Robin Gutch, 14/06/12

Robin Gutch was a commissioning editor in the Independent Film and Video Department and ran the FilmFour Lab, 1993-2003.

Interviewers: Ieuan Franklin, Rachael Keene, Justin Smith

*IF&V[D] = Independent Film and Video [Department]

JS: …And what we'll do is um transcribe it and let you see the transcript.

RG: Oh right.

JS: We're not going to do anything with it…

RG: Do you want to say anything more about what you're doing?

JS: Yeah, well this is kind of a little summary but I'll kind of talk through it I mean essentially we're funded at the University of Portsmouth by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and this project is about assessing the contribution of Channel 4 to British film culture over the last 30 years, preceding from the acknowledgment that from 1982 Channel 4's sponsorship of feature films and a whole range of other kinds of film, and bringing that to television and to cinema, was a massive you know transition in the British film industry and British film culture. That's essentially the background, we're talking to as many people as we can who've been instrumental in that history. And as far as Independent Film and Video at Channel 4 is concerned, we've spoken to Alan Fountain and Rod Stoneman and um etc. etc. And so in a sense we're very interested in your perspective on how Independent Film and Video evolved at Channel 4 during the 90s and after, and equally in the kind of dynamics and the relationship between C4 and the independent sector, and certainly companies such as Warp subsequently, so that's the kind of territory if you like. So we'll kind of mix it up a little but I'd just like to begin by asking you…

RG: Is that the mike? I've got quite a soft voice…

JS: Thanks, that's considerate. You're background before Channel 4, you were at the BBC I understand?

RG: Yes I worked at the BBC from…um 1981 until I went to Channel 4 in the 90s, so about 12 years.

JS: What were you doing there?

RG: I was a trainee producer, then a producer. Which kind of in those days meant, usually if you're a producer you're a producer-director and that, if you make factual programmes. Uh so quite a lot of documentaries, some studio shows, most of which [were] consigned to the oblivion of history. [All laugh] So before I left I had become senior producer in what was then known as the BBC's Community Programmes Unit. So it was often documentaries and factual programmes, usually given a licence to be rather more sort of overtly subjective in the editorial content and most BBC [CPU] programmes at that time would be, so there was a sort of sense in which, uh with documentaries you would be making even with a strong sense of authorship or of a

community, and it was not, it was kind of you know given slightly more of a licence than, say, a current affairs show uh would have been. Uh and then when I moved to Channel 4 I was basically sort of…uh Stuart [Cosgrove] replaced Alan [Fountain] and it happened that they were also replacing Rod [Stoneman], so Stuart quite rightly got the job, because I had almost no experience in the independent sector *at all*, which would have been quite problematic had I got the job. But Peter Salmon, who was the Controller of Factual at that point, offered me Rod's job, which actually was perfect because it meant I could sort of learn it without having to reinvent it at the same time [laughs]. So I moved over and worked with Stuart for a couple of years and then he got promoted and I became the main commissioning editor…so it was then that I moved to Film4.

JS: But, not only had you not worked in the independent sector but you hadn't worked on the kind of programmes, particularly, that, that you were making at 4, or was that community….

RG: No, I think, there was a definite overlap, because Independent Film and Video, I mean actually in some ways they were almost [rivals], you know if that BBC Department had a direct competitor, well not competitor but you know, you know, the other position would have been IF&V because we were doing sort of certain kinds of [?] documentary in a particular kind of way, as were they particularly with the film workshops, so it was a different kind of model….many not all but with many documentaries we would do, we would come in and work with an individual or a group of people within a particular place, or sometimes a particular interest group um that was lobbying or whatever, Friends of the Earth, you know that kind of organization at that time. And then we would sort of, we would make the programme, and sort of, they would oversee it, approve it, then it would go out. There would be a kind of social action follow-up, which was a kind of primitive attempt at social networking! And then we were paid by the BBC in the same way as any other documentary producer was, many of the staff went into just mainstream documentary, uh whereas obviously the workshop model was much more the setting up [of] a workshop in a particular area – Newcastle with Amber, Chapter in Cardiff, Black Audio in wherever…They would be sort of in situ, and then make films or programmes with the area that they were in, and that was, they would be there permanently. So it was a kind of different sort of model, but there was an obvious, aetiologically and aesthetically a sort of overlap….so when I moved over the idea was that I would be looking after primarily the factual, current affairs, documentary part of IF&V because at that time, you know, it had a sort of *very* broad remit in a way that no department in any UK broadcaster would even remotely try to sort of cover! Because by that point it covered everything from low-budget feature films, a little bit of low-budget drama which I had done a little bit of at the BBC, mainly documentary, some more journalist current-affairs, studio discussion programmes, gay and lesbian programmes, you know, which could be any form that was deemed suitable or…uh sort of, so it covered every genre pretty well. Uh and so you know when Stuart came in he would sort of take on certain kind of areas and I would look after others. The idea was that between us we would cover most of the strands of the output. And at that point Caroline Spry was there was the gay and lesbian commissioner. So it was quite a big department, it wasn't one of the biggest, but it was fairly substantial and it was, you know, in a good and bad way it was always sort of spoken of as 'the heartland of the channel' or the 'soul of the channel' or other such metaphors which could be used… [JS: Without irony…] Sorry? [JS: Without

irony…] Uh sometimes with irony, sometimes without. Sometimes with gritted teeth [laughs], sometimes not. I mean it would depend on the context. Certainly I think it was seen as this sort of irritant in some respects, but on the other hand a sort of necessary irritant because without it you would have lost what Jeremy Isaacs particularly [valued], but also for Michael Grade actually – who was, I think, unfairly, to some extent, seen as this commercial *arriviste* which actually isn't a fair perception of him, he was actually quite a beneficial figure in certain [ways] – he was certainly a good friend of IF&V…so in that sense it wasn't ironic [?] …but you know at times you know 'so well when we've sold the channel, what can we do with you?' [?] See what I mean so I think it was probably most irritating for some of the other commissioners who felt that we could do whatever we liked, because as Stuart always said, it's independent and it's on film or video, so why wouldn't we do it? [Laughs] So on one level it was sometimes…with people, you've got to stick to your current affairs remit, or you've got to do that, it was kind of irritating sometimes that we could evade those parameters. I think there was a, I guess going [forward] as time evolved obviously the difficulty was that the equilibrium between an increasingly centralised and increasingly commercialised, not massively actually - there is a certain myth about the early days of Channel 4, there was a fair amount of schlock [inaudible] it wasn't pristine art by any stretch of the imagination. But nonetheless it did get more centralised and it did get to a degree more commercial and market-focused, and increasingly there was a sort of tension between the demands, if you like the cultural remit of IF&V and the needs of the schedule and that used to fight its way out in terms of when the programmes would be scheduled. You know, and that's probably when the soul of the channel debate became paramount.

