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Visions: a Channel 4 experiment 1982–85

John Ellis

Any experiment in broadcast television is forced to come to terms with the overarching structures of television as it is lived at a specific time. The broadcast model has dominated television since its inception. So any work that seeks to further another form of television (that is, not that of broadcasting) is, by definition, an experiment. The structures of broadcasting are those of the schedule, intimately linked to the rituals and habits of the domestic spaces into which broadcasting projects itself. In broadcasting, experiment is perhaps more about the structures of the medium than the creation of specific texts. Indeed, my first experience of television work in the 1980s with Channel 4 led me to believe that any thorough form of experimental programming requires an address to the form of the broadcast flow. There now exist many general accounts of the foundation and early years of this channel, including my own. This account is much more specific.

10 November 1982, the second week of the new channel's existence, saw the launch of *Visions*, a novel series about cinema. *Visions* was made by an independent production company, Large Door Ltd, founded for that sole purpose by Simon Hartog, Keith Griffiths (producers) and myself, billed as series editor. Like most other production companies working for the new channel, we believed in its statutory mission, "to encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes".¹ To write about *Visions* twenty years after the series ended is to explore a now almost forgotten concrete attempt to realise something of these aims. According to the channel controller, Jeremy Isaacs, 'Film culture demanded that we have a serious regular programme about cinema. But *Visions*, the channel's film magazine, though it ran various excellent items, never quite caught on.'² This is why.

In 1982, the sole regular TV programme devoted to cinema was *Film 82*, a long-running BBC1 review show hosted by Barry Norman. Arts documentary series like ITV's *South Bank Show*, BBC1's *Omnibus* and BBC2's *Arena* sometimes featured documentaries about cinema. No other TV channels

existed in the UK at that point. Although by present standards there were a large number of subtitled films on these channels,³ the coverage of cinema centred on Hollywood, particularly on Film 82. Large Door Ltd was founded to propose to Channel 4 a series which would predominantly centre on other cinemas, covering some of the new releases on the art-cinema circuit, neglected or recently discovered cinemas, and take the occasional critical look at the films in commercial cinemas. This was the period in which Chinese cinema was just becoming known in the West, thanks in part to the work of the critic Tony Rayns, who was heavily involved in the *Visions* project. It was also the period in which the BFI was carrying on a cultural politics of cinema, centred on a circuit of regional film theatres and radical critical and analytic practices fostered principally by its education department. It was also the period in which a radical independent cinema had begun to articulate new film forms, in part financed through the BFI's production fund and Arts Council funded regional arts associations. Over it all loomed the relatively new government of Margaret Thatcher, which at that time took a fairly laissez-faire attitude to culture, though it was later to mount a direct attack on the BBC. The Thatcher government created Channel 4 as an instrument of 'freedom'. It saw the idea of a channel that commissioned from others rather than making its own programmes as a means of bringing market economics into the closed circuit of TV broadcasting. The project, however, had been conceived with quite another conception of 'freedom' in mind: freedom of speech and expression. Both sides can claim significant successes for their conception. Broadcasting has indeed become marketised; and a degree of freedom of expression that was unthinkable in 1980 has now been achieved.

It was, therefore, a strange and exciting moment to launch a bold new TV series on cinema. There was considerable activity to draw upon. The contents of the first few *Visions* programmes demonstrates the breadth of the agenda which we had set ourselves.

- 10 NOVEMBER 1982
Cinema, Cinema: a montage of film clips acting as a prospectus for the series, assembled by Tony Rayns
An interview with Paul Schrader on the release of *Cat People*
Angela Carter reviews Peter Greenaway's Draughtsman's Contract (15-minute review with extensive clips)
- 24 NOVEMBER 1982
Ivor Montagu interviewed by Stuart Hood on his work with Hitchcock, Eisenstein and communist film politics
British Exhibition Today: a survey of different forms of cinema activity presented by Susan Barrowclough

- 8 DECEMBER 1982
Festival des Trois Continents: a report from the third cinema festival held in Nantes in November
French Film Policy: an interview with culture minister Jack Lang
- 22 DECEMBER 1982
Special Effects: the development of British special effects from *Fireball XL5* to *Superman*, a documentary presented by Lynda Myles
ET and Tron: a comparison between two current sci-fi releases by John Ellis
Gandhi: a review of Richard Attenborough's epic by writer Farrukh Dhondy
- 19 JANUARY 1983
The Cannon Classics Group: a report gate crashing the annual convention of this distinctly dodgy would-be UK cinema major
Michael Snow: the doyen of the avant-garde interviewed on the opening of a major retrospective in London.

