

Interview with respondent 0725

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Location: UCL

Interviewer: Emma Pett

Interviewer: Where you were during the decade, where you lived, roughly how old you were just to kind of set the scene?

Respondent: Ok, well the 60s era was the period of my teenage years and very early twenties. I was at school in England all that time and then later on at university in the late 60s, but being from a military family we moved around a lot and part of my...five years or so was spending holidays on the continent, Germany and such...

Interviewer: You probably saw...because continental holidays weren't as common then as they became so you probably saw, maybe saw a bit more of Europe than perhaps some of your peers?

Respondent: Oh quite definitely, yes.

Interviewer: Do you think that was a contributory factor in your subsequent interest in European cinema or other cultures more generally or...?

Respondent: I'm sure it made me more open to it, yes, absolutely. Yes.

Interviewer: You said one of the things that you enjoyed about going to the cinema was the glimpse of other cultures and sort of seeing other worlds and obviously during the 60s there were less opportunities to do that generally in terms of kind of media available. Can you...is there anything in particular that springs to mind? Were there films where you saw something like a Japanese film or a ?? film or something quite unusual and it was something completely new to you, can you remember that sort of feeling or experience?

Respondent: Yeah, yeah. Quite a number of examples rush to mind but one rather kind of obvious one is that after the...was it the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo Kon Ichikawa produced a film about it, which was absolutely fascinating. Partly because it was a brilliant piece of filming in the manner of the...the German...I can't remember... the lady who did the Hitler films...

Interviewer: Leni Riefenstahl

Respondent: Leni Riefenstahl, yes. Only this was in colour and kind of a bit more inclusive and it was also quite an opening, because Japan in those days was still very much an emerging economy

Interviewer: Yeah

Respondent: And, you know, we didn't think of it as being a, you know, a powerhouse of success and...

Interviewer: That Ichikawa film, did you see that at the cinema? Do you remember where you saw it?

Respondent: Gosh.

Interviewer: Sorry, I didn't mean to put you on the spot...

Respondent: No, fair enough, I suspect it was probably the Academy in Oxford Street, and it was the sort of film that didn't get a very wide release or probably only a very short release.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's why I was asking because actually I don't think anyone else has mentioned seeing that so it's quite interesting. I mean one of the things I'm fascinated in with this project is the variety of programming that you had in the 60s in Britain in terms of the different kinds of cinemas from the flea pits through to the old picture palaces that still existed, but also the programme itself the rolling programmes that you still got in a lot of the cinemas particularly at the beginning of the decade, the documentaries and all those sorts of things. There was a variety and a range of films, I think, that people encountered at the cinema which doesn't happen these days, people now more just tend to go and see a feature film.

Respondent: Well I, yes... I mean film is there in glorious diversity on media of various kinds if not actually in the cinema any more, then that was our...the only way we could...unless the TV happened to show something which

occasionally they did, and of course that in itself was quite an interesting emerging art form.

Interviewer: Did you watch any of the...can you remember when you got television at home? Was it...Did you have it throughout the decade or...?

Respondent: Well no we didn't. It was in about 1964 I think was the first time we had a TV and that was when my parents had moved back to England so we...you know, so we got BBC 1 and BBC2 which was terrific because they did wonderful black-and-white documentaries, live jazz broadcasts and things like that.

Interviewer: Quite a range of things. I think the films that were shown that were programmed on television in the 60s tended to be a lot older didn't they, things didn't come out that quickly on TV?

Respondent: Well there was a kind of read across to contemporary cinema in that, for example, the Shakespeare company did their cycle of ??, the Henry VI plays and..with the Wars of the Roses and that was filmed in a manner that clearly had picked up on some of the, you know, the photographic techniques of the cinema.

Interviewer: So you could sense a kind of crossover...

Respondent: Oh absolutely, of course because when "The Russian Handbook"(?) came out, must have been about that time maybe a little bit later, ... although there was something quite special about the Russian one

Interviewer: Yeah, quite a few people have talked about that. I mean did you watch any of the...there were some TV programmes about cinema as well weren't there, I don't know if you can remember a BBC 2 programme called World Cinema..

Respondent: I can't say I remember that.

Interviewer: So you more remember the crossover just in terms of the dramas that were made for television and...

Respondent: I think the drama and the music was of particular interest to me at the time. I was 6th form and those sorts of things were very close to my particular interests at the time and the...we had, I suppose film was too I suppose. I think the answer was that I didn't watch a great deal of TV and it was only the holidays when I was at home that I would watch it...

Interviewer: You've mentioned that you were a member of a film club, was that at university or...?

Respondent: And before.

Interviewer: And before? Oh okay so what film clubs were there?

Respondent: Well my school, secondary school was in Bedford and when you reached the 6th form you were allowed to join the film society which seemed to be a very grown up thing to do. They had a really...I can't remember if it was

every second or fourth Sunday and they had a matinee showing of something which was usually not kind of hot off the...you know...

Interviewer: Not a new release...

Respondent: Not new releases but they were mostly classic releases, you know the recent pass and they were...it was amazing the little ?? it was a little sort of capsule of great 50s and 60s films.

Interviewer: Yeah, so what...where did you watch them? Was it like in the school hall or...?

Respondent: No, no, this was a town film society.

Interviewer: Oh a town film society

Respondent: Yes that's why it felt grown up you see.

Interviewer: Oh I see okay, you were in the 6th form but you went, okay

Respondent: Off to Sunday lunch and down to the...can't remember what the film, the cinema was called, it was down by