JS: In terms of [inaudible]…

RG: Yeah I mean…in terms of we're meant to be the soul of the channel but nobody ever sees anything. So, but, you know it came to…you know if you give me a 9 o'clock then the film will be more accessible…but we can't have that many…unless it's going to win a BAFTA, you can't have an OK documentary on at 9 just because it's come from IF&V or anybody else for that matter, it has earn its audience. So *Cutting Edge* most days was routinely delivering 5 or 6 million…it was a different era obviously. So…no one was expecting us to compete with *that*…but if you were delivering half a million it's not great. And sometimes the subject matter, by definition, was not going to deliver 5 million uh…

JS: Sure, so uh I mean, to what extent were those shifts also to do with changes in the sector in a sense of the people you were commissioning and the people you were working with, you know, there is, again I want to avoid clichés, but there is a sense of certainly in the early days with Alan Fountain of stuff being made in a shed with a great deal of political commitment, whatever it might be. To what extent was IF&V shaped, in your era, shaped by the fact that some of the people you were working with and commissioning were actually very professional outfits who you know…quality-wise were able to provide that television that could work in mainstream slots.

RG: Yes um that was probably, and if you haven't you maybe should…are you talking to Stuart? Yeah 'Cos Stuart was…there was a definite sense in which there was a sort of Alan and Rod era, and um I think Stuart and I were sort of brought in, particularly Stuart, but I think there was a sense in which that body [?] [of work] had

run its course…so there was no doubt – Stuart had been appointed for a whole range of reasons, but one of them was that he had run a commercially successful small independent. So there was a sense in which the Department was sort of becoming increasingly anachronistic. Uh and we were brought in to sort of you know – of course there's some ideological baggage within the term - but there was no doubt that it was meant to sort of come in to sort of professionalise both the commissioning process and the output. And you know, that, to some degree that had happened a fair amount already when Alan was there – what, he was there at least 10 years if not longer. So that had happened, if you looked at you know the early workshop days and actually, yeah some of the companies, you know, 'my vision' [?], like that, they become quite reasonably successful business primarily based on commissions from IF&V, as companies that were [originally] workshops. So that was already underway. So there was a sense in which that process was going to go up a level or two. And I think also what Stu was saying was that actually you know it crystallised around sort of around the…and it was quite a deliberate decision on his part that the first 'new era' strand if you like was called *Red Light Zone*. Which, you know, Alan was not above, you know, quite canny use of sex to sort of get an audience. So if anyone did watch the Arts Council videos there is quite a lot of, particularly at the time, quite a lot of extreme sexual content. But nobody would have dreamt of putting it so sort of, presenting it in that sort of way. So it came on, and of course it got a *Daily Mail* reaction, and it was all very strategic. And there was a sense in which it was taking in quite a lot of, you know, material, often actually using very similar filmmakers that…The director of I think the first film actually in the strand was Margot Harkin, who was a Derry Workshop stalwart. So it wasn't like suddenly you'd [JS: left all that behind] yeah but actually the way it was put on screen and the kind of storytelling and so on was quite different I think, and of course that did induce a sort of, quite [strong] reaction. Some people welcomed it, some people definitely didn't, saw it as sort of selling out to the tune of the devil etc. Um so I think what, but it was a sort of presentation approach [?], so I did a, my slightly different alternative was that we followed it up fairly soon afterwards with a strand called *Secret Asia*. So what we were trying to do was sort of, rather than the *Eleventh Hour*, which was indeed at the eleventh hour, and had become a ghetto, if you get films and put them in the *Eleventh Hour* you would never get an audience. So what we tried to do was sort of say right, well we did a series called *Secret Asia* which was actually feature films bought in from Asia, and documentaries including *The Dying Rooms*, which were more journalistic, and had sort of, you know, other things. So there were, like, 3 hours of programmes about Asia, about East Asia if you're interested, one of which might be an indigenous Japanese film. Probably less auteurist sometimes, not always, I mean some were actually stuff that had been sitting there for a couple of years, from Alan's period, very good films which had never been shown. But we needed some good headline-driven documentaries, I mean not even headline-driven but I mean there would be a sense of, if you call something *Secret Asia* by definition you've got something secret…So *The Dying Rooms* was actually an instance where that was going to be the lead film, and then it turned out to be a bigger story than anyone could have really anticipated, and then that was put on at 9 o'clock. And again that was…it was a good instance of where IF&V did perform a service because basically, as I found out later, it had been turned down by current affairs, it had been turned down by *Panorama*…'cos they were a very untried team. So, but of course like, not [inaudible] there was a sort of remit that you're meant to be working with new people…that's what you're meant to be doing, so the pressures are not the

