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Interviewer:
Murray Weston

BRITISH UNIVERSITIES FILM & VIDEO COUNCIL

Interview with EDGAR ANSTEY

I think it's interesting as background to consider the extent to which the original dress and philosophy er - was developed in the first instance by him and then er - was moved out, partly by his efforts, partly by the efforts of, of, of, were stimulated - public relations officers who saw the chance for their own area to be enhanced by film. And so you had two tendencies, really, two trends, two directions of development. One towards the Shell Film Unit, the other, later, towards Shell-Mex and BP. And in a way they were both concerned with the er - the environment, but er - Shell UK was more concerned, probably, with the domestic environment and Shell International, er - Shell Film Unit that is, was more concerned with international considerations of environment and you had as a consequence this wonderful series of films which were made after the war under the guidance of Arthur Elton and Stuart Legge, particularly, who came in and made films in association with the United Nations agencies, which were about the relationship between the environment and the planet as a whole, between the environment and the way of life and the economy of countries, particularly in a deprived situation, Third World countries, that were threatened by, by famine, were threatened by drought, threatened by disease, and by pests. All these things were examined in the films by Shell, which were dealing with the struggle, if you like, between man and his, man and his environment. Er - Shell Mex and BP were more inclined to go into the areas of forestry, for example. They did a number of films. And of course,

they, they, they looked at technology, but not in the wide sense that the Shell Film Unit looked at man's struggle with his materials to provide a mechanised life support, as it were, in the way that, that Shell International did through the Shell Film Unit. But all of it can, in a way, come from Gearson's original notion er - that the great multi-national corporations, and indeed, the national corporations, would be well advised to take up its national and international responsibilities in, as, as, as er - organisations operating in the public interest and they should look at the whole concept of contemporary life from the point of view of the service which they were trying to offer and so Shell was offering oil for lubrication and as a fuel, and this meant aircraft and this meant cars. They should also look at how er - the use of their product for cars and for aeroplanes was going to affect man's situation in his environment, what the problems were, what the opportunities were and how they could be met. And this all springs, in a sense, so far as Shell, Shell Film Unit is concerned, from a report which Gearson did at the request of Shell International, in which Gearson recommended the setting up of the film unit and as a consequence, er - they, having accepted his report said, who can run this? And er - Shell er - accepted his invitation, which was that I should run it. And so in, in 1933 actually, I joined them to develop this unit, which really began in 1934. And er - hence the 50th anniversary. Er - but we began, we went immediately to the er - air travel and the er - some kind of attempt to show the importance of the existence of a national airport, Croydon as it were, on grass out there, you know, with the most extraordinary beasts patrolling,

and promenading about. And this er - wildly futuristic concept of people moving all across the globe by aircraft. And, and Shell made a film which made passing references, not really more than passing, to the use of, of fuel and lubricants which might originate with them. There were one or two signs of the Shell trade mark. But really what they were mainly concerned with was the fact that they should acknowledge that they were a part of the contemporary social scene as well as part of the industrial scene.

INT Do you think that commercial companies that are multi-national are now taking the same view of their role in the world, or do you think things have changed since then?

A Well, I don't think they are taking quite the same view, because er - there was a liberal spirit amongst the er - the great corporations. Allot of people went into er - what later became known as public relations, which was virtually invented with the documentary film. A lot of people went to serve the great industrial corporations who were of a liberal return(sic) of mind, er - some of their masters had come out of a liberal, non-conformist tradition of the 19th century and they did have a feeling that whether you were working in, directly in the public service or whether you were working for private industry, you had a first duty to serve the community with your work as well as to make a profit for your company. And so, I think, in those days, in the thirties, liberally minded people like Alexander Volkov, who was at Shell, and Jack Beddington, who was at what we now call er - Shell UK, er - people of that kind er - saw their role as being one in which they would encourage their corporations to make a contribution to the public service

in the interests of their company and thereby gain prestige for their company. And so er - they didn't so much say to us, the film makers, when we wanted to make a film on a particular subject, how aeroplanes fly, a whole series came out from Shell early on - they didn't sort of say to us, what good is this going to do for the company? They rather thought that here we are, fulfilling a role which will not be fulfilled by anybody else, we are finding the money, which is peanuts by our standards, in order to persuade the public that we are a part, a part of this great enterprise. And later on, when I was invited by Shell after the war to go to Venezuela and start a, a film unit there, which was an adjunct of the, of, of the Shell Film Unit er - it was accepted happily by Ernest Branch, who was the assistant general manager looking after public relations, that what we were saying in the films we made er - was and - I should break off to tell you what we were saying in these films - was that they should use part of their revenue for oil in Venezuela, which was virtually their only source of revenue, they should use it for building up their social services and they should use it for er - diversifying their industry into other fields, bringing out the iron ore and so on. And I remember one day saying to Ernest Branch, well, it does seem to me that by encouraging the government to participate in the planning of their own economy in this way, you surely are leading to a situation in which the government will say, well, the best thing of all would be for us to nationalise the oil industry. And Ernest Branch, who was by no means a, a, a socialist, said, yes, of course, we recognise that,