Already some of the intended features of the series made themselves clear. There is an eclectic range of films from the commercial to the most resolutely non-commercial. Where commercial cinema is addressed, it is done so critically and coolly. Reviews of specific films were presented by unusual and often critical voices. Dustin Hoffman, in London to launch his drag performance in *Tootsie*, took particular exception to the *Visions* review of the film by two gay activists on 27 April 1983, and refused to appear on any Channel 4 talk show. The series tried to address the present moment, but at the same time remain resolutely different.

As the series developed, this difference became more marked in the aesthetic of the items in the programmes. The predominantly documentary or direct address format of these early programmes began to give way to a more idiosyncratic approach: a moody essay on Wenders by Chris Petit; an item on Syberberg's film of Wagner's *Parsifal* that managed to include marionettes; a screening of Jean-Luc Godard's mediation on his own film *Passion*. The final series of *Visions*, a monthly magazine running from October 1984 to July 1985 emphasised this authorial approach. It offered the opportunity to produce a montage essay on the month's releases to filmmakers like Peter Wollen, Neil Jordan, Michael Eaton and Sally Potter. It commissioned short films from Chantal Akerman, Marc Karlin and Keith Griffiths, and bought in another made by Raul Ruiz. The idea of a montage essay was novel and had not been tried before, to our knowledge. The commissioning of shorts on film-related subjects from filmmakers was derived from the French series *Cinema, Cinemas*.⁴ This series, which also started in 1982, came to provide something of a model, and *Visions* offered

a selection from the series on 23 May 1984.

Visions had an underlying seriousness of tone, which was criticised even at the time by the commissioning editor Paul Madden. This was by no means unusual in the early days of Channel 4, which ran a programme called *Opinions* in which an activist or intellectual read prepared text from an autocue to fill a half-hour slot. Such 'seriousness' resulted from the desire to say something predominating over the need to say it in a way suitable to television. There was a lot that needed saying at that time, as the traditional British left was feeling the impact of the new politics of Thatcherism, as Stuart Hall had named it.⁵ Largely impotent in the political arena, and, increasingly after the miners strike of 1984–85, in the streets and workplaces as well, many of the left found a refuge of sorts around Channel 4. "The channel", as it tellingly became known, was conducting an experiment in the rules of TV discourse. It was shifting the then mandatory broadcasting practice of 'balance', and replacing it with programmes that asserted particular points of view rather than constructing a discourse that sought to mediate between points of view. Many of Channel 4's attempts at innovation, like *Opinions*, took such a form. But they were definitely not experiments in the forms and aesthetics of television itself.

The seriousness of *Visions* was slightly different. The series rested on the tone of seriousness found in many contemporary analytic discourses about cinema, particularly around journals like *Screen*, *Framework* and *Afterimage*. It compounded this by asserting the importance of what were, to much of the audience, novel forms of cinema. If *Visions* did have a problem, it lay in a seriousness that assumed rather than presented the pleasures of those forms of cinema. Sometimes it worked, especially if the film clips managed to engage and thrill even when truncated. At other times, it seemed, the combination of clip and critic or director commentary simply failed to communicate the pleasures of the large screen, or indeed militated against them. Criticisms of the series at the time tended to include the word 'wilful' as in 'wilfully obscure' or 'wilfully eccentric'.

Some of the problems of early Channel 4 programmes, shared by *Visions*, also arose from the restricted costs and restrictive technology of the period. Channel 4's budgets were necessarily strained, and series like *Opinions* filled slots at prices lower even than bought-in US programming. The first 15 programmes of *Visions* were made for a budget of just under £500,000, giving an average budget of under £34,000 per programme, which would not buy a huge amount even using today's far cheaper technology. From the outset it was decided that the bulk of this money should be spent on a number of filmed documentaries covering the cinema of the Far East. This produced one of the most successful, or at least most widely exported, programme *Cinema in China* directed by Ron Orders and presented by Tony

Rayns. Outlining the history of Chinese cinema since the 1920s and including interviews with veterans like Sun Yu, Shen Fu and Xie Jin (shown shooting *The Herdsman*), this programme was still being screened in the USA in the mid-1990s. Reports from remote locations like China, Philippines and Nicaragua were shot on film because tape was not a practical originating format at the time in such places. These programmes were almost all completed on tape, however. The main reason for this was the ability to telecine extracts from films. Unbelievable as it now seems in this era of piracy, the major distributors lent us reels from their upcoming releases so that we could telecine our chosen extracts. This facility was extended even at the Cannes Film Festival, to which were devoted most of the programmes on 25 May 1983 and 29 May 1985. Nowadays, an electronic press pack provides pre-chosen, mandatory clips, a development that began in the UK as the *Visions* series was coming to an end.

