Interview with Professor John Ellis

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HX: First, let’s talk about the adventurous series Visions which was the first commission of the independent production company – Large Door, which you, Keith Griffiths and Simon Hartog founded in 1982. For me, I’m very interested to know why you chose a history of cinema in China as one of the subjects? As a Westerner, why you were interested in Chinese cinema in that an early time?

JE: Because that was still the time when, if you were seriously interested in cinema, you could be interested in cinema from right around the world, and you would be interested in histories of cinema right around the world. And, in Britain that time, we were aware that we knew a lot about our own cinemas, a lot about cinemas in Europe, America and North America, but we didn’t know so much about cinema elsewhere, and particularly, China was a completely unknown cinema. Indian films for example were available in London. But apart from what was going on in Hong Kong, we knew nothing about cinema in China.

Just the time when we were setting up the television series, there were the first exhibitions of historical and contemporary Chinese movies in Europe. So in 1981, there was a festival in northern Italy and I organised by Marco Muller. And then, after that, two people in London organised a big season of the films in that a national theatre in the British Film Institute. And that were Tony Rayns and Scott Meek, and Tony is the presenter of the ‘History of Cinema in China’.

So, it was really … it was a way of … it was part of the whole opening of China. As a Westerner, I am very happy to be able to be part of that. It was really an extraordinary moment, because China for us had been this complete mystery for many many
years. What we knew about China was all sorts of mistaken ideas. And also, a lot of us on the left in UK were interested in some of the political ideas that had come out of China. We knew more about the ideas than we did about the practice of the ideas, and so we were keen to see what actually was like … you know.

HX: Then, what histories of Chinese cinema did you present to the British audiences?
JE: It was the history of a progressive filmmakers based in Shanghai during the 1930s, and then it engaged from Shanghai in the Anti-Japanese struggle, and then ending up, after the liberation, making this one film I love very much called ‘Crows and Sparrows’ 乌鸦与麻雀 (1949). It is a film which was being made while the Japanese were still in Shanghai and finished afterwards. It’s about an apartment building – all the different people who lived in an apartment building. The Kuomingdang General who claimed to own the building was going to evict the people, and how they try and fail and succeed to resist. It’s a very true film, particularly, and also full of wonderful characters. It’s real … It is one of those ensemble dramas which seem to have emerged around the world at that time. There is no dominant star, there are about ten people who are equal. It is very hard to do these movie things.

So after that, we looked at the development of the industry in Beijing and the kind of films that were being made in 1950s and 1960s. Though there is a lack of films being made during the Cultural Revolution, we had some extracts from the films made by Xie Jin, like the Legend of Tainjun Mountain (1980) Jiang Jun Mountain, because he is from the generation 50s, and made extraordinary films in the 1950s. So, we basically it is that history, and so it is to some extent the history of China seen through its movies.

HX: Back then, did you have feedback from the British audience? Did they like the documentaries you made about China?
JE: In television how do you know? No, you can’t know. But, you know, back then, the audience feedback was people writing letters. It is broadcast television in the old way which there’s no feedback. So, people writing letters are the only kind of thing that you get. Then the film had quite a considerable history of being used afterwards – that’s really how you know. It was shown at a number of film festivals. It was bought by Australian television, public television in America, something like that. So, it had quite considerable used afterwards. It is now available on YouTube which I guess it doesn’t get to many people in China … Now there it is available and actually not enough people have watched.

HX: Okay, yes, I can guess not very many British people watched …
JE: No, you know YouTube is available around the world … but compared to other weird things that we made, it was less watched. There was a subsequent film that Tony Rayns made about the fifth generation – that gets seen a lot more … because I think the films we begin with Yellow Earth, you know, that’s where we start. So those films which are people knew about and taught about on their courses …
HX: Is this also because they obtained a lot of awards, the film awards, so they have the reputation and get seen a lot more?

JE: I don’t think it’s the awards, as so much the names of the directors are known … the films are shown to the students, and so then the teachers look for material that will explain and contextualise, including good documentaries.

