuff? Things like that. Around the Miner's Strike – there were issues there about what programmes are being shown, whose point of view is being shown. We could often argue that the whole purpose of Channel 4 was to open up new possibilities for British television. And it was quite difficult for people to argue against that in those days. Unless you were really...you know with something like the initial gay or lesbian programmes it wasn't the IBA, it was the tabloid press that killed that off in the beginning.

RK: So were you very much talking about Ireland, and I know there was a season of films, were you in very much in favour of presenting the material in seasons as a contextualisation and to give it continuity?

AF: That's right, yeah. There were different routes to that, really. Because one thing was...in the 70s when there was a lot of discussion about how to present independent film, and there was this idea about contextualising screenings by having discussions [afterwards] and all this kind of thing. At that time it was quite a hot debate. I think we kind of took that idea about...having a wider context. And I think the other thing that we were always quite aware of really...in a practical way, was how to make an intervention onto television. We felt that if you put together a season about something, even if it was late-night, and then you produce the booklets and you try to get some coverage, that that would make some greater impact with the audience, and some greater political impact. That was one of the reasons to be interested in seasons and series as well....I always felt really...with television, something I differed with Isaacs [on] really. He often talked about C4 at its best of being about the individual programme-maker, speaking to the individual member of the audience. Which is a nice idea, and in a way its right and I of course support that. But I also feel that television is in a way very much about volume – the ideological battle in television, is about volume. It's about over and over and over and over seeing the same sorts of representation of things...that's what the political power of

TV is to me, it's about incessantly [doing] the same. In a way you've got to be different and you've got to take it on those terms, you've got to do something more substantial...it's an impossible battle.

JS: I was always struck by what an incredible achievement you made in bringing that range of work to the screen, and to new audiences. And to some extent you know, if it's not too grandiose an idea I think in actually defining the independent sector which had been in the 70s certainly, yes very active but sort of amorphous and nebulous to some extent. And I suppose one of the things that I think about that is the extent to which in defining something you also sort of to some extent limit it or put boundaries around it. And that seems to me to tie in with something you said earlier about the notion of you all in a sense being '68 children, and the extent to which this was sort of a generational thing. It could only have happened...for that brief dawn...in the mid 1980s and was inevitably kind of going to seed [?] into something else.

AF: I agree with that...I think you're right that what we did in a way defined what the independent sector is. At the time we felt we had a strong sense of it. We did try to recognize different components of it and tried to make sure that they all had some space in what we were doing. By today's standards we did what anybody would call experimental work, in film and video. I know there's a lot of the people in the sort of experimental camp who say 'they didn't do as much as they could have done'; David Curtis, for example. Fair enough but I think particularly you know Rod Stoneman I think who very much led the way with that work because he was very close to it. To me he did a remarkable job, and if you look at any television system anywhere in the world you can't find one that does anything like that kind of work. Of course you can always do more but I don't think it was so bad. One of the things that I felt was an important part was working with video workshops and the idea of democratizing television. In a way you could say that...when I think about it myself, it's a total analysis...When I started we thought we'd change television and do something different, and have a different conception of television. In a way one of the good things is that new television has made a lot of the things we wanted to do much more possible – both inside and outside television. I know one time one of the things we thought about...was the idea of just having a big box at the reception at Channel 4 where *anyone* could come and drop their video into it, and we would show any of it as long as it didn't break the law. So it would have been free access. It would have been great. In a way that does happen, it's called You Tube.

JS: But it's moved, it's changed, it doesn't have the institutional baggage. Television is always politically sensitive.

AF: What was the other thing you said to me...you said something else and I didn't [answer it]?

JS: I'm interested in...I suppose what happened with that brief wonderful kind of flowering...is my sense...2 things really. The thing you said earlier about Grade...but was it also true that the sources dried up, and was that for other reasons which you can't blame Grade or television culture for? Did something change at the grassroots?