Without this access to telecine, the *Visions* approach to cinema would have been impossible. Video also enabled the recording of longer interviews, work with chromakey, to shoot quickly, and to put together items like the late Mary Holland's commentary on Edward Bennett's first feature *Ascendancy* (25 May 1983) in less than a week. But this use of video came with certain drawbacks, especially in terms of visual style and cutting rate. Video recording was still on 1-inch reel-to-reel tape which required a crew of at least two and had a limited tolerance for contrasting light levels within the frame. Editing was carried out on what now seems a cumbersome linear system, computer-driven but effectively copying from one tape to another using up to three input machines. When a new input tape was required, one existing one had to be spooled to the beginning, taken off the deck and the new one put up. The output player was then adjusted for the levels of this new tape which was then spooled down to the required shot. This took time. Editing was not quite frame accurate, so the trimming out of pauses or other techniques that required fast cutting and a short shot length were effectively not an option. Complex visual effects were also to be avoided because online editing suites were in short supply in the early 1980s and were being worked on a 24-hour basis. It was common for the previous booking to overrun by several hours. Editing was something of an activity of informed guesswork as offline editing was a rarity. It was out of the reach of most productions until late 1983 when the first VHS offline suites became available. All of this militated against any overt stylishness in early programmes.

Visions did introduce one stylistic trait from the outset, however. This was the framing of its film clips. All were shown in their correct aspect ratio, framed by a white line, a kind of audiovisual quotation mark. This enabled a more adventurous transition between film clip and other material, especially in the more experimental work of the series. However, as with all such

devices, it relied on audience familiarity. This was particularly the case with Keith Griffiths's *The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer*, which introduced the work of this Czech animator to British audiences. Extensive extracts from his films including the complete film *Dimensions of Dialogue* (all displayed within the electronic frame) were combined with comments from six art and film critics and animated sequences by the Brothers Quay which provided a meditation on the bricoleur activity of Svankmajer the animator. Anecdotally, it appears that some viewers still missed the distinction between Svankmajer and Quay in the programme.

The framing device was intended to indicate the transition between material derived from cinema and that produced by the programme itself. This was necessary as the series deliberately tried to adopt an aesthetic approach derived from cinema. However, the fact that production deadline pressures required the adoption of videotape as the basic production format often worked against this. Where items needed a fast cutting pace, this was often impossible given the technology and budgets available; where attention to the detail of visual style was called for, the limitations of video at that time often became painfully obvious. However, one aspect of cinema remained at the heart of the series' approach: the attitude of always trying something new, of modest experiment. Each programme was conceived as an adventure, in which there were no standard features to items. This was an attempt to integrate into the texture of the programmes themselves something of the excitement and unpredictability that lay at the heart of our experience of cinema. Outside the mainstream of filmmaking, it seemed, one never quite knew what to expect. *Visions* tried to replicate this experience in its own shape as a series, but this in many ways was the main reason why it never quite worked.

The *Visions* series was ambitious. It used video when few others were doing so for arts programming. It married the journalistic approach of Simon Hartog with the aesthetic ambitions of Keith Griffiths and added an approach that I had derived from involvement with *Screen* magazine. It was an experiment in TV that had a relatively long life. Yet it never quite fulfilled its potential. The fundamental reason for this lay not with the variable quality of different programmes, since that variability is a fact of almost every series ever made. Some editions are better than others for all sorts of reasons: because fewer mistakes are made, because the team works with a single objective, because the programme hits a moment of wider relevance, because everyone around seems to be watching, or because a formal and performance unity are achieved. But as an experiment, the *Visions* series' imperfections were more visible than its achievements for one fundamental reason. It was never scheduled as a series, so it did not have the regularity of pattern that its experiments tended to assume. It was an office joke that the

series never had the same starting time twice.