HX: You and your colleagues call it New Chinese Cinema starting from the fifth generation, why the New Chinese Cinema?

JE: Simply because it was linked to the showing of several of those films on Channel Four and Channel Four had already shown a number of the historical films that we discussed in the earlier documentaries. So, it was their marketing really – the New Chinese Cinema. This is meaning this is the cinema which is coming from China now – should have said Chinese Cinema Now, really… But if you put ‘now’ in the name of a film programme then it gets old very quickly – never a good idea. ‘New’ is okay, ‘new’ will last, ‘now’ is bad …

HX: I’m also interested to know, as a Westerner, do you think cultural differences affect your understanding towards Chinese films?

JE: Obviously yes. One of the great things about cinema is you see things that other cultures think are normal, but you think are not. So, you’re able to see inside, and you’re able to see inside normal behaviour, everyday behaviour. No matter how much writing you read, it just doesn’t work the same way, even in fiction. When you read fiction, you take that back to your own experiences. What you imagine is out of your own experience, but when you watch it on screen, then you are confronted by things in all their strangeness. So, that’s really what the importance of cinema is in a way.

HX: Does this and effect your research on the Chinese film?

JE: Yes. You have to understand why people in the films are doing what they do. You have to understand what is this behaviour, what is this scene all about. Sometimes you get to the point where you can understand. Why is this a problem? Or what is the problem?

HX: Do you have any solutions to solve these barriers?

JE: Are they barriers? Or are they something to celebrate? The world is not the same the world over. You know, actually we are not globalised. This is the everyday proof that we are not globalised. Even if you have the culture that is open to influence the outside – the appropriate things and make them its own, reject them, change them, and recombine them. So, all the time we got this kind of into play of cultures. That is on the level of cultural theory; but in terms of what you see in movies, you see the intimate, specific practices … so the films show you things that are foreign to you, so you do not quite understand what’s going on. Maybe, sometimes, you need to seek to explanation.

HX: And did you continue to do the research on Chinese films nowadays?

JE: I don’t see as many films as I used to. Films full stop, let alone Chinese films. Because as time has gone on, I become more and more involved in trying to understand
television, from having worked in the television industry, then writing about it and so on. I look much more to TV to give my movie-type experiences these days. That’s much more difficult because Chinese television is not exporting very well.

HX: When you do get started researching Chinese television?
JE: I never did. Oh well, you mean properly researching. I find things out, but it’s not what I was researching. That’s a big difference.

HX: From your book ‘Seeing Things’ published in 2000, I noticed two keywords, one is witness. You described the 20th century is the century of witness. What about the 21st century, especially in the so-called social media age? Do the audience still have the experience of witness?
JE: Well, the experience of witnesses is there, but there is no longer ‘The Audience’. That’s where the difference lies. I mean witnessing is on a continuum, in a sense that actually to see and seek to understand, to see into here to have a chunk of audio-visual reality that you have to deal with. It is still what’s going on. The differences are … and in my book about documentary ‘Documentary: Witness and Self-Revelation’ (2012) – a very good book about documentary – I discuss the way now that the whole way of documenting our lives, the whole way of making documentaries has changed. Because we have moved into an era when it is now easy to make moving image and sound. I mean when I wrote ‘Seeing Things’, just at the end of the last century. That was still an era when it was quite difficult to film. You need quite a lot of technical infrastructures, you need quite a lot of money, you need some specific skills. Now anybody with a phone – can not only make things, but can also broadcast them to their network. So that’s what’s changed. It’s still, you know, the kind of function of witness is still there, in a way that I explored there and later on. Because a lot of people criticised using that in the book. There is a whole debate with a man called John Durham Peters. He wrote an article and I wrote one in reply. That’s quite a useful kind of debate. It’s been presented in the book ‘Media Witnessing’ edited by Paul Frosh. That’s quite an interesting follow-up on the ‘witness’. But, you know, to develop that concept has been a very interesting piece of work altogether. It still works. But the changes have happened in the other end. There is no longer the audience, there’s no longer the broadcast model in a simple way, and especially in relation to, shall we say, the factual material. The material about the everyday world. That’s much more diverse.