AF: No, I think one of the things that happened I think...obviously when Thatcherism showed up [we were] on a collision course really. Thatcher was fine about Channel 4 because she thought it was [aiding?] the creation of small British businesses [?] she didn't care what was on the screen, and it was the thing which broke everything else

in television...The point of difficulty was the ideological battle. A lot of the people we worked with, the vast majority of them, somehow came from this culture and this politics which was now under sort of serious threat and was going to change you know...you need to think of the fall of the [Berlin] Wall, the crisis of socialism, the increasing dominance of market ideology. All these factors which affected Channel 4 and what happened to it. And those were the things that mattered, more than what happened between us as Commissioning Editors inside, or even Grade and Isaacs...you can't avoid it. And in the end I think a lot of the people...someone like Stuart [Cosgrove]...I think by the time Stuart took over, he who had been in the left and in a way moved over to the right, I think he looked at everything we did and saw it as hopelessly anachronistic and not right for the new period. But the new period turned out to be sort of reality television, sexualisation blah blah blah. Of course, I would say that but it did...But unless you've got a very clear idea of how to ride that change, and how to adapt, how to deal with the suppliers and find different ones. Unless you really think that through, and you're in an organization that wants to think that through, you've had it. That's what I felt at the end, was how long do I want to stay at Channel 4 because do I really want to be [constantly] fighting, to keep the slots and keep the budget and everything else? And I also felt, to be absolutely honest, which in a way is kind of the answer to your question I think, it was I know we have to shift and change and re-think. But do I have the capacity to do it, whilst I'm doing this job at the same time? Which, those jobs if you do them properly are very demanding. And I felt I don't have really...I haven't really got the answer to this whilst I'm there. I thought, well the writing's on the wall, it was time to go. And also I spent all day saying no. [JS: Really?] Well the thing was we'd built up this quite large British, European, and, up to a point, global network of producers, all of whom thought you know oh I'm going to get hold of Alan at Channel 4...so I sat there all day saying 'sorry I've spent the next year's budget, I love the programme but I can't do anything'. So the job became quite tricky really...very difficult to manage really. Because the demand, [and the people] looking to Channel 4 and to that Department was sort of, it's a small thing of course, but within that environment it was huge. I still go around the world now and meet people [who] say oh yes you worked at Channel 4. I felt it's partly our fault [that we didn't capitalise on that recognition?] because we didn't publicise what we did enough. Channel 4 never really realized the impact it had made internationally, globally...they didn't care about it actually.

JS: ...Work was still being made, things were still going on, people were still knocking at your door...in a sense Channel 4 created something that it then couldn't fulfil or couldn't...maintain...certainly...under the ethos that it then adopted or developed...But of course in the meantime, to some extent, the other providers in the sector...I'm thinking of the BFI Production Board in particular, had gone to the wall. Channel 4 had become...yours had become the only door to knock on.

AF: That, also, was a sort of global phenomenon as well, a lot of the...particularly feature film and documentary makers that we worked of...getting something out of Channel 4, the money was useful...the sort of imprimatur to go to other funders was useful. That all dried up....You're absolutely right...

JS: The pressure increased as it were from producers...from people who were making work, but at the other side, y'know the slots, the schedule, the opportunities and the budget was disappearing. Was your budget cut during the time you were there significantly?

AF: It began to go down, I can't remember the figures now....Well, *The Eleventh Hour* had gone, which was tricky. Because it meant we were operating in a different environment. *Cinema from Three Continents*, which was an important thing that we did. That, after a while...

[Brief interruption as AF takes a phone call]

JS: 'Cos I think you had about, sort of, 1 and a half million a year to begin with, didn't you?

AF: To begin with, and we got it up to about ten or eleven or something like that at some point, and then it began to go down again. And things like [the Third World film season] *South*, we got *South* going. It was difficult to get people to continue with that. That was something like a million pounds a year, it was a lot of money. Again that was a tricky one because we were desperately trying to get Arte who were going to buy them, to co-produce it, because it seemed like the perfect thing to work together. We could never quite convince their commissioning editor there. So again you'd go back to Channel 4, who said, 'you said you were going to get a co-production'...so it was those sorts of things.