we understand that full well at Shell. And this is what subsequently happened. The industry was nationalised, but it was nationalised on the basis er - in Venezuela, that the people er - there er - would er - be wise enough not to put all their hopes, pin all their hopes on their oil exports, but they would by this time have diversified and set up proper social services and they would be ready to take the responsibility of nationalisation in a way that private industry is not able to do. Now, you ask whether this is going on today? I think that the, the hard men in industry have taken new heart from recent political developments and they are not any longer sure that the public need own these great corporations, you see, and they, they, they hope again, as we did in Victorian times, that there might be a future for private industry. I - I won't lead you away into what my own personal views ab... about this are - but they weren't certainly the view of liberally minded people in industry in er - the end of the last century and through into the first quarter of this, because it was seen as a logical development, that the people would own their own wealth. You know. And, and - but - and so there has been this change. But I think nothing is permanent and I think when the er - the private society has, has, has, er - had a few more years of trial, it'll be clear that, you know, that - we are after all a social group here, sitting here on these islands - that we are not private individuals. You know. There is no future, I think, for er - the private elite to fight society. You know.

INT So the function of the films originally had a certain amount of social interest involved, from the point of view of the company, and they obviously, you know, seem to have avoided using the films as propaganda for their own purpose, in that you very rarely see Shell products displayed on the screen within the films and so on. How did that come about? How did that decision come about? I know in Airport, for instance, you see, I think, two or three men loading fuel onto a plane with Shell logos on their I think that's about the only reference there is

A That's right. Yes. Yes.

INT ... To Shell. Obviously, a company was sponsoring these films and therefore could have said, we want to see Shell everywhere, Shell logos everywhere and Shell advertising. But they didn't use them in that way. Was that an outcome of policy decisions by yourself and (TOGETHER) ... by the company itself?

A Yes. But even earlier than that, you see, if they had wanted to do what you describe, which would have been the normal practice, and they would thereby have finished up with an advertising film, publicity film. If they had wanted to do that, they would never have gone to John Grearson and said, will you write a report on how we might use the documentary film. Because they'd seen what work he was doing for the Empire Marketing Board and the Post Office Film Unit and they realised that what he wasn't doing was advertising. You see. If they had wanted^{- there were} plenty of advertising agencies - if they had wanted that, they would have gone to the advertising agencies. Now, one consequence of their doing so would have been immediately that any hope of public showing of their

films in those days would be gone. Really. Because you know, the cinemas would take advertising material provided they were paid to show it, and then it would have to be very, very short indeed. So they didn't want that. They weren't going in that direction. What they hoped was that they would benefit as er- as the fishing industry had benefited from Gearson's DRIFTERS, say, as the Post Office was benefiting from things like NIGHT MAIL - they hoped that they would benefit, but this was not, they recognised at once, in the advertising area. So when they said to Gearson, will you write a report, Gearson in his report had nothing to say at all about advertising, but a lot to say about the need for good public relations to engender a feeling of respect and sympathy on the part of the public, good public relations on behalf of the corporation. Moreover, they would not have accepted Gearson's advice er - to use me in running the Unit, if they had wanted advertising material. So my problem was very easy when I went out to Croydon to shoot AIRPORT. I just tried to give an account of how the airport worked in those days. And if - I needed naturally to show an aircraft being loaded with fuel and when I did so, well, the tank had Shell on the side of it. That was fair enough. This was part of the story. But er - they - nobody ever said to me, couldn't we have a bit more of that, because they knew what the answer would be. I, I would say, well, no. Because once you move across that boundary, you are into advertising and the audience will at once recognise the film as advertisement and they will at once dis,... discount its message and will say, well, it is really just an advertisement. And so on. So you break faith in a way with your public,

if you offer them as educational entertainment, whatever it is, if you offer them something which clearly er - is concealed advertising. So it never arose and, and Alex Volkov, who was the chap who was mainly, later became public relations officer, who I worked with mainly there, he was fully on my side, as Ernest Branch mentioned in Venezuela, later was. You see. Now, one interesting consequence of this was that when I, I left and went on to other things and then Arthur Elton and I came back later to er - to, to run the Unit, and during the war er Shell - and this is quite important, I think - Shell's skill in technological exposition was such that when Shell put the Unit at the disposal of the Ministry of Information, they were very anxious indeed to have its services, because we were probably the leading unit in technological exposition in, in the country at that time. And it was vital to the war effort that people should be given in the cinemas and on theatrical showings some notion of what part was being played by technology in the war effort. And the Shell Film Unit was chosen to do that because it had built up the reputation and then I came back and ran it during the war and we made most of the films which were trying to explain the technology of, of contemporary strategies or how technology was helping strategy, helping tactics and so on. Films about the progress of the war. Films about the new machines being used in the war. These were almost entirely made by the Shell Film Unit. Well, you see, this, this shows how far away we were from advertising. We were really exploring er - the new technologies with the aid of the new, modern medium of exposition. The, the sound film.

INT What was the process for selecting the topic for the films you worked on? Was it from some committee within Shell or ...?

A No. No. We had er - AIRPORT. I mean, it was an obvious one in a way. Er - Rosa had made for Shell Mex and BP, as we called it, Shell UK had made a film called CONTACT. Aviation was a great thing at the time and so as soon as I got there, I looked around for subjects and Shell were very much concerned at that time with aviation fuel and I simply said, well you know, it's, nobody's ever told the story of a great airport, day in the life of. Was, clearly a good documentary formula, really. And so we took - we went down there. And then we started films on the petrol engine and the diesel engine and how aeroplanes fly and all these things, trying to provide a, a sort of course of education, really, in the new technologies. Which had not really been attempted. And always with one eye, not with any eye on the cinemas, really. Shell had never been interested in the cinemas or in television. They had not been interested in tel... entertainment in that kind of way, or the entertainment media. But they had been very interested in anywhere where there was demand for technological education - schools, or universities, or - by non-theatrical showing to specialised groups. And this was the market that we were really serving.