HX: Yeah, nowadays, when people talk about the audience, they prefer to use ‘users’ or ‘participants’.
JE: I like the term ‘users’ because it means that people make the material, have no control over the way in which it’s experienced. You used to be able to say television and cinema are the relatively standard models of dissemination, and so you could have in your head a kind of ideal user type. You can’t have any more.

HX: I like the term ‘participants’.
JE: But most participants choose not to participate – they are still using, because life is short. You know you got involved in that sense of participating with all the material
you meet every day. You will do nothing else. As we know, the purpose of life is to deal with emails.

HX: Now, let’s turn to another keyword that I found from your book: *uncertainty*. This reminds me of the currently quite debated ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth politics’. Could you please share some of your ideas?

JE: I think the model I used there is the ‘story telling’ model of the news. It is one that really has a lot of validity. People who study news really haven’t paid attention to it at all. And it’s the idea that, if you take the idea of a ‘news story’ seriously, then actually any single news item, any single news report, any single news bulletin, isn’t telling you the whole story arc. It’s simply telling you the latest episode in a big story arc. So, these are never finished things. The crucial thing is then to see how much of that news is actually fact, and how much of that news is speculation about what will happen. And a lot of news, especially news where I live is actually more speculation than analytic facts. They start by saying ‘Okay this has happened, this is what happened’. Pretty soon they start to ask ‘What does that mean? What are the implications? What will happen next? Where is this going to go?’ So, it’s all questions about the future. That is an interesting function of the news. It is really as much to predict the future, as it is to tell the past and present. And fake news, of course, is nothing about the future. Fake news can’t become the future, because on one level, everything about the future is fake, but on another level, fake news has absolutely nothing to say about the future. It is trying to influence people’s behaviour, and that’s what it is for, so it’s on the side of propaganda. But actually, that kind of informed speculation about the future which is a critical component of news is the best way we have of combating with fake news. When the predictions of the informed news service come true, then that reinforces its authority as a source. You can’t just combat fake fact with real fact, because the response of people who believe the fake fact is: ‘so, how can we tell what is true and what is not?’ You can’t combat it. The speculative, predictive part of news coverage will influence future behaviour, by trying to see where it is coming from and what is it for, rather than what it is.

HX: And in social media platforms, fake news can be easily produced and people can also be easily attracted to fake news.

JE: I think that is not a kind of … I think when you’re looking in the wrong place, it’s blaming the messenger again. What is the reason why the fake news takes off now, rather than five years ago. Why the fake news now? Well, because we have a fake president in the United States – that’s one reason. But the real reason why fake news is the issue at this moment in history is because we have an element of distrust of power by ordinary people. This very odd distrust. Because this distrust which seeks to install strong leaders. You would think it would be a kind of populist mistrust that would say, you know, I don’t want the institutions to betray me, and we need to remake institutions. But it’s not. It’s another kind of more reactionary things, which says if we had a strong leader then it will be okay. And the Americans will find the mistake in this because they have a strong leader, who is not a trustworthy person. It
is rare to find a strong leader who is also trustworthy and honest. But the reason for fake news is because of this kind of populist distrust of power, and what these powers have done to us in the last ten years.

**HX:** Yes, the world is fast changing …

**JE:** Yes, it is changing. You see the multiple failures of state systems, multiple failures of corporate care, and multiple failures in both public and private sphere, which have led people to on the decline in standards of services and things, which let people simply say, you know, ‘I have had enough’, ‘nobody’s listening to me’

**HX:** Do you think social media play a role in these processes?

**JE:** Yes, people think, if you use social media, people will listen. And you know, we are not quite yet of the analytics good enough actually to make the process really work. And also people’s skills in using social media are not that great – they cannot interact, actually, with the analytics, in order to make their particular feelings aggregate with the feelings of others. But the social media have the potential. This is very interesting.