JS: I was going to ask you about that actually, because one of the things that strikes me, in observing these kind of...shifts and changes that happen towards the end of the 80s and in the early 90s, is that the...the sort of international aspect of work commissioned and of collaborative funding seems to me to become much more significant, and in a sense, what you started off with in a sense was promoting British grassroots independent film and video work but in a sense it took on a much more international aspect.

AF: Yes, well the funny thing is you know that we began...have you got the big book? The funny thing was that actually we began doing the international stuff incredibly early you know, in 1982 the season...we did Ireland, the silent voices, we did Women and Film, and then we did the first season of new cinema of Latin America, all in 1982. So we sort of continued that, if you look at a lot of the one-off programmes of *The Eleventh Hour*, a lot of them were international documentaries or fiction, Africa on Africa was '83. I can't remember when we did the Chinese one, I think that was late 80s. I can't remember exactly but the height [?] we got to with *Cinema from Three Continents*, which was a late Sunday night slot. At one point we had something like 40 slots in a year. We were buying and pre-buying a lot of films...and then that was eventually whittled down and it went. And to a lot of the filmmakers around the world that we were trying to work with...it was one of a small number of markets that they could sell their work to. So they depended on us.

RK: Of those commissions are there any that you were particularly proud of...and that you thought were really successful...both international and just outside of the workshops.

AF: We did a lot of stuff really...a lot of the...I can never remember all the titles now. But quite a lot of the films that we bought or pre-bought for *Three Continents* area, for instance won prizes at Cannes or other top festivals...they were successful in international terms, not really recognized by Channel 4. And um in terms of individual work, something like *Last of England*, or *Blue*, which we were involved with. *The Garden*, Derek Jarman's film. Amber as a workshop. And if you look at a lot of the

political documentaries, the Miners Films I thought were very successful, for what we were aiming at. They got some of the biggest audiences we ever got....Expressing the miners' point of view....*The Battle of Orgreave* got a good rating.

RK: Now that you mention documentary, a lot of the workshops were producing documentary film, did you feel that you had to push them to move into features at all?

AF: No - not really, we were happy with that mix really. Also to be honest, for many of them we didn't have the money. If you look at the ones which were successful with fiction, Amber was probably the most successful. They...are an outstanding group of people. They had a very clear idea of what they wanted to do, they knew they were going to do it for the next 30 years. They learnt about how to make fiction well, very unusual fiction, on a low budget. They realized how to get all the stuff to work with television, you needed to keep the money low. They were...highly unusual people really. There was another workshop called Frontroom who were very different, but they made very unusual fiction films. Again, low budget - did well with audiences. The majority of the workshops were not really geared up for fiction. One of the Irish ones...made a very nice fiction film...with the woman who became a famous rock star. *Hush a Bye Baby* it was called. With...what's her name? [JS: Sinead O'Connor...] We sort of encouraged them to do what they were best at. We were wary about them plunging into fiction without knowing what they were doing. Unfortunately now I have no record of all the things that we did, apart from that book. So...I often find it difficult to remember sort of individual programmes. [RK: It's very difficult...without looking through the listings...] Yes, it's very difficult.

JS: Well this is part of Rachael's PhD project, in actual fact, to construct a kind of catalogue. And what we're using, as part of this project, in collaboration with the BUFVC we're digitizing all the weekly Press Information Packs, which will be on their website, under agreement with Channel 4. And it'll be fully searchable. So hopefully we can reconstruct...

AF: That's a really good idea. One of the people I should put you in touch with, I'll have to track it down on my computer. Um...a woman did a PhD partly to do with the independent sector, and partly to do with the workshops. I don't know if you're aware of it ever having been published, but she managed to track down quite a lot of programmes.

RK/JS: There was the AHRC project at Sunderland, and Charlotte Brundson's PhD student at Warwick on the more mainstream feature film production...

AF: One of the things that was really nice when I went to Middlesex, I went poking around the library there and I suddenly realized that lots of people in different subject areas had recorded the different programmes that we'd done, and put them in the library. Historians, sociologists, the film people....One of the nicest things that ever happened to me, when I left Channel 4 I met someone at an FE college who said I recorded every single Third World film you ever broadcast! Then I thought all this is sort of invisible for Channel 4, with the drip drip drip effect. Of course it's small scale but it means something to the people who saw them.