INT So, I mean, a small proportion would have been shown in the cinema?

A I don't think much, except during the wartime. Wartime, with what was called "the five minute films" and "the monthly films", went out under the auspices of the MOI and they were shown virtually in every cinema in the country.

These went into the cinemas. During the war. But before the war and after the war Shell er - some people felt were over punctilious. I don't know what the word is. They were pernickety perhaps about not going into the cinemas. They felt that for them to compete with commercial film makers, for theatrical time, was wrong. They wouldn't have wanted to buy time, you see, because then they were advertising. But they wouldn't want to go out and bid for theatrical bookings on the entertainment basis and they never did. Anymore than they have ever made much use of television. Virtually none. Shell Mex and BP, - Shell International have, I think, but not - and I don't know whether they were right or wrong about that. In my other unit, Transport, we got a lot of exposure from cinemas, we got circuit bookings and brought back more than the cost of some films from theatrical distribution and television together, and American distribution. But Shell have never done it. And they always had a principle that they weren't in the entertainment business, you see. And commercially they weren't in the entertainment business. And they have been very pure, if this is the word for it, in that way.

INT It's odd, isn't it, that they have tended to keep a fairly low profile, as a matter of fact, as a film unit. Why do you think this is? Is there any particular reason within Shell that they would want to keep such a low profile?

A Well, I think they wanted to continue - I never thought how to answer this question, but I will try now. It's a valid one. I think they felt that, that they wanted to retain the support of the Shell directors, which was forthcoming, the freedom that they gave to the film makers,

And it was complete freedom, really. They wanted it to be free of any kind of notion er - that people were simply er - using film to build what they might have thought was a spurious reputation for, in the entertainment world, for Shell or any of the individuals. They wanted to keep well away from any kind of glamorous association, you know, show business and all that. They wanted, rather, to be in the education business and they didn't feel that the cinemas and television in the early days were really concerned with, with education. I think. It applied particularly to, to the cinemas. And so they, they were comfortable with education, because this was a sort of, a gentlemanly activity, as it were. Culture, you know, in, in the best sense. And this is where, this is where they wanted to be, because Shell have always had very close relationships with er - various educational organisations in, for example, providing finance for scientific and technical, technological laboratories in schools. And this was the kind of work that they did. And this again, they were very low profile, very unobtrusive and I think they wanted their film work to continue in that kind of tradition. And it did them a lot of good, because people used to feel, well, it must, you know, Shell are honest, direct, straightforward, good chaps and therefore, you know, you can't be - YOU CAN BE SURE OF SHELL. In fact, it was a way of, you know, of ... of making, making that point. And I once remember somebody else saying when I was talking with him about these things, he said: well, nobody would ever have any hesitation to invest in Shell, to buy Shell or any of those things, because they do all these peripheral things, they do all these er - produce these good works on behalf of society, so they must be very

prosperous, otherwise they wouldn't be able to afford to do it. And therefore, you can be sure - you know. And so in a way, indirectly, and long term, it wasn't, it wasn't a bad reputation to build up. But I don't think they calculated that. It wasn't, by the way, peculiar to this country, because er - Carnegie started it, in a way, in America, and a lot of big American organisations sponsored trusts and educational groups. Ford, there were endowments here and endowments there. And they, they felt they gave themselves a high commercial re.... reputation by being, as it were, er - above the commercial battle, you know, and on a rather higher level. You know.

(CUT)

A I don't know how much of this is any use to you, but

INT We'll not chop your words around, but at least we might take a small sequence out. It's very useful, all of it. The Film Centre is something which has intrigued me, in that that had a relationship with, obviously, Shell, with the Shell company and yet Shell had a Shell Film Unit and the Film Centre was regularly credited at the end of the Shell films as providing production expertise or even possibly, facilities, technical facilities. I am not certain. What was that relationship and why did that continue and exist?

A Well, er - it's interesting how it began. When the unit was set up, and they, following Grearson's advice,

they asked me if I would, I would go and join them, and I went to join them, and then I, I recruited staff and found the premises in Shell Mex House and built up the unit and we started to, to make films. I became disturbed to begin with and then rather desperate about the slow progress of the units so far as the decision on new subjects, expansion of production to justify the size of the enterprise. I felt that this was inadequate, that we ought to be working on more films and working faster and I had long, long discussions. I began to feel that the thing was going to run into the ground and er - I was young then and, and er - not perhaps as farsighted as perhaps I later became, er - but I thought, well, I - now that they have got the unit, simply using it to, to display to visitors, directors would bring visiting firemen in from overseas and show them the unit and the one film we'd made and play sound backwards and say, hurrah, whatever it was. And I got very, very jumpy about this, and after a lot of discussion I decided to leave. And er - which was quite a brave decision. But er - you know, I, I had a big stake personally and, and I wasn't very happy. And so we separate amicably and er - they couldn't behave more, more correctly and they said, well, it'll take a little time if you insist on resigning, because nobody has ever resigned before in your situation, and so we'll have to see what we can do and I eventually got out. And I went to do other things. And made HOUSING PROBLEMS and ENOUGH TO EAT and so on. And then Grearson - well, Arthur Elton and I really were the principal people in setting up the Film Centre,