**HX:** What about social movements? This is quite a trendy aspect in researching social media.

**JE:** But with many of these things, especially the trendy thing, like Facebook, is the problem of the analytics. I don’t know about social media in China at all. But one of the problems I would say – Twitter. It’s still a system where it’s quite difficult to decide what hashtags to use. And the hashtag comes from personal tweets, and that’s in effect that person creating their own metadata, and so still you know you’ve got metadata chaos, basically. I mean they are systems in trouble in terms of chaotic metadata. And the most chaotic is YouTube. Metadata defines content and allows people to find the content. What’s required now is that the analytics develop to the point that they get powerful enough to understand in real time – the very large amount of very colloquial texts that are being produced.

**HX:** In your book, you also mentioned that scheduling is the power. Could you please give more explanation, especially in the social media environment?

**JE:** I want to take a few steps back to explain what happened in the television industry. It has got more and more different in different territories, because of the way now that the patterns of consumptions of the television are very different, and the channels by which people meet television materials are very different. Different television in different territories. It depends on completely outside things, like what mobile telephone networks, how they work, what your contract like … If television consumption is very different in different countries, but it’s nothing to do with televisions, it’s still with delivery system. Scheduled television can still be very important. It is important in the UK, but less important in other places. I think it’s also important for different generations. Actually, scheduled television is a very effective device as soon as you have children. Because in the current situation is that it’s very difficult to find television content. There are no search engines. Content
discovery takes time. It takes active work and that is going to destroy the industry. The content discovery systems really have to be radically improved, they have to open up to data to each other, so that you can get cross platform searching which show you everything that you can have. At the moment, searching is a sort of a mess. As soon as you are short of time, scheduled television is a brilliant thing. It says these things are going to be good, for you, now.

Secondly, there is that important aspect of live television: it says ‘it is important to see this now’. You know it begins with the sport, but it is also there with the big competition shows and so on, which we call ‘event television’. That’s still very important. Those are scheduled moments. So, schedules have not gone away by any means. Indeed, there are fresh forms of schedules. If you look at social media television delivery, you will also find scheduling, because people ask all the time. When is the best time? When is the best time to send something else on different social media platforms? It’s not enough any more simply to post, it has different times of the day. So, people are also scheduling their social media use, like the best time to post something on Facebook – first thing in the morning. The best time to send tweets on Twitter – not first thing in the morning, but in the afternoon.

HX: In the last part of the interview, let’s move to the technology, which is also the subject of your current project ADAPT.

JE: I’ve been involved with a lot of projects about making old television programmes available, opening up the television archives, because there is a huge amount of material sitting in television archives. And it’s of the greatest historical importance. It is an audio-visual record of the second half of the 20th century. I think you cannot understand our recent history without seeing material from television, whether it’s news, an interview, or a politician, or whether it’s the really influential dramas, fictions, documentaries and so on. So, you have a lot of things to see. They are all available, but as I was saying earlier audio-visual productions are changing so fast. It has changed fundamentally in ten years. So, we now need to understand what used to be like actually to make television. How did it used to be made? How difficult was it? Because already my students say: why did they film it like that? why did they make it like that? Why didn’t they do this which we do now? The answer is ‘Because they couldn’t’. It wasn’t a technologically possible, or logistically possible. It would be too expensive. It would push the equipment too far. You know, it was just not possible. For reasons which are not simply to do with technology, but more with the way that the technology was implemented, and the conditions under which technology is actually deployed. So, that’s really what we are looking at. How do they do it? What happened? How difficult was it? You know, to take the example of this interview, you’ve just got a little thing, a small phone. But then you know back in the past, you would have to get your tape recorder, because that was the only storage medium, a tape. You would have to put the recorder down, down, thread the tape, start it running with a clack, and you would be using quite a big microphone. We both be aware of it. You will be aware of the tape going round and round. You know the technology always has that kind of way of changing the interpersonal dynamics.
So, my ADAPT project is looking at all of those questions, and so a big part of the project is to reconstruct how television is used to be made. And we do very direct and radical reconstructions, which is we get people used to work in television industry, the machines that they used to use. We put them together and say, ‘do again what you used to do’. Okay, if you were using films, show us, actually use some film to film an interview. Set it up, see how long it takes. For you to enter a room that you have never seen before to the moment when you ask the first question of the interview. How long does that take? What happens there? Then, we follow the film which has been exposed, go through the telecine (which makes a video from the film images), and then the process of editing. So we show the whole process of making television using film. We’ve also reconstructed a live outside broadcast using one of the first colour outside broadcast trucks and cameras from the early 1970s. That’s making television using analogue electronics. It’s not physical film, it’s electronics. That electronics are actually 50 years old. It can hardly work anymore, because of wiring… We found the equipment from dedicated enthusiasts and collectors, not from museums. If you go to a museum, they have great machines in their collections. But when you ask them whether they work, they say they have no idea. ‘We have no idea. It has not been used for 30 years’. I can tell you that if it has just been sitting there as an object for 30 years, with no maintenance, then it can’t work …