same as if you're doing *Dispatches*. Uh so I commissioned Brian and Kate who've now made about 20-30 investigative films, won many BAFTAs, they're sort of, certainly established, have worked steadily over the last 20 years in investigative documentary in the UK but that was effectively the first thing they'd done. And…so and it was obviously a huge story. So those kinds of things kind of put the Department back in the heart, but hanging onto that was always something we had to fight for. You know you don't get those sorts of programmes – in a way, thank God – you don't get those programmes every day of the week. So it was a different era…I think the workshops, I think the two areas that suffered – I think one was the workshop tradition because I think they evolved in an era in which basically Channel 4 gave them a certain amount of money, they would make something and then send it, and obviously you know if you read accounts of the period, Alan and Rod were gradually trying to wrestle it into some kind of shape that the Channel would want to transmit. Whereas some but by no means all but there was a sort of sense of no, no your job is to support the workshops, it's our job, it's meant to be devolved. So some of it was about, you know, power - power, money etc.…as always. And I think that that, in a way, that IF&V became increasingly more difficult to churn out [?]…there wasn't much left of it actually that we did pull out, the last bits of sort of workshop funding for the first couple of years that we were there. Of course once, you get to the point where it doesn't have any critical mass. It becomes, oh we have to give 'X' workshop 100 grand a year and don't really get anything back from that. We could do, with 100 grand we could do a *Dying Rooms* do you know what I mean, it does come down to that…And then the other area I would say that definitely suffered, which was actually not something we tried, with the *Secret Asia* we did another thing called, what was it, *Latino Nights* which was a similar exercise for Latin America, where we tried to reinvent the 'framing' of films, acquired often very cheaply, often pre-booked [?]. So Alan would give them £30,000 and they would go off and they would get a bit of money in France and a bit of money in Germany, of course it took forever, and then suddenly…Alan got, quite rightly actually, got pissed off, 'cos in his last year, that they…and at the time it didn't actually mean a great deal to me, but [suddenly] they had 3 films in official competition in Cannes. No one from the Channel even noticed. You know, now what would it be like to get 3 films in competition…they were all films as had happened with Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*, they were quite small amounts of money that were put in and at some point great work would come back and arrive, often in an anonymous envelope or something. But um but again that was almost unsustainable, so we did fight quite hard to retain them [the film seasons?] partly because it was interesting. I'd like to claim it was purely altruistic but it was also actually kind of interesting to me, so we tried to sort of preserve that but I think there was a point where the Channel just said they were not interested in showing the films, even if they were in official competition and the statistics for sort of subtitled films, either the French or other mainstream European films was almost, it became about 6 films or year. So the Channel would just buy them at Cannes and then the idea of putting money in and waiting 5 years to get it, was just sort of another planet. So that, that area….

JS: Yeah and what about the fiction you were dealing with, because you know there's a sense in which the packages of shorts and so on, and those programmes became, or again, seemed to become less avant-garde, less experimental, less formalist and much more narrative.

RG: Yes I think that's certainly true. I think there were two aspects to it – probably more. But I think there were 2 things to it. Actually, really, mainly continuing what Alan and Rod were already doing to some extent. Because they'd started to move into doing what you might call low-budget drama, as indeed we had done when I was at the BBC actually, we'd done that, as there are stories we can't tell blah blah blah you'd do drama by then, these strange things called digital cameras! So you could do drama in a way that was different aesthetically, which was quite exciting. Um so they'd already started that and Stuart and I were quite keen to continue that work. Um then the other facet was that the IF&V would make what was called a subvention, which was effectively a sort of grant of money which we gave each year to the BFI Production [Board] and I think both because of, you know, and then the commissioner would you know say to Stuart or me to sit on the board of BFI Production, but then we'd only have a say, it was a board. In a way, it was like, well it's our money, but you could have quite a big say, but nonetheless it was [ultimately] a board decision. I think actually the BFI itself changed. I think Ben Gibson's era…he supported some avant-garde work, which was at times problematic for the Channel. But, you know, there were films – *Stella Does Tricks*, *Under The Skin*, *Beautiful People*, which were both very important and very good films but also quite *playable*. But it wasn't a unilateral [decision], the Channel [hadn't] forced him to do those kind of things, he was aware that BFI Production needed to kind of have some films which weren't just going out, in those days, you know to the ICA or wherever. So I think there was, but they were still sort of British auteur films, but they were more narrative-led, less formalist than the preceding [BFI] Production jobs there. They worked better with the way the Channel was going. There was limited appetite for *Blue* or something on the Channel…or a complicated piece of avant-garde filmmaking. Channel 4's planning department probably weren't hugely excited by the thought of sticking that on! So basically what we ended up with was [more] feature films going through. We still, with Carol [Caroline Spry] and with the success of Jacqui Lawrence she would occasionally put bits of money into some features that had a strong usually gay or lesbian director or content, so that continued. Uh there was the BFI subvention, then there was the sort of low-budget dramas and one that actually Stuart kicked off, which he admitted as it were that he'd set in motion was the *Granton Star Cause* which then became part of *The Acid House*, which actually in some respects *is* quite a formalist film. Certainly for a mainstream film, as many of the buyers who thought it was going to be the next *Trainspotting* discovered! But that actually started as a half-hour drama, it actually won the Prix Italia as a drama then you know Channel 4 actually [inaudible]…we kind of converted it then into kind of a theatrical trilogy, with the other two. Um so that was really not done with the BFI at all, that was just, you know, we had a fiction element into that budget. So those were the two and I think the big decision…I would say this because I was involved in it a bit, but I think on the whole for the better, but when Michael Jackson came in and took over from Michael Grade, he was a great film enthusiast, and he wanted all film put in the same *brand* as you call it now, which was Film4.

JS: Absolutely. We've spoken to uh Paul Webster. I was going to ask you about that, but I wondered did you want to come in Rachael?

RK: …I was just going to ask a bit about scheduling and whether, you know it sounds as if you were using a lot of content that had already been commissioned you know before you got there and it was being fit into kind of packaged kind of zones [RG: some of it was…] and strands. Was that something you were concerned

with, the scheduling of things? You know were you involved in thinking [about whether] this will fit into this particular strand?