because we realised that there was a lot of opportunity outside and Grearson encouraged us to do this. There was a lot of opportunity outside to make films for people outside the public service, outside the Empire Marketing Board, the Post Office and so on. There was a demand. And so we would set up an advisory organisation. We set up the Film Centre and Shell meanwhile had got rather into the doldrums. They had somebody there running it who, who er - who was, was a little bit lost and nothing much was coming out of the unit, so we thought anyway, we had friends still there, we would send our prospectus to Shell. Which indeed we did. And er - we got a letter back from Alexander Volkov, who was the successor of the chap who had been looking after me, Walter Hill, and Volkov sent back a note saying, I would like you to come and talk to us here. And Arthur and I, Arthur Elton and I had a long session. We thought, well, you know, this is really quite extraordinary, that they should sort of turn the other cheek, as it were, in this kind of way and we must try and behave correctly about this. And so I said, well look, Arthur, I think you should go. I won't go, because it seems ridiculous for me having walked out, to go back and say And Arthur went down to see them and finally it was agreed that Film Centre should take the unit over again and that Arthur should be in charge. And thank goodness, because he gave it, what quality that it now has derives almost entirely from him, because he had a real aptitude for the technological film. And Arthur took it over and I remained in the background until the war broke out and then Arthur went to the Ministry of Information as director of production or whatever it was called, and er -

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Shell said, well, perhaps Edgar would come and take over the unit and then put it at the disposal of the Ministry of Information and also the Services. We worked with them as well. And so there I was back again, but in an important new capacity. You see, instead of being on the staff, which I had been before, hence all these difficulties with my getting out, because there is no way of getting out of Shell once you are on the staff, but I did get out - but instead of being on the staff we were consultants, advisers, which meant to say, Film Centre was not in the hierarchy at all. We worked directly with top level and we told them what to do. If they didn't want to do it, they could say so. And they never did. But we were, as it were, not answerable to anybody, really, except as an organisation providing a service and we ran the unit for many, many years on that basis, as an outside consultant, but supervising the operation - Shell and, and - it was done from 34 Soho Square, from the Film Centre and we hired, we told Shell what staff to hire and we told them all the things to do, but we were simply the consultants. You see. And this worked very, very well and the fascinating thing is that much, much later on, Arthur Elton did go onto the staff, very briefly, and again it didn't really work. And it was fairly quickly changed. And I think the consultancy running a thing of that kind, is an ideal way. There are exceptions to the rule, because when I went to Transport I wanted to do the same thing for them, but they, the way they worked, the Transport Commission then, they couldn't do it and I had, I had to go on the staff. Which I did. And I remained on the staff and it worked really quite well.

But that's the exception that proves the rule. I think with most of these industrial sponsors a consultant which has his own hieratical(sic) concept of power, but is outside and working on the highest level is more effective and doesn't have to take orders, as it were, from anybody, really, except long term and on a sort of annual basis. I mean, if they didn't like the way the Film Centre was running at the end of the year, they could, er - they could cancel the contract if they wanted. They never did, but it meant to say that one was both part of the organisation and stood apart at the, at the, the difficult times. You know. You were on your own and you could behave as if you were on your own. So out of, out of the, my early experiences, I mean, came this er - came in a way, this valuable and, and essential discovery. Er - in a way, why I was handicapped in the early days, '35, '36, was really because I didn't have the power to say, we will make this, we will make that. Now, once the Film Centra was advising, it was very hard for them, having hired Film Centre and they paid us a reasonable fee for our services, they had, they were almost obliged to make use of us, in a way which you are not obliged to make use of somebody on your own staff. In a way. You know. Why should he worry. You know. He'll be all right. But if you are buying a consultant, in a way you have to, to make proper use of his services, otherwise it looks like bad housekeeping. It's very curious, a very curious discovery, but it came about in a way by accident. But that's, that's the story. And it reflects, I think, enormous credit on Shell. It really is rather a wonderful organisation. That

they were ready to come back to me and Arthur and say, well, in effect, you know, our thing is not working. As - we didn't allow them to get in a position in which they had to say, well if you had told us, it wouldn't. You know. But it's not working, why not come and try a new way. You know. To make it work. And they are very, very - I have enormous respect for Shell as a multi-national ...

(CUT)

INT The films that were made in your time by Shell - of those, which ones would you really regard highly? Are there any that really stick out in your memory?

A Well, during my first time, really only AIRPORT and AIRPORT has become more important historically than perhaps it was at the time it was made. I mean, Shell make a great deal of use of it still, as a historical document. At the time that we made it, it was er - a run of the mill, day in the life of, film. It was well - Graham Sarpe and Sidney Rodman - Graham Sarpe did most of the direction - I was sort of supervising it and, and Stanley Rodwell was the cameraman. It was well photographed, it's reasonably well edited, it has a rather conventional sort of commentary on it. Er - but it was a good, straightforward example of the documentaries of that day. Er - the er - the great days, I think, began to dawn when er - Arthur Elton produced and Geoffrey Bolt directed - this was after I had gone - TRANSFER OF ~~THE~~ POWER, which was, er - I suppose you could call it a seminal film