JS: The generational thing...Channel 4 did impact hugely on a whole generation not just within education but more widely. One of the other things I'm involved with [talks

about BUFVC's off-air recording scheme and effort to create a union catalogue of off-air recordings held nationally, to integrate with TRILT]. It's interesting at what point a particular point becomes history...open to archiving....that archival exercise, that mapping is well underway. We're also going to have a conference next year. We're hoping to get it to coincide with the 30th anniversary of Channel 4 in November. We're hoping to hold it at the National Media Museum, you're very welcome to attend...I think it's very sad that we've got to a sort of stage where a lot of the kind of work you were showcasing on Channel 4 sort of disappeared from view. It was briefly brought to the surface and stimulated, then it fell away again.

AF: The whole relationship of Channel 4 with the independents changed I think. Grade was in a way saying we've got to fight for the audience share.

RK: What amazes me in the early days is that, particularly late at night, you have programmes...of no consistent length...*The Eleventh Hour* and lots of shorts. You never see that on TV now.

AF: Absolutely. One of the things that I've always found a bit weird about this is that when television technologically has got to the point where they've got more airtime than they know what to do with...to my mind there is a political, or some sort of, conservatism really. Because they could quite easily show a lot more films from around the world, they could find them quite cheaply. They could just use the night. In my view British television consistently fails to see itself as a distribution system. And in a way it's amazing that the BBC manages to get away with it. In a way I'm a fan of the BBC of course I have a lot of criticisms...but I also think, certainly in international terms they completely fail to serve the public, it's extraordinary really...of course television everywhere is much the same....

JS: The very guarded and cautious way in which they're embracing the digital age and they're moving into their online profile but as you say and as you've written elsewhere, what an opportunity that is to derive user-generated content. It couldn't be easier now.

AF: The ethos is so strong...I was looking at the coverage of Tunisia...they take the attitude that unless a BBC journalist sees something it probably hasn't happened! When you look at the coverage of Al-Jazeera, for example, it's amazing.

JS: One of the things that we're asking people is...who else should we speak to...There's Rod [Stoneman], is he still in Ireland?

AF: Rod is um Head of the Irish Film School in Galway. He comes to London relatively frequently. I'm sure he'd like to do it. Have you got his contact, I'll get it for you.

JS: And is Caroline [Spry] still around?

AF: Yes I can give you her contact as well. She's teaching...

JS: That's super, thank you. The other thing we're hoping to do is to talk to as many of the sort of regular independents as it were who you worked with. We'd like to talk to Amber really...

RK: I've fallen in love with Amber...I'm definitely going to go up there.

AF: It definitely makes a difference when you go up there. You get the whole idea.

JS: One always wonders how long they can continue.

AF: The person to see is Ellin Hare.

RK: I know they have an archive as well...they always manage to sustain themselves in the community. They have had pubs in the past, they've got a cafe.

AF: They had a pub, they had a boat, they had a caravan, they had horses. And then they make a film around it, with the people...that's what you mean by serious. I remember I lived with a guy who was a housing activist, who said 'I'm going to be a housing activist in Nottingham for the next 40 years'. That commitment. Murray [Martin] was like that. He was one of the backbones of the whole workshop really.

JS: We're going to talk to Roger Graef.

AF: He was always very supportive of us. He was good. Have you talked to David Rose and Caroline?

JS: Yes, I've talked to David and to Jeremy Isaacs. He said you've got to talk to Alan. We're bit by bit mapping Channel 4's film coverage. Who else from the independent sector do you think would be good, approachable, or do you still know?

AF: Some of them will be disappeared or dead. Alex Graham might be someone to talk to. He's known a lot about Channel 4 from the beginning. When we did The Media Show, the first producer of that was Michael Jackson. The second producer was Alex Graham. I worked quite closely with Alex. He's the chief of Wall to Wall. He could be interesting...

JS: We've spoken to Paul Kerr, who was involved with the Media Show.