People have to get hands on the machines in museums and see how they work. I think part of the future of education here should be to break open to the museum and get people to try and use this equipment, not necessarily with electricity, but simply to see how heavy it is. How can you move? How do you change the shot? How do you focus? How did this used to work? This is really complicated. So, making film and TV was an elite activity. It was a rare thing because all the equipment cost so much money and was specially made. All these things are now mass produced. We have cameras because we have phones. It’s an incidental technology, but back then it was really special. It was very special, very expensive, very rare, and not remotely dependable. So, that it’s all of that we are seeking to look at, which gives us a lot of data about just how they are made – the expensive films.

And also it shows us a whole working culture of how people and machines work together. So, it’s a different set of data, about people and machines. The project has certainly become more complicated than the research project that I think we had initially anticipated. And then there comes an issue of dealing with terabytes of audio-visuals and information. There is no machine searching, which surprises me. You know people say machine learning is getting better and better. You confront machine learning with moving images and you find that they are at the stage where they can tell a cat from a dog after a lot of work. So this project about the history of past technologies is also having to deal with very contemporary technological problems as well.

HX: Specifically, in your ADAPT project, there is a section on social media …
JE: Yes, social media as a production tool. That’s really interesting. That aspect – my colleagues James Bennett and Niki Strange are doing this project, which is on the use of social media in production. It’s actually within the production environment. So, two questions. How are the social media outputs in any production integrated into the
production process? That’s the first thing. The second question is more interesting. How is social media used within production teams? We found the production recently which was taking place in a hospital. In a hospital, you can’t use mobile telephones because of the medical equipment, so they were using the hospital Wi-Fi. They were using a live chat platform with a limited group to communicate about production: to tell a crew where to go, to say something is happening here and to tell them immediately. They were using the social media platform within the production as the key management tool. So, that is all of that, which is going to be easier and much cheaper than the alternative which is having a wire-based fixed rig in the building. That was an interesting thing. The other thing is the way that people manage their careers in the social media – as a third aspect of the project. If you are somebody working on the production, you want to post on social media, to say that you are working on the production. You’ve done, you show it off. But the publicity department says ‘no’, because they don’t want. They have on the Star Wars film – made in London. Somebody started putting things on the social media, and accidentally leaked stills of something that the producers wanted kept secret until the film’s release … That’s all of it. So, it’s another specific aspect. The confusion or conflation of the public and the private in social media, creating major problems in the publicity of the entertainment business. That’s the third aspect of the project – how is this be managed in practice now in the British television industry?

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John Ellis, Professor of Media Arts, Royal Holloway University of London John Ellis is a theorist and historian of television. He leads the Masters in International Television Industries at Royal Holloway University of London. His book Visible Fictions (1982) is one of the founding texts of television and media studies. He produced over 100 TV documentaries for BBC and Channel 4 in the United Kingdom between 1982 and 1999 through his own company Large Door Ltd, including a history of cinema in China. He currently leads the 5-year ADAPT research project on the history of television production technologies and their everyday use. This involves filming retired technicians using again the analogue equipment that once was used in TV production. John Ellis is also Chair of Learning on Screen, the UK teaching and research organisation which promotes moving image and sound in UK education and research.