RG: Uh I think it was probably a mixture…but I think probably the key thing that was important to both of us, but particularly to Stuart, because I'd totally give him the credit for this - he came in, 'cos I came in with a sort of traditional quite traditional BBC like 'if you're after Newsnight you're fucked basically' [attitude]. [But Stuart said] No no, you don't understand the way Channel 4's audience works, people don't watch it that much at 9 or 10 'cos they're get[ting ready to go out?], so actually there's a good audience [later], we will get a good audience, particularly for the *Red Light Zone*. 'Cos the *Red Light Zone*, heaven forefend, for various reasons it did get a big audience, so 11 o'clock we can aim for that, there probably wasn't this language about it but…11 o'clock…the Department can own 11 o'clock and make it appear mainstream in Channel 4 terms, achieve strength through that. That was the key, driving idea. Uh the stock was often, you know, partly because of the nature of the, kind of commissioning that the Department was doing – you would tend to end up with, nobody would commit to scheduling it. So they would sort of say, let's see what it looks like when it comes in. It would come in and then you'd have to get somebody to watch it, and then someone else to watch it usually. So it's kind of, what you would end up with, like you've got, I mean often, like a million, £2 million pile of stock which in TV terms you would call residual programmes [?], not that they're bad, they just have found a place in the schedule. And over a period of time that doesn't look good – you say we've got 5 or 6 million for next year here's what we're going to do, and they say well actually you've got 2 million of stock which you haven't found a slot for. So until you've found a place for that we're not going to give you masses more money. So some of it was opportunistic in trying to find, for instance, the *Red Light Zone* actually put out, I'm sure the Arts Council was thrilled, but it included some of the experimental videos, we just had, it wasn't like we changed them, it was purely a presentational device. But it wasn't like, this is the new strand of experimental video, it was ah here's an experimental video in this thing called the *Red Light Zone*, so I mean there was a definite element of opportunism in it, but it was also to solve a quite real problem. And obviously there were things that wouldn't [fit], but gradually we got the stock down to a suitable level, and I suppose partly it became more about commissioning strands and titles like *Secret Asia* and once the stock level became much the same as anyone else, we were kind of commissioning for a slot as opposed to than commissioning and then finding a slot. There's a fundamental difference between the two – I mean now everything is commissioned for a slot, it's like you virtually work out the marketing and strategy before you get a commission. But it was like we'll commission it, and we'll worry about where to put it later, which was kind of how the Channel started with that work. It was pretty well gone anyway, and we'd certainly got rid of that, because then you're completely at the mercy of the scheduler. I mean you're always at the mercy of the scheduler but [with that style of commissioning] you really are at the mercy of the scheduler!

RK: Did you perceive the schedulers as being quite powerful in their position? You know, did they..?

RG: Yes they were definitely powerful. I mean it's like in any organization, it was a trade-off but fundamentally they're there, they probably have even more power now, I mean they're right- or left-hand person often to the Director of Programmes, CEO of

Channel 4, so if they think that something doesn't need to play at 9. You can always argue about that, it has to play at 9, it's a work of genius, the issue it raises is hugely important, I know most people won't watch it but it's really important statement about the Channel 4, or whatever the argument might be. But it's that sort of argument, the only thing is you have to be careful if you keep whingeing every week about it, obviously you run out of…You have to try to judge it, you have to not be a pushover but…on the other hand, we did a documentary that did get put out at 9…about the Stephen Lawrence story, which was the first time that the footage of the Acourt brothers with the machete, it was the first time that was shown, so that was, something like that gets you to the peak time of the schedule. But there are times when you sort of have to say, yes I know this can be difficult at times but it should be shown, sometimes it could be on artistic merit, but then it's getting a Michael Grade or John Willis to look at it, and then…a scheduler to agree…So it's a trade-off uh but you know you had to work at it; the notion of commissioning to the schedule is fundamental, as it means you have to have filmmakers who actually deliver both for the slot, and also on the time. So you might say great, we've got 8 one-hour slots, 9 o'clock, in six months time, and then fail to have arrived, got there because…again, it begins to filter your choice.

JS: Makes your risk averse…

RG: I mean look, it's not so much…I don't know if it makes you risk averse, but it certainly means you can't have people that are going to say no, no, I need 'x' amount of months in the cutting room to get this right. It means that, it professionalizes, for better or worse, the output…You know, of course the more you do that…there will be at times exceptional things which get squeezed out in that process. I mean I think…when the film part moved to Film4 so there was some low-budget drama and then documentary and factual remained with Adam Barker, uh and then Jess Search after him. But I think it was definitely the right thing to do for the film part of the Department, but there was a sense in which it also made it more like all the other departments because it was, not the only thing, but one of the things which distinguished it. Adam came in I think partly because Tim Gardnam who was Director of Programmes, I think so he clearly felt even more pressure to play in the centre of the schedule, so arguably the output became that much more mainstream. You can never get it quite right, there's never a perfect solution. There's a point at which somebody, as indeed happened, eventually turns round and says well, why have we got this department? So you're sort of, you're caught between a rock and a hard place, because if you're too mainstream, then you're always going to be seen – well, we've got a documentary department we don't need another one – in a sense it's a duplication of the function argument. Which, if the overheads are tight [then] that's a dangerous spot to be in. Or you can [be], 'no, no, no, we're *really* different' but we can't get any bloody plays [? inaudible]. So everybody in that job has always had to balance that, so it wasn't a massive surprise that they closed it down, and then they, some of the remit for new filmmakers just got absorbed into other departments. And I think gay and lesbian programmes, the notion of a separate department began to seem, inevitably more and more anachronistic because by that time they were quite popular and so some of the other departments [were making stuff] so I think Jacqui commissioned the first quiz show, which was one of Graham Norton's first appearances.

IF: And [there was] *Queer as Folk*…

RG: Yes, *Queer as Folk*, which was at the Channel 4 Drama Department, which was a real milestone, so again you don't need someone else to do a cheaper version of that.

JS: So was the decision behind the Film4 Lab, was that, did Michael Jackson drive that? Did he want you know, IF&V to go to Charlotte Street with Paul…?