in the sense that it er - laid the foundation, really, for a whole er - vaultful of, of, - well, a whole tradition, really, of the technological documentary. And it's, it's a great film still and I think it's interesting to compare er - as we have done once or twice during my course for Temple - to compare TRANSFER OF POWER, which was made, what, in about 1936, '37, I suppose, with er - ACTING IN TURN, which was the remake, made after the war, which is about much more advanced technology. Some of these remakes are fascinating, because the technology had, in fact, changed, so they had to be remade. But the er - in TRANSFER OF POWER you have a film which examines fundamental principles in a very human way, I think. Er - ACTING IN TURN, perhaps because the technology is more difficult, is more er - I don't think sort of sociologically it's more profound, but I think technologically it's more complex. You know. And therefore is er - it's a better film, it's more revealing and wonderful and, and full of miracles of modern science, but in a way it's, it's less er - less fundamental in its, the philosophy which it propounds. You know. And it's very interesting to see thw two styles. Er - but the, perhaps the most important films in a way - well, the technological style, which is represented in an awful lot of films, is absolutely vital to the, the, to the unit tradition, but the films that were made, like, er - the THIRD WORLD. No? What's it called?

INT THE RIVAL WORLD?

A THE RIVAL WORLD. That's right. THE RIVAL WORLD. Yes. The films which were done in association with the UN agencies are unique, I think. Really. Because they show

the, er - the very scientific approach, but they are at the same time beautifully written, beautifully composed - the editing has always been very good in the Shell films - and the er - the film aesthetics are more than equal to this task of telling the story of man in a certain phase of his development on the planet. And I think these are very, very, very important films. And a lot of the contemporary work on television derives, I think, from these. And in a way, perhaps, contemporary films on these same subjects have never quite er - equalled the, the, the poetry and also the rhetoric, sometimes, you know, of the, of the great films, Shell films, in this area. There are a number of them. Four or five. You know. Made over the years.

INT How do you then see now for, say, the 1980's, and in the environment, which is dominated to a great extent by television, how do you see the non-theatric, sponsored film production, especially the Shell Unit, developing?

A Well er - this is a difficult question to answer. You see, the - a - you see, the Shell films are not cheap to make, because er - a great deal of time is, is spent in er - getting the circumstances right to make each individual shot. When the camera is, is, is - the camera is not actually operated until the position is right, the light is right, the angle is right and exactly the shot that the editor is going to need is prepared. Er - there isn't much time nowadays and in a way the equipment is so er - mobile and, and portable that there isn't the inclination perhaps to spend as much time on each individual shot as we did ... Consequently, the opportunity of precise composition at the

editing bench is to some extent, I think, lost. And video ed... editing is not so flexible nowadays. So what one wonders sometimes is whether the er - the opportunity to create the film, really, on the cutting bench, whether that may not be lost in, in time. I think there might be other things that come to substitute for it. Er - but building, building the films from visuals and sounds, as we did in the early days, or as they did, because I didn't have much to do during the big period of Shell. I didn't have much to do with it. But building out of the, sort of building bricks of films, which are pieces of sound and pieces of image and so on, building a completely new thing which takes on a life of its own. This tends to go now and more and more films, I think, are built from the people and ideas who are its subject. You know. The, the - this is perhaps particularly a loss er - a loss for the technological film, where people are not there to provide the same thread of continuity and interest. You know. The idea itself, the scientific fact perhaps is your theme and to make that cohere, you have got in a way to compose from little pieces of fact, rather than a lot of human observation or what somebody says, or what somebody does. You know. Which is the common, er - is the common raw material of television, isn't it, really. And er - and where you have got a lot of facts being composed, you generally have a talking head who sort of guiding you through the composition, where, er, for obvious technical reasons, we tended from, er, they would to believe that the facts must be do comp tell their own story. Really.

INT I suppose in the popularisation of science, which is really the field that Shell was working in to some degree, television now does duplicate some of that role, of the non-theatrical film?

A Yeah. Oh yes. Yes. Yes, I think it's true.

INT In that respect presumably one would see a future for Shell films or sponsored films in general in, in the video cassette distribution or something like this, and perhaps in the home?

A Yes. I think so. (TOGETHER) ...

INT ... non-theatrical distribution of films themselves is going downhill.

A Yeah. Well, it was interesting in the Grearson Memorial Trust meeting just now, er - Dave Watercombe was saying that er - 16mm distribution is still more effective than, than video. How long that will remain true, because we were talking about a particular video film and whether we should get it on 16, and he thought it would be worthwhile actually, because the video distribution isn't quite yet .. But the time, I should have thought inevitably, would come when video was, was, was the obvious, was the obvious way. I would think. Rather than 16.

INT We have seen the passing of quite a number of sponsored film production units.

A I suppose so ...

INT In industry.

A I was wondering the other day - you see, a lot of names, various names came up the other day we were talking and there were one or two people, I must say, I don't know what they have lately done and, and I can't help feeling

perhaps the traditional er - documentary is, is, is rather on the wane, I would think, now. For non-theatrical use or for direct use, as it were, as distinct from broadcasting.

INT Yes. I have always felt ...

(END SIDE ONE OF TAPE)

INT ... going to lead you away again, back to transport films, or British Transport films, and thought I ought to perhaps ask you more about that and your involvement there. When did you start with them and how did you come to join them?