AF: That's right, yes. Another person who might be worth talking to, who's also in the academic world is Tony Dowmunt, do you know Tony? He's at Goldsmiths, and Tony was active in the video workshops at that time, so he was very into video and access. He could be a good person to talk to actually. Another person who was involved...he was involved in the Birmingham Film Workshop, and they very recently had a whole exhibition about culture in Birmingham, and a thing on the workshops was part of that. Roger...I can't remember. Roger Shannon. He might be someone to follow up. He lives in Birmingham...and works in a University in Liverpool, Edge Hill. Do you want his contact? I'm sure he'd be very interested, he's very keen...he was over in Ireland recently doing something on the workshops there, and is very keen on documenting the workshops. He'd have a different perspective...the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop was one of the ones where basically it was a facility where filmmakers would gather around it. Another very interesting person to talk to, another angle slightly is Jonnie Turpie. He was in the Birmingham Film Workshop and made some interesting...worked with young people, access programmes with young Birmingham working-class people who then became filmmakers themselves. In the mid 1990s he founded Maverick television...a major production company for Channel 4. He knows all the history, so he could be an interesting...he's not so into fiction although he made...within the Birmingham Workshop, he made a very interesting video fiction...shot on video. I can't remember what it's called [*Out of Order*]. Do you want his contact? The other thing that Rod would be good at is the experimental side

of things – video art. He knows all those people extremely well. Another person you could talk to is...a producer...Keith Griffiths. Keith's an interesting guy, he produced a film which won a prize in Cannes last year, a film called *Thailand* [inaudible]. He worked at the [BFI] Production Board, and then became a producer, producing a lot of television and fiction programmes. He works a lot with European producers. He would have an interesting overview. He is in a company with a guy called Simon Field...Simon was sort of like...an expert on experimental films, and then he became the Director of the Rotterdam Festival, and then he did that for several years...

JS: Did you...one thing that's quite interesting is, did you...we talked a little about David Rose and in a sense where the borders between your two roles [as commissioning editors] would be in terms of saying 'that's not me, that's David'....What sense...the person we haven't spoken to yet, who we will obviously want to talk to in due course, is David Aukin [AF: definitely]. What sense did you get? You were still around during his tenure as Drama or Fiction, whatever it was called then. How did you get on with David?

AF: Fine...to be honest there wasn't...the funny thing about David Rose was, when we were at the Channel, of course we had cups of coffee with him, perfectly friendly, and with Karin. But there was hardly any cross-over...it was very separate, they just got on with their own things. There wasn't a thing about borders. I think occasionally we would try to get hold of one of our people, someone like Jarman or Amber, some of the other people and say why don't you meet them and try to work with them. The thing was they had the money. The stuff that we did that was fiction that wasn't the workshops we sort of did it by...smoke and mirrors. We didn't have a budget for feature films really. So we didn't do that many. The ones that we did...well, one of the crucial things was the BFI, you see. One of the things that went through our department was the subvention to the BFI, so that was agreed with Jeremy, and then went through then department, but then we would also additionally co-produce with some of the BFI films. So that was a means, of between us, getting some more fiction done...or someone would turn up with some money...or we could do something very low budget. It was the first and third world, between us and David's department.

JS: What's interesting is there's relatively little cross-over in terms of production. Very few examples of filmmakers...[aside from] Jarman. I always wondered whether ...those kind of structures that you had at [Channel] Four]....militate against...or create a distinction between what's independent and what's mainstream.

AF: ...Probably I think if the two Davids thought we were working something, it would be someone almost by definition they wouldn't work with.

JS: Did you have a sense of David Aukin's ethos being more commercial?

AF: When you look at what David Aukin did it's pretty impressive, you can't really argue with it. He's still doing some interesting work....We were very friendly and I think Rod probably got to know David [Aukin] better than I did....we probably did talk to David Aukin but not that much. He had his own agenda and got on with it.