RG: Yes he definitely wanted all the filmmaking whether it be shorts or features and the BFI thing, which then ended quite soon afterwards, went to the Film Council, and now back to the BFI! So Michael wanted all film activity put into Film4. The Lab idea was partly because by then, I used to talk to Stuart quite a lot, a sort of mentor/confidante, but I began to increasingly feel that the title 'independent film and video', although useful, was becoming more anachronistic and sort of odd. So I wrote some kind of I guess what you'd call a position (or repositioning) paper - it wasn't a PhD – but basically sort of arguing that, I don't remember, but the word 'lab' was in there. That the whole IF&V could become a film or media lab, it was definitely not trying to keep the film out, but focussing on blah, blah, blah much the same thing as we'd already done, but by then the PR value of what we'd done was much clearer. It's something, in the Department, Stuart was…very good at that, I think Alan and Rod sometimes kind of undersold the Department because they you know, and in some ways I share this view, that there was some sort of like some big kind of crackdown, but actually in this day and age you have to. But if you like the narrative – post New Labour – the narrative of IF&V needed to be changed for a new era. And Michael, he was very supportive actually but there was a sense in which he was someone who like didn't want to carry on doing good stuff, he wanted it to feel like he could change stuff. So anyway there was a sense in which I felt we had to do something. So I sort of anyway wrote all this and then Michael and I talked about it, and he was quite into the idea, but then he kind of 2 and 2 made 5. Which, he thought well I like the idea [but] rightly I think came up with a better one, which was I'm not sure about the word 'lab' which he kept quiet about, he liked having a cluster dedicated to that, but definitely wanted film coming out. So in the end we ended up with Film4 Lab going over to Paul and then um it sort of became IF&V being left as IF&V but without film. In Paul's era it worked pretty well, the lab part, but I don't think IF&V ever managed to reinvent itself. Which I think in the end is [acknowledged?]…

JS: Because you were concentrating on fiction.

RG: Because yes you know we made it very, I was mainly doing fiction. We did do fiction and not documentary, although we did do *Body Song* which was technically documentary.

JS: Personally that was a transition for you, and something that had been you know attractive for a while? You wanted to get out of doing factual …?

RG: Uh yes, it wasn't 'get out of jail' but inevitably you change as you go along. I occasionally get involved with documentary – I think the editing part is more interesting, because you can change it enormously. With fiction you can to some extent, but you have a script blah blah blah. But yeah so it certainly felt, that felt refreshing and I think also as we'd been [?] trying to do everything, it's an era of professionalization, you know, to try to do every genre, it's kind of, it's fine if you really are on a separate planet, but if you're really are trying to keep with the specialist genres it becomes progressively more difficult. So I think being able to

focus that work in a new organization, in many ways it felt like a new job, but still for Channel 4. And I think it worked, I mean I wouldn't do everything the same way, but in principle I think it worked quite well, because it was the way Paul was taken for Film4, it was a definite Film4's going *here*, Film4 Lab *here*, it was a sense of purpose. I think what Film4 did, once they had to narrow it down again, it, Film4 Lab, sort of lost its purpose, because actually there wasn't that much clear blue water between what we were doing and what Tessa wanted to do with the main Film4. And I think it, Peter carried it on for, technically it was carried on for a year maybe two years but it was kind of a bit, nobody quite knew what to do with it, quite understandably because this whole point it was there as a sort of, kind of a bit like IF&V in some ways, it's sort of like, Film4 is going to go off and have an LA office, and all those now seemingly huge unrealised ambitions but there will at least be this bedrock here for different and exciting alternative filmmaking, new auteurs etc. so that's a given. It had a quite clear role. So in that sense it worked quite well, but as soon as you got rid of distribution and sales, by definition, if you're doing things like *Dead Man's Shoes* with the main Film4, then actually having a Film4 Lab suddenly seems redundant unless you're going to go really marginal.

JS: Yeah, sure, so did you kind of offset that by playing on the talent drive in a sense?

RG: Yes, to marry new talent, yes I think that, it's an easier story to tell/present than sort of trying to, it becomes quite an abstract discussion about alternative ways of filmmaking…but actually there are, we did do this film *The Filthy Earth* with Andrew Kotting, who's certainly much more in the IF&V, BFI classic tradition. And as is *Body Song* actually, but you know, *Body Song* I still think is a brilliant film actually, commercially it didn't do, it was disappointing. But it was actually one of the ones that Paul and Pete were most excited about, as a potential project. And I think I sort of quickly realized that you, if you're doing new talent that's fine but it can't just be Andrew Kotting, no I mean he's great…but you can't just do *This Filthy Earth*…you've got to have something, it's not about schedules it's about distribution, you know, to be pretty brutally frank we did one comedy which was probably definitely a mistake…which was *Large*, which its merits but also it has its not-merits! So which didn't, for various reasons, I think certainly didn't succeed. But it was kind of, if you're doing [a drive for] new talent, then you can have a range of potentially commercial projects, or more extraordinary, you know, the Andrews. New talent allows you to kind of do both, it is also more clear that - that's where the lab kind of works, in some respects the wording people say why is that film called that, so something like *Jump Tomorrow*, it's a very good film and did very well, but it's a very conventional film, there's no pretence that its pioneering territory in aesthetic terms. So yeah but on the whole I think it was worth doing. I mean you know, I genuinely don't think - if anyone had just carried on with the Film4 Lab I think it would have disappeared anyway, because that notion of the amount of difference the Channel was allowed to or prepared to offer with confidence to the Commissioners, I mean it was after I left the role of Commissioning Editor for IF&V I think became so limited well then you, it went from...these figures aren't accurate, but my perception was that it kind of went from when I left it was about a 6 million budget and probably about 1 and a half of that went with the move to Film4, which was the fiction budget. And I think by the end it was down to about a million, a million and a half, which is not a department, well actually, it's not worth having. Jess kind of had had enough, and actually Jess in a magnificent way reinvented the IF&V approach with BritDocs for a

new era and very successfully, and in a funny kind of way it's almost going right back to the workshop [model] where they're…funding as opposed to commissioning. That enabling and supporting is tied into the Channel to some extent, but actually for this day and age it's a far smarter, more productive way of doing it. Uh so in the end, the sort of legacy if you like kind of lives on…it's an amazing bit of reinvention because it kind of works, it's a very successful organization and has a model of supporting a lot of people…like Alan used to do, a bit of money supporting a lot of people to go and make films. So will be brilliant, some will be good, the odd on will be rubbish, but that doesn't matter. And actually you can do that with an organization that's not an internal department servicing a broadcaster whose commercial life is never ever going to be easy again.

IF: Uh yeah just in terms of what you were saying there about the Film4 Lab, was part of its identity very much to do with digital and digital technology?

RG: Uh yes, we, to some extent anticipates the sort of things we've done with Warp X actually, there's overlapping personnel, not least because Peter's [Peter Carlton] here as well.

[End of File 1.]