A Well, the, the, er - in - London Transport had been talking about developing a film unit and I discussed with er - with er - a chap called Hutchinson there, who was their public relations officer, er - the possibility of, of my starting a unit for them and he felt that it, it wasn't - you know, they weren't going to operate, or I felt, we jointly felt, on a large enough scale and I went off to er - Venezuela where I was doing some work for Shell and then I came back from Venezuela and there was an urgent message - I think I had a cable first of all - to say would I meet a chap called Christian Barmer, and Christian Barmer was public relations officer for the British Transport Commission. And he told me that he had heard that I had been talking with Hutchinson and er - they were in fact going to start quite a big unit in the British Transport Commission and would I be interested in this? And I was immediately

interested, because Barmer had worked with London Transport under Pick. He had been the great, he was the big man at London Transport so far as art and communications and the imade of transport was concerned. A great man called Pick. And Bremner, who was chief public relations officer at the Transport Commission, had worked, believe it or not, with Stephen Tallons in the er - in the Empire Marketing Board and after that, more importantly, in the Post Office and at the Ministry of Information. Bremner knew all about documentary and Barmer knew all about documentary. And I was keen on what they were doing and they were keen to get me, so I joined them and I started to set up this unit in the same way that I had at Shell, but with the advantage that the Southern Region - your grandfather comes in here - Southern Region had a unit. Because I think he was Southern, wasn't he? Or was he Midland? Was he Midland? But Midland - they both had something to do with films, Southern, Midland, and there were in addition to the Railway Executive, as it was then called, under the Commission - there was the Docks Executive, the Waterways and all the other people - we eventually made films for. And so I started to, I started this unit down in er - london Transport headquarters first of all, and then it expanded and we took on people from the Midland, we took on people from Southern and, and built up the unit and off we went. Er - and although I was on the staff this time, everybody had learnt a lot about this kind of operation by then and Cyril Hurcombe, who was chairman of the Commission, I had worked closely with him and he was sympathetic and er - sometimes a little bit embarrassed because of his passion for natural history. He thought it was, you know, he was

a bit embarrassed that we made so many natural history films, but was I pointed out to him, this was nothing to do with him, this was my decision. And anyhow, they were very good public relations in the old tradition and so, and that - it grew from there. But again it was er - they were looking for the kind of operation they wanted and er - this was what I was only too anxious to, to supply. I remember Hurcombe, when I first met him, er - said: Mr. Anstey, I don't care what films you make or how many films you make, as long as they are good films. He said. Which was the most wonderful brief (LAUGHTER) ...

INT The high spots in the production there, is it not true that you won an Oscar?

A Yes. For a natural history film. A conservation film, really, called WILD WINGS. Yes. At Slimbridge, basically, about Peter Scott's operation at Slimbridge.

INT How did that come about? Were films from ...

A Well we entered - you have to have American commercial distribution to enter for an American documentary Oscar and we had, we had quite a bit of distribution in America, we had a distributor there and he entered four or five of our films and we got nominated four times and then, at least, we, you know, the nomination went, we, went through to the first, the last four. And at last, with WILD WINGS, which wasn't the best of them, to be nominated really, but this - it got an Oscar. And we got a lot of awards for that er - Venice, we had the main British Film Academy Award, I think, three years.. And the Venice, main Venice award on three, three or four occasions. We did very well. And again we had complete freedom, really, to, to make films on any subject

which were promoting travel in the very widest sense. Er - the, that as a sort of objective became less valid as the Commission lost more and more of its control of public transport. You see, when we started in '49, er - we had the, not only all the railways and London Transport, we had the bus services, you see, and ports and hotels. So we had complete justification for making films about travel and transport. Really. And we were able to do that quite justifiably because we had our own non-theatrical distribution, very widely spread, a good system. We were going into the cinemas and onto the television and, and so anything which encouraged people to move around was almost certainly going to bring benefits to either the railways or the buses or the hotels. Er - and so on, you know, one - and all the ports with the tourist films. For people from overseas we did some stuff on North America. We made some films for them. Er - so it was, it was a wonderful total brief, because it was related with such an enormous area. You know. And we could do technological films as well. You know. To explain what we were up to.

INT So as the Commission was in a sense dismantled, I suppose, how did ... (TOGETHER) ... create anything in the way ...

A Well, what happened when the, when the - this was no threat because the er - Commission simply was er - taken over by the British Railways Board. The British Railways Board, really, took over the offices of the Commission at Marylebone. So far as London Transport was concerned, and so far as the other things - Waterways, Docks and so on - were concerned, we then, we had made our relationships

very close and warm and all those things and so we were able to go on working directly to them. So we continued to work for London Transport, the Docks and the Waterways and so on, as sort of contracting units, you see. The British Railways Board was greatly different, because we got a sort of grant from them, which guaranteed our existence, as it were. They paid our salaries and er - then we charged them out of their own BR budgets for the films we made. With the other things they didn't contribute anything at all to our salaries, except through the overheads that we put on the films we made for Waterways and the Docks and so on. And they financed those films that we made for them. You see. So it became a kind of contracting-out operation as far as er - the non-Railways parts of the Commission were concerned, the old Commission, and we were a direct department, department thing with the er - with the British Railways Board. And it qorked quite comfortably and well. We were constantly being investigated, but you know, we got expert at dealing with investigations. And the, and it was er - a viable, it was a viable thing and we had er - one advantage of being inside and not an outside contractor was that we developed a lot of close relationships, you know, with the people there and we were close to the Board, and I was head director with access to the chairman, I reported to the chairman finally, not to the public relations people. Directly to the Chairman of the Board of the Commission originally and, you know, we became a part of the scene really.