JS: Other things keep entering my head and I don't want to delay you. But what do you know about what sort of records you kept, what sort of paperwork you had in your department. We are in touch with Rosie Gleason...and there was talk at one

point that Channel Four would donate their archive to the BFI but it never happened. We don't know [what's in the archive]. They've got the minutes of the Board Meeting, correspondence, meetings with the Commissioning Editors. We've haven't been able to learn about whether they have files on individual films.

AF: I was very bad about paperwork. The person who has...and is serious about it, is Rod. Rod has got stacks of stuff, and he was talking to me recently, he doesn't know what to do with it. It's sitting in...he lives in Ireland, his mother had a house in Torquay which he inherited. There's stacks of stuff...the last time I looked in the room. The thing about Rod is, whenever anyone wants to go into detail, he kept notes of everything. In fact when we went out, he won't mind me telling you this, we went out for departmental lunch, we'd have to...ban him from taking notes! I don't know how systematic it is. He would be interested in the whole archive question. And I think he would be very happy, if someone was interested, in taking this stuff. Give him a week...he's in the African festival for about a week. He would be really interested in all that. When you asked me about the relationship with the IBA, for example, I couldn't really remember, but Rod will have *notes*, and he'll have a better memory. I think with a lot of the archiving, Channel 4 wasn't very sensitive about it at the time.

JS: The impression we get is that they weren't very particular about it at the time, but subsequently the lawyers are very sensitive about it....relatively minor things I've already asked for...it's not that they don't want to give it to us. Rosie Gleason couldn't be more helpful...she's an archivist but doesn't spend much time archiving, she does 1001 jobs for the Channel. But anything you want has to go through a lengthy process of being scrutinized, redacted, the lawyers have to sign it off, we have to draw up agreements between Channel 4 and the University for the terms of usage....That might be for something small. As we understand much of what is called the archive is actually uncatalogued.

AF: You obviously know about all the books written about Channel 4. What's the woman's name? Dorothy Hobson...endless meetings...must have recorded so much stuff I don't know how she ever sorted it out. The other point, I wonder what the legal status of all the stuff that Rod has got, I wonder if Channel Four regard it as theirs?

JS: Roger Graef has donated stuff to the BFI...Board Minutes and financial documents. Channel 4 must have approved that. But I mean it's an interesting issue. My original idea for the project when I was putting it together was we'd approach Channel Four with the idea of funding a proper archival investigation.

AF: The thing about the lawyers. Because they have no idea about what they've got, who's got it, where it is, what it might say about Channel 4, their first thought is to say no to everything. Has Jeremy kept much stuff?

JS: Not really. We're going to talk to Paul Bonner.

AF: He'd be good to talk to.

JS: 'Cos he wrote that history [of independent television].

AF: When I did my interview [for Channel 4] it was him and Jeremy.

JS: Was it 1994 you left? [Talks about meeting JI and PB at the Garrick club]. He's very sharp. But some of the people are no longer alive – Justin Dukes, Chris Griffin-Beale. We've spoken to his assistant, Di Hall.

RK: She's got an incredible memory.

AF: Did you speak to the guy who did series [Peter Ansorge]? He was in David's department. Not Walter Donohue. He had worked at the BBC with David, and had responsibility for [drama] series. He was responsible for *Brookside*. And he also had worked on feature films.

JS: I didn't realize that...

AF: His expertise was really on scripts I think. That's what he was always good at. I think David had other readers, 'cos I imagine the scripts must have been pouring in all the time...

JS: That's been really interesting Alan, thank you so much.

AF: One feature that we did do, I don't know if you've come across, which I'm arranging to be re-released on DVD, is *Empire State*. A guy, Ron Peck, I'm going to have lunch with him.

JS: Oh really? He made Nighthawks, didn't he? Don Boyd was instrumental in getting it made. Who's putting that out?

AF: The BFI I think, or Artificial Eye, I can't remember which. He also did *Fighters* and *Easy Money*. I think the BFI put those out...I commissioned *Fighters*, and *Empire State*, that was co-produced with British Screen. Another done by Lezli-An Barrett called *Business as Usual*.

RK: I've heard of the film.

AF: I suppose every year we were trying to work on a few [feature films]. It was a challenge to get the money together.

JS: Always the way....Thanks very much indeed.