[File 2]

"...It did very well on the festival, and won a lot of awards. And it was actually Ben Wishaw's...he won Best Newcomer and then went off to drama college! You know, so sort of like, in casting terms it generally did put a future star....on the screen. Uh and yes that was partly well Dogme, Copenhagen, you know, we're calling ourselves 'The Lab' so to be doing everything on [digital] film but in an analogue way [?] sort of felt like we should be engaging with that. But it's funny that, I mean even and now, a bit less now, but well no definitely quite a lot less now, but sort of going back some time a lot of filmmakers they're not I mean they're interested in what they're interested in and digital per se for many, often the most talented actually they're not interested so you know you had uh we pretty well with Warp X we ended up doing almost all of the films digitally in the end. But it was, you know, quite a slog [?].

JS: And it's a generational shift as well though...

RG: Yes well I mean now they're using particularly Red [cameras] and Ellet [?] really sort of getting [popular]...I mean in some ways Dogme kind of sort of put digital on the map, but on the other hand it became oh it's a digital film equals running around with a camera like *The Idiots* and *Festen* which were aesthetically defining digital films at that point. And *My Brother Tom* was not dissimilar in that respect. But I think the idea of doing something which was very composed, quite [inaudible]...at the same time, but it's also, once everyone starts doing digital it becomes meaningless anyway, it's just a film, it just happens to be made in this particular way. But I mean now the resistance is less but we've certainly got one of the best new directors I've encountered in a long time and indeed Steve McQueen, Steve would not even consider doing anything that wasn't 35[mm], would not consider that even though he's sort of an avant-garde artist. He was like, this is a film, it has to be on 35. So it's...but gradually it's changing and it's not like...*Dead Man's Shoes* was Super-16 I mean you know it's sort of...

JS: And the economic, I mean the economies of that, is that a genuine factor? I mean, I know things like production costs, in terms of the mobility of the equipment and so on has probably improved, but I mean how much...?

RG: Uh it makes a difference, the digitalness...first of all you have to deliver because even now once you have a film which has a mainstream distributor – in the independent sense - or a sales agent, they still want a 35mm print. They still want all those films which have to be made, even if you made it digitally. It does save some money but it comes down to the aesthetic, if it is a minimal crew then it will definitely save some money. It will save you less money if you have to do conventional delivery materials…like [having to] strike a print and so on...

JS: That may change though…35 will go won't it, in exhibition terms….

RG: Yes, again that will change, I mean once there is no need for that and I mean, you know, obviously you can just create a digital [print] and distribute on that now. But Sony International have got to start somewhere – not all, but some people will take the view that you still need some of those 35mm delivery materials. But a lot of it is down to the approach of the filmmaker so *Kill List* which Ben Wheatley did, which was shot on Red, uh was made, you know, astonishingly cheaply and that's, elements of technology in that, particularly if you're shooting on two cameras it begins to add up. That can make a difference. So *Kill List* was shot in 18 days, which is *very* tight, I don't know many people other than Ben who could have done that. And some of that was to do with the digitalness – the two cameras, the flexibility - but some of it was about just taking decisions like [using a] small unit, a unit he's worked with before, [with whom] he's developed a shorthand. So there's a lot of factors involved in that…someone who can actually cope with that turnaround, that's as much to do with him working for 10 years in television, and on commercials, as [about] digital. So there are a lot of factors…it's certainly one. Uh but you know it can be, if you shoot digitally and you have a director who wants to spend days in a grade [grading the film?] that's [inaudible] so it's a lot of things.

JS: Let's rewind a bit in the kind of, the personal narrative as it were. Um the decision to leave Four and go to Blast, can you tell us about that?

RG: Oh that was one of the personal milestone things. That, of course you know, the Charlotte Street pool sort of…basically the idea of Film4 being a rival to Working Title was axed, you know, and you can argue the pros and cons of that, but fundamentally that was terminated with what James Bond would call extreme prejudice, well not necessarily with extreme prejudice, but it was certainly terminated [JS: with unseemly haste…] There were about 6 of us left, out of 55 people. So you've got that, sort of like, bleurgh….and then it comes…I'd worked quite happily…for 5 years and then it's 10 years since coming over, it kind of felt as if one's life had gone into reverse. Tessa was very hospitable and supportive, she was like if you want to stay that's great, if you don't then you know I'll help you make the move. There were no personal agendas, there was just that sense of, it is 10 years, it feels like I've kind of gone through a loop. The key moment, not through anyone's fault but I went into my new office and I said, actually this is the office I actually had 10 years ago. It was like *Groundhog Day*. And Blast was just because I'd just made Penny Woolcock's film *Principles of Lust*…uh that worked fine I think it was quite a big learning curve. Probably for them as well! But certainly a big learning curve for

me because I'd by now been dealing with independents a lot even though it was different but obviously you're aware of some of the aspects of the independent business but nonetheless it was very different [JS: becoming one…] working with them as opposed to there...and I think you know we'd started big projects. *Hunger* kicked off there, *Death of a President* kicked off there, but the slowness of the film development process...in terms of [inaudible] is a quite fundamental thing. Finally...developed and creative exec'd you know quite a lot of drama doc, which I actually quite enjoyed, 'cos I hadn't done that for years, so that was in some respects quite refreshing [inaudible] there was a bit of a gap...and Film4 and the Film Council tendered this low-budget feature scheme which was creating...the chance for someone to do a slate of low-budget features. So I thought quite a bit about, should I put Blast in for that, and I did a bit of an objective analysis, and thought well I can tick about 50% of the boxes but I can't tick the others...and Blast can't either uh and Mark Herbert and I worked...and he was in a slightly similar position and he could tick the ones that I couldn't and vice-versa. And then we sort of joined up...it was a long process but we got the gig, set up Warp X and it's now just coming to a close actually and we're just about to green-light, indeed, our 10th film through that screen. There's some big differences with what I was doing before, with Independent Film & Video, you know, but to some extent new talent, sometimes digital, low-budget...there are some definite overlaps if you like. And obviously...*Dead Man's Shoes* which was obviously the most successful low-budget film for a long time, and I've got the FilmFour Lab you know commissioning experience if you like, so the two...he had a very good relationship with Optimum Releasing, so if you put them all together you actually make quite a decent application. So yeah there is, like all these things, there are continuities and traditions but also reinventing them in different shapes and so on.