INT Which films are your favourites then?

A I think a film called THE ENGLAND OF ELIZABETH which was a film built on er - it's a film where, where the soundtrack really is the important thing about it, in a way.

Vaughn Williams did the score. We had some very good musicians composing for us and Vaughn Williams did this. And it was an, an account of the history of the first Elizabeth, built entirely from historical, surviving historical relics - buildings, and there was a lot of Shakespeare on the track and so on. And that in a way is - because we had a lot of trouble with it, but it worked out very well finally and it did well in the cinemas and is - made more, more than its cost back in America. It has a lot of showing in educational circles in America and this - then the JOURNEY INTO HISTORY, which was the first of the natural history films got the Venice and Academy awards. This, this is a good film, with Laurie Lee writing the commentary and er - Edward Williams who did the music. At long last the BBC discovered him. He did the music for LIFE ON EARTH. This was one of the first scores he did in this area. JOURNEY INTO SPRING. Er - well, they are interesting from a number of different points of view. A film called HOLIDAY was a kind of free cinema film. Edited by Ralph Sheldon from library material, really, with a jazz score played by Chris Barber and his band. It's a very interesting film, with only about two lines of commentary spoken by Robert Shaw and written by me. Which is a sort of nostalgic film about Blackpool. And these are the films. There are four or five that er - that will survive, I think. But we experimented with a lot of new techniques, really. We did an account of a weekend outing. ONE of the first people to do a kind of cinema verite account of an actual event and we had about five cameras, I think, working on a weekend outing. And I can't remember

what it's called. I was thinking the other day - I am sure - it hasn't been in distribution for a long while, but I am reasonably sure that I have got or there is a copy retained of that, because it was er - a film in which there was virtually no interference at all with the people. There wasn't time, because they were moving very fast. You know. From place to place. And we tried, rather as television does now, you know, to cover the whole thing...

INT It was a multi-camera setup? That would have been fairly rare in those days.

A Yes. That's right. Yes. I don't think anybody had ever thought of doing it before. But we had the equipment. We hired one or two additional ones and just to show what an outing was really like. I think er - Jack Holmes was the director of that. Whose son is now working in films, you now. Andrew Holmes. Jack worked in the Post Office film unit and came, did a lot of films for me. We had a lot of very good people there and used a lot of good writers and composers. And er - we - Ustinov - when Ustinov had his first film part with me, but that was during the war. And Miles. Miles, he started - the first thing he ever did - both of them, the first thing they ever did was a Shell film.

INT TURN OF THE FURROW is one.

A TURN OF THE FURROW, yes, was Miles. Miles. Er - now with a knighthood, you know. Er - and, and Ustinov, I must look at that film again one of these days. Ustinov was in NEW ACRES, I think. Playing a rather dumb sort of...

INT So he's in front of the camera?

A ... refugee from the continent, I think. Yes. Just at the beginning of the war I think it was. He was over here and in danger of being interned. I think he was. Well, he was in some kind of detention for a time. He had been at the Players' Theatre. A lot of people like him and er - Koestler - were sort of picked up because they were suspect and we, we rescued, rescued Koestler and he came to work at the Film Centre. From er - a rather dreary situation he was in.

INT And when the end of British Transport Films came,
.....

A Well it hasn't really quite come. I mean, Lionel Cole is still, is continuing with, is continuing with video, but I think er - I was looking at the title on his latest film and it still incorporates BTF, but I think we may have to face the inevitable and it might be sensible to er - to er - regard it as at the end of the road. Er - and, and perhaps have a celebration of some kind for it. What, what were you going to ask anyway?

INT Well, I was just wondering how it came about, in that where there was certainly a move away from film, anyway, wasn't there ... and the library itself was ...(TOGETHER)
...

A Well you see, the library went first and then the er - it's just the old number game, you see. The, the Board is increasingly obliged to reduce the number of people on the staff and er - that is what it er - can best do in the case of films by, by getting - they handle the thing fairly

generously. I mean, people are offered early retirement, but they are gradually running the thing down. And then they made, they made a film within the last - I can't remember what it was called - oh, it's about travel for the disabled, which is rather a good film. They have managed - I think Lionel Cole is going to try and do another one to keep, you know, to keep the thing just ticking over. But er - it won't, it won't, I suspect, survive much longer. It'll get to the point where er - you know, the individual regions will probably do whatever they want directly, with contractors. You see, this is another thing that whereas we centralised everything, under, under me, actually. Not only films, but slides, slide tapes, still pictures, we had all the still pictures still working to British Transport Films. And this was an economy. But it's only an economy where the volume of the work is sufficient. You see. And now more and more they are doing less and less, because there is not much internal image building going on. I think even with stills er - what the regions will do, I think, is, is what stills they want, they will take themselves or get the local chemist, you know, to loan them a camera and do it themselves. That kind of thing. It's partly because, sadly, they, there is no finance, really, to build morale at the centre. You know. It's, it's, there's no Minister of Transport who is ready to say, well, you know, it's important to have the railwaymen believing in what they are doing. You know. The feeling that they are making a contribution to ...

INT When perhaps they are most needed. Perhaps. Well, thank you very much for ...

INT ... spending the afternoon with me. We have spent ...

A Well, you might let me have a copy of all this.