The series was commissioned by Paul Madden at Channel 4 because it was one of the very few proposals in the months before the launch of the new channel that took an overtly topical approach to cinema. There were many proposals for films or series dealing with particular aspects of cinema: director profiles, national cinema surveys and even polemics. But the series that became *Visions* was rare if not unique in trying to address the films that people could go and see at the time when those films were available. The initial proposal envisaged a far closer link to Channel 4's own film screenings, which were extensive in the 1980s and later led to the formation of the Film Four channels, initially as a subscription offering only and from 2006 as a free-to-air digital service.

However, the links with Channel 4's own offerings proved virtually impossible in practice. Early scheduling of films was a short-term hand-to-mouth affair, so it was impossible to link the making of a documentary with a lead time of three or four months to any season of films from a particular country or director (the main classifications at the time) since film seasons were planned just weeks in advance. Editorially, Channel 4 preferred the format of a short 3 or 4 minute introduction by a critic to each film rather than a free-standing documentary. So this aspect of the proposal was hardly ever realised. *Visions* was, therefore, principally concerned with current cinema releases, to which it took a strong editorial line, championing the little known and the difficult, and asking awkward questions of mainstream releases.

From the outset, the series sat uneasily in what began to emerge as Channel 4's scheduling pattern. British schedules in the early 1980s did not have the settled pattern of half-hours they now have. Slots could vary in length, especially on BBC2, whose flagship social documentary series was called *40 Minutes* after its distinctive slot length. Where programmes or bought-in feature films dictated a slot length that did not fit a 30 or 60 minute pattern it was difficult to pad the slot out, as is now often the case. There was a lack of promotional trailers and strict regulatory limitations on the total amount of advertising permitted in an hour. The result, even on Channel 4 which screened commercials, was a variable start time for late evening programmes, especially when scheduled after a feature film as *Visions* often was (the schedulers hoping for a certain amount of audience inheritance). Hence, there was never twice the same start time. Schedulers were also prone to trying isolated experiments without consultation with either producers or commissioning editors. The programme of 27 February 1985, designed for a late slot (examining Hungarian and Nicaraguan cinema) was pulled forward to a 9 p.m. slot. It was not a suitable case for such treatment, whereas the preceding programme on 16 January might

have been, since it featured British cinema of 1945 on its 40th anniversary and a quirky view of the pre-cinema machines displayed in the newly opened Deutschesfilmmuseum. Such a change of slot in the middle of the series did not help with winning the familiarity that goes with regularity.

However, regularity and the visibility that it brings eluded *Visions*. The dates of this scheduler's experiment show that *Visions*, now in its third series, had become a monthly magazine series which ran for a year. The second series (May and June 1994) had consisted of a conventional series of six one hour-slot length documentaries, including *The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer*; a survey of contemporary Italian cinema including a rare interview with Sergio Leone; an investigation of the problems of African cinema seen through the cases of the adjacent countries Madagascar, Mozambique and Zimbabwe; and an extended conversation between two British directors, Wendy Toye and Sally Potter. The first series was also a magazine programme of 15 episodes alternating with an intellectual discussion programme named *Voices*. This was a starkly contrasting format to *Visions* as it was an invariable format of studio discussion between figures like Isaiah Berlin, Bruno Bettelheim, Octavio Paz, George Steiner, Susan Sontag and John Berger, produced by the late Udi Eichler.⁶ The alternation at least provided a slender sense of regularity for each programme, but also a level of confusion, this being an altogether unfamiliar channel in what had become a very settled broadcasting ecology. The production company of each series received letters intended for the other, even on occasions from Channel 4 itself.

Channel 4 was the first new channel to be launched in British TV since BBC2 almost twenty years before. No one involved realised how much was required to change the audience's long-established viewing habits. Those of us producing programmes tended to assume that the startling nature of what we tried to offer would be a sufficient attraction, and this approach was to a large extent shared by the channel's senior executives. Early schedules offered a bewildering variety of programming, many of them one-offs or short series, with very few fixed points other than a nightly news at 7 p.m. In contrast, when the next terrestrial launch took place in March 1997, Channel 5 prioritised the attempt to establish the regularity of its schedule with its potential audience, boasting that "we'll show you a film every night at 9".⁷ By that time, the UK was a multi-channel environment and TV programmes had become definitively subservient to scheduling patterns.