JS: I was going to ask you actually about...

RG: So we actually got a film, *Berberian Sound Studio*, which is premiered in Edinburgh, which is a classic you know Independent Film and Video – very very wacky – it's very good but it's really quite a weird film, so the spirit of experimentalism isn't entirely dead!

JS: That's interesting. I was going to ask you a question about, the, in a sense, the role of the producer if that's not too abstract a kind of topic but you said at Blast you went back to doing some drama series and documentaries for television and at the same time you were developing features, but in terms of the kind of skill-set, or the creative energies of those different roles...are there differences or do you feel like you're doing the same thing whatever the project is?

RG: Whatever the job...I see, whether documentary or?

JS: Yeah, that's the question...

RG: I think...there are some similarities. I think I suppose one definition of what a producer does is 'the person who makes it happen'. Which is slightly naff, slightly tendentious because a writer makes it happen, a scriptwriter. But there's a sense in which a script on paper can become something else etcetera. So whether that be...finding someone to make a documentary about...even making it yourself if you're a producer-director...or finding a director...or commissioning it, finding someone who can write a script, getting the funding, commissioning them to write

that script and then building it up. From that respect there's a similarity and you're usually the person probably who's there pretty much all the way through. And obviously for a feature that can be literally a 10 year life-cycle and hopefully not always! But it can be, it's certainly – one of the things I learned at Film4, you know Independent Film & Video, a TV department, usually you can say let's commission that and sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't. It's not kind of years of your life. If you start making a feature with someone and it doesn't work out you're looking at very...a long time to be collaborating with someone who, you know, may well feel the same way. You know, it's a long time to be collaborating if it's not working, on a personal level or there is some way they could...so with features you're looking at a very long cycle...I think with features there are, I think they're just that much more complex. But obviously with documentaries there are theatrical documentaries like *Touching the Void* or the Isle of Man TT [*TT3D: Closer to the Edge*] there are some very big feature documentary productions which can be as complicated as some fiction. But overall there are a lot of different skills involved and there are a few producers who can probably handle the whole menu, from getting finance to legalities, to the working with the writer creatively, working with the director creatively, to leading a production, to managing a production team, pushing distributors and marketing, managing the financiers etc. Relatively few people can do all of that as one person and also if they are doing it as one person then they probably can't do anything else, other than that, 'cos it's a very multifaceted project management kind of thing. So most people, many successful film producers are part of a [team]...Jeremy Thomas is an exception...Steve Woolley and Nick Powell – and now Steve Woolley and Liz [Elizabeth Karlsen] - Eric [Fellner] and Tim [Bevan], you know, they're often working in partnerships, often covering sort of things all by working in a company type of structure. Certainly I don't want to be working outside of the company given the number of things you have to deal with. So that's the difference, whereas, with a documentary for TV you need someone who is producing you, and probably someone who is directing you but that sort of production management, you don't need more than that. So it's really a matter of scale, I think. But also there are, you know, producers who don't do anything else from primarily finance. There are producers who don't deal with that, they have a lawyer who does it for them, or someone from Business Affairs who does it for them, and they'll do the creative side or whatever. So...that's the difference.

JS: So where would you say your personal strengths are in that portfolio, your skills.

RG: Well...I'm not saying it in a sort of poncy way but I'm definitely nearer the creative end. I mean Mark [Herbert], who's the Head of Warp Films if you like, I think he's someone who very much you know is, depending on the film, but particularly if it's with someone like Shane Meadows he will be very on it the whole way through, with quite a lot of back up from the Head of Production, the Head of Business Affairs…[inaudible] deals. So [even] he's not really dealing with everything but he will be very hands-on, he comes from a kind of location manager/production background, he's exceptionally good at production and management of crews, which I don't pretend to be. I'm probably the right background on the whole for dealing with scripts, I tend to be stronger at the early stages of the product. So I think certainly that's quite a good collaboration…but you know if you look at…I mean Warp you know a small company really here we have a Finance Director, a Business Affairs Head, Head of Production, me, Mark, a couple of producers, a development person. It's not a big company but we can carry those sort of functions. It's also

psychological, that, you know, once you're producing something inevitably you're invested in the project even if you're also director of the company. Kind of, at the very best we'll have split loyalties. But there's always a sense of the project needing [leading?] …uh so you need someone…who's going to stand alone [?] saying we shouldn't do that because we're giving up, whatever it is. Uh you know just get it done…so there's a sort of good, you need someone who's not got that emotional investment, who can be much more clinical about the deal side, which is why…I'm not sure but I think you know Steve Woolley and Nik Powell were, from what you read at least, Nik would be ducking around with the numbers, the deals and Steve was trying to make the film, which, again a great combination. In the end, Palace went tits up. But…from what one reads they weren't particularly brilliant at the business management side of things, but as a creative partnership, combo they were amazing, really invented the landscape, really did. So yeah so that's I think why one tends to have that 'cos very few people I think…

JS: Very interesting…

IF: The regional set-up of Warp is very important, because I know that's something that you, you…with the Independent Film & Video Department you took it in that direction, you wanted to get away from the kind of London bubble. Could you talk about that a little bit?

RG: Yeah I mean some of that…history, is basically there are 2 offices. Basically the mothership is in Sheffield, and we're the annexe. In numbers terms it's about equal – about 5 people each, in terms of staffing. Uh but sort of Warp Records started in Sheffield before it moved down. And then Mark was brought in by them to set up the film company. And you know he's a Sheffield boy – I can't quite imagine him outside Sheffield – I mean living! Obviously he comes in here a lot. The roots of the company are in Sheffield. So that's fundamental…if we have company meetings then we usually go up to Sheffield. Not always but usually. Not quite away days…but more or less we go up to Sheffield…the mothership is probably the way to look at it. Um so that's important but also Screen Yorkshire, or Yorkshire Forward were very supportive in terms of business loans, support grants, and that sort of thing, particularly in the early years – they were, if you like, backing the company embryo, company as much as individual films. Probably more the company actually. Which I think has become quite an imp…though the money's more problematic since the ERDF etcetera…but I think that the help rather than backing individual films…whereas Mark is the very entrepreneurial producer/company. In the longer term that will deliver more benefits for that kind of investment rather than lots of tiny bits of money and lots of, [a] sort of range of quality features [?]. I think that's become fairly standard now. I think it was rarer in those days. Because some of the money might have been for media business it wasn't always film. So that was, so having that was important – and I think it would have been harder to achieve that in Bristol, probably in London actually. Because there's a sense in which it's rarer. Uh and then I guess the other facet of it is that we've made something like 14 films. And only 1 has actually been made in London. Uh and some of that's to do with cost. You know, uh sometimes to do with films really need…I mean Shane's films it's difficult to imagine [them being made in London]...although he has done uh *Somerstown* was actually but that was quite odd [?] in some respects. He has done but on the whole he's not going to make films in London. *Kill List* we shot it, made it in Sheffield, partly because just because it's got some good locations, it's cheaper and people aren't so