INT Yes. Absolutely.(TOGETHER)

A reminiscing about the past.

INT One thing I should ask you, was how you started in films at all. I think there's a long story about that.

A No. No. I'll try and make it brief anyway. The er - I was working, I was working at the Building Research Station under, which is part still, of the Department of Scientific & Industrial Research. I was there at Garstone, a country house outside Watford. And er - I wasn't enjoying it awfully much, but I had been trained as a scientist and a girlfriend of mine, also working there, came in one morning and said, well look, there's an advertisement in the Times which might interest you and there was an advertisement in the Times which said, er - young man - I think it was in the days when all these things were young men, not for young women - young man required to train for film er - editing, writing and eventual direction. Or something like this. Well, she knew that I was passionately interested in, well, in the arts generally, particularly in film. Er - and I wouldn't have seen it if it hadn't been for her. But I cut this out and I sent in an application and I went for interviews and still now knowing who had put it in. And by golly, when I got the er - the invitation to interview, I discovered the great John Grearson himself had inserted this in the Times. You see. And I went along and I was

interviewed. And I talked about ~~THE FILM~~ 'TIL NOW, Roth's ^o book which had just appeared and which I had read and then I also was full of excitement about the editing and titles of TURK SIB(?), which I had seen. And I didn't know that Grearson had done, done the layout of the titles, and done the title planning. So that did me no harm. You see. Anyway, to cut a long story short, I was eventually taken on and that was the beginning of it. And ... (TOGETHER) ... Arthur Elton was taken on, who - he and I worked together for many years afterwards. As a result of the same advertisement. Which was very, very interesting. We got there together. And another chap, Norris Davidson, who went to, - is now with Irish Television. What time he is working at all. And so that was how it happened. A purely fortuitous thing, because I had tried to, to get into the BBC and I had tried political writing and so on. Er - but this, this worked and Grearson always said that the only reason he took me on was that er - after a long interview, when he thought he had got rid of me, in fact, he came up to close the door behind me, I delivered a parting shot. I don't think he ever reported what the parting shot was. Which he wouldn't have paid any attention to if he hadn't discovered that I had got my foot in the door. And he was so impressed with this, that I had taken the precaution of making sure that he heard what I said, by putting my foot in the door, that he decided he had better take me on. This was his story. Absolutely hyp no foundation in fact at all. That I can remember. But that was hit story.

INT That's excellent. Yes. I am sure there was a great deal of competition even then, wasn't there, for that

sort of post.

A Yes. Yes there was. There was.

INT And so what age would you have been when you left Garston?

A I was, let me see, I was 2... 23, I suppose.

I suppose I was 23. 23 or 24. YOU see. Yes.

INT And to be really given responsibility for Shell later on, you would have been ...

A Yes, it was 34. I was 26, you see. But Grearson sent me off to Labrador with two Devrai cameras, a piece of paper to write the script and some lights, er - in HMS Challenger. I made two films. One of the survey of the Labrador Coast and one of an Eskimo village. And er - this was after I had been with him a year and a half, I think, and I had never done - I had done some still camera work, but I had - I had never done any movie camera or anything. And he said: Anstey - he always called me Anstey - I think you had better be off on this Labrador job. Tallance is not very keen, but I think you had better do it. He said, have you done any camera work? And I said no. He said, well better go down to St. James' Park and make some shots there. And I went down to St. James' Park and crawled around on my hands and knees making low angle shots, heavily filtered sky, you know, monuments and trees and so on. Brought these back and showed them to him. And ... it's all right. Go out again tomorrow. Tomorrow it rained, so I only had one day's experience. And I set off with a little developing tank and some chemicals and what I was going to do was tear off the end of rolls, process them to see the exposure was all right. And I did this and it worked out not bad. Not

a foot remains of the film now. It was distributed by the Imperial, by the Commonwealth Institute and they had a lot of copies made, but they all seem to have got destroyed and the negative when there was panic in London, when the war broke out, about nitrate, you know, and a lot of film was destroyed. It wasn't a great masterpiece, but it got me started. But that was the way Grearson operated. He just, er - you know, have a go was the thing. And of course, the, the, it wouldn't be really possible nowadays.

INT That he was the way he related to other people as well then? Arthur Elton as well.

A Yes. Well, well I was lucky really, because not ever - not all the people - Arthur didn't do much camera work. I did quite a bit. After I got back I did a fair bit. On films like er - DROITWICH and one or two things I did some camera work on. But he tried to give people experience of everything. And er - including beginning by - when you first joined - his sister taught me to join and then his sister, Marion Grearson, also taught me to run the projectors. That's the 35mm projectors. And it was felt, you see, his theory was you had to be able to do everything. Because he was constantly bugged about. He used to say about the elderly technicians that would tell him what couldn't be done, never would do. Drifters, he always claimed - I can't remember the name of the cameraman, but he didn't want to shoot it because it was, the weather was too dark. You see. And he - he only wanted to shoot when the sun was out. And Grearson said, well, no, no, I want this effect, I want this dull light and so the cameraman said, well, then I insist

on writing on the report sheets, shot under protest, or something like that. So Grearson made up his mind that he, his apprentices were not going to be subject to that, so they learned for themselves what was and wasn't necessary. Which was not unsound.

INT No. And the sort of experience you find it hard to get nowadays. Well - and maintain a position as well. It would be very difficult. Well, thanks very much for you time and so on