The *Visions* series in some ways anticipated this development. This was partly because it had a journalistic, time-tied aspect to its address. The magazine programmes of series 1 and 3 included items that were entirely addressed to the week or month of transmission. The series also grew to depend on a belief that a few of its devices and approaches were familiar to viewers, particularly the device of framing of film clips, but also a distinctive

approach that included the lack of any presenter, the refusal of homogeneity in style within one edition, and the challenging nature of some of its material. If *Visions* had a consistent identity, it lay in a lack of consistency, a sense that it was never certain what would come next. But in television, to be consistent in a lack of consistency requires an underlying regularity of appearance on the screen that the series never attained. As linguistics teaches us, difference and creativity are possible only on the basis of a deeper framework of familiarity and regularity.

This was why *Visions*, in Jeremy Isaacs words, “never quite caught on” even as an experiment in television. It was neither because its experiments were too bold for television, nor because its material was too esoteric. The series was morally acceptable in its content, failing to outrage or offend in the surrealist sense, despite the derivation of the production company’s name from the Bunuel/Dali film *L’Age D’Or*. The one and only brush with censorship took place in a careful and rather conventional programme about censorship in Brazil under the military.⁸ Nor did the series fail to ‘quite catch on’ because there were too few decent items in the series: items were widely screened in film festivals and sold to broadcasters, with a co-production arrangement for the final series being made with the new Canal+ in France. It was simply because *Visions* never had the scheduling regularity to enable it to become a recognised micro-brand despite its 32 episodes.

What does this reveal about experiment in television? It shows that programmes matter only marginally. There is still a place for the occasional high profile innovative event that can command wide publicity, a one-off like Peter Watkins’ *Culloden* (BBC, 1964) or Peter Kosminsky’s *The Government Inspector* (Channel 4, 2005). But beyond such isolated events, experiment in TV requires bulk and regularity. An experimental series needs to establish its ground rules. It needs to use habits of viewing to shift habits of seeing. Perhaps the model I have in mind is a truly industrial one: the experiments that an established series such as *ER* can undertake in prime-time, telling a story in reverse, or in real time, or as a live broadcast,⁹ each being a deliberate variation from an established pattern. Other examples might be Paul Abbott’s BBC1 drama series *Clocking Off* (BBC1, 2000–3), with each episode featuring the story of an individual, all branching off from a common workplace; or the *CSI* (CBS, 2000–) series which has introduced the untrue flashback into the vocabulary of TV; or the format of the *Fast Show* (BBC2, 1994–2000) which transformed the baggy sub-genre of the sketch show into a densely self-referential form. There are a few examples from the area of factual programming, however, perhaps as such programmes do not provide the same satisfactions of narrative completion that drama and comedy can bring. Examples in the factual area tend to be portmanteau arts series like Channel 4’s *Without Walls* (1990–97) or ITV’s

South Bank Show (1978–), which consist of single arts documentaries with few common characteristics from week to week. Occasional experiments in visual style or factual address can take place within the double safety of these series: the safety of ‘the arts’ as a category, and the safety of a single item in a long series. The length and regularity of a series, in short, enables experiment to take place and to be noticed as such.

Notes

- 1 Broadcasting Act 1980 (HMSO 1980).
- 2 Jeremy Isaacs, *Storm Over 4: A Personal Account* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989) 152.
- 3 Since at the time of writing the main terrestrial channels show no subtitled films, the two or three such films weekly across the channels now seems a cornucopia of delights.
- 4 *Cinema, Cinemas* was a monthly series on Antenne 2, produced by Claude Ventura, Anne Andreu and Michel Boulut with a regular offering by Andre Labarthe. It ran from 1982 until 1991.
- 5 Hall originally coined the term in the journal *Marxism Today*, and by 1983 it was the subject of a collection of essays, *The Politics of Thatcherism*, eds S. Hall and M. Jacques (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1983).
- 6 *Voices* ran to 42 editions and was initially presented by Michael Ignatieff. It reprised Eichler’s earlier series for Thames TV, *Something to Say*, with Bryan Magee from the 1970s.
- 7 According to the launch presentation broadcast on 30 March 1997.
- 8 The programme ‘Brazil, Cinema Sex and the Generals’ directed by Simon Hartog was pulled from the schedules on the afternoon of planned transmission, 19 June 1985. Accounts can be found in: Isaacs, *Storm Over 4*, 118–19; and an account by Julian Petley in various contributions to Derek Jones (ed.), *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001).
- 9 The live broadcast of *ER* is the subject of Jeremy G. Butler ‘VR in the *ER*: *ER*’s use of e-media’, *Screen*, 42: 4 (Winter 2001).