snotty about filmmaking as they can be in London. So it's just easier. So it's about cost, value for money and ease of working...you don't have to spend hours in a traffic jam just to get to the location. So there's a sort of practical side to it as well. So... yes I'm just trying to think - not all of them are made in Yorkshire. You know, *Submarine* was made in Wales, *Donkey Punch* was made in South Africa [inaudible], *Four Lions* was made in Sheffield...very difficult to do it anywhere else. So there is a practical side. But I think it is an important part of the company's identity. And you know certainly with Warp X...it was genuine but you know it did tick a big fat box for the Film Council, that they gave the award to a company that wasn't in London. Big shock! That was quite unusual. Because film, more than in television, is even more London-centric.

IF: I suppose that is something that you can say, you know, that the workshop [still] exists in a partial way...with people like Penny Woolcock being from Trade originally...

RG: Oh yes, certainly some filmmakers...obviously they're not just out of school anymore. I think there are a few workshops still going, I think Amber is still going, probably more archival but still there. I think the legacy is more in the work that was done that inspired others rather than actually the institutions in themselves...

JS: Uh I was going to ask you about distribution actually because it's always one of the most difficult areas of low-budget filmmaking, and to what extent Warp has cracked that, in terms of...

RB: Uh I think in a number of ways...I think primarily by having...a bit of a truism, but in having a good relationship with distributors, particularly Optimum [Releasing]/Studio Canal who've done most of our films. I mean we don't have a deal with them or anything [?]. Um so most of the films have got theatrical distribution, and you know almost invariably have a sales agent on board before it starts. So there's a sense in which, with the odd exception, we're not doing the thing of oh we're going to make a film and someone will pick it up. If we have it's been a quite deliberate decision. Mark in particular I think it's a very entrepreneurial producer. We're not sort of...which would be a different from the workshop...we've yet to be truly successful but it definitely aims to be a commercial company. A commercial company without selling its soul. It think it's important because we have had offers occasionally to buy up half the company, which, we wouldn't have made our fortunes on, but we would have been a bit better off. We have occasionally explored [those options] but we felt in the end to satisfy the needs of the buyer you're going to have to become something else. No bad thing if that's what you want to become, but there isn't that appetite there. So it is independent but not independent in the workshops way, which was that generation to whom accepting money was being part of the capitalist system. So it's a company which is definitely focused on getting the best deal for the film – not just for us, but for the filmmaker, anyone, the crew, the cast. So it's pretty focused on getting the best deal. It's always intended...to make sure the films are not made at ridiculous...at a price that's beyond its value. There's a trade-off. Sometimes they probably have been made at...There's a sort of real sense in which we don't go off and make films very expensive for the sake of making them expensive. But we genuinely believe in a correlation between the cost and the value of the film

IF: The appropriate budget

RG: Now I think we've changed a bit on that, again, we have to take the view, let's say for a Studio Canal kind of company, there's no point in doing it at a really small budget. Because [inaudible] it is a studio...there's not a lot of point...you're better of distributing it with a smaller distributor, or indeed at times, as you've done, to distribute it yourselves. Hang on to the rights. I think we found that...which we did do on *Le Donk & Scor-zay-zee*, to some extent on *All Tomorrow's Parties* and a couple of others. We've never lost a lot of money, but we've never made a lot of money doing that. And actually we've kind of taken the view that - more for creative reasons rather than the ambitions of the company - in terms of the scale of films that on the whole we want to make, you know, are not films that you can distribute as a small company with no distribution. In the end it comes down to the fact that if you really want to distribute your own films you have to have enough films to distribute, which is kind of self evident. So you can't do it like, 'oh yeah we've got this film yeah we'll do that this year and then in nine months time something else we'll do it again'. You can do it if you take everyone off to work on that but in the end [inaudible] you have to acquire some films and acquire people to acquire the films which we don't have time to make. So then you need a quite serious level of investment. So in the end I think we went in a loop on that for a couple of years and then decided that what we do, to use a jargon phrase, is create content. We try to maximise the value of that, but we're not trying to be distributors or sales agents. To be honest there are good people out there who do that. If you're going to do it you've got to be serious about it – you need a lot of money and we haven't got it. And it's not like there are three people who desperately want to distribute it as sales agents [?] But going back to the [question]...there are some similarities in regionalism and to some degree the auterism of some of the films that we make. But there's also a sense that, like the record company which has survived for the last 20 years and its had some better years than other but it's sustained itself as a totally independent company in a business that's completely changed and has kept going and survived unlike many – in that sense we've been quite focused. One of our strengths is finding people – obviously in making a film there's a lot of people involved. On the whole we've done well...some of that is to do with hanging onto talent. Shane being the most obvious example. I think Richard Ayoade is going to do another project with us, Chris Morris. Sustaining that is quite time-consuming.

JS: But that's an important part of what you do isn't it – the soul of the company in a sense.

RG: Yeah yeah. It's part of defining who you are and your work. And also it adds to your value in a way, because the bricks and mortar are certainly not worth anything. The value of Warp if anyone did want to invest is in those relationships.

JS: Are we up in terms of your time frame?

RG: Yep.

JS: Thanks very much indeed...we'll transcribe that and get a copy to you. It's been absolutely fascinating talking to you, really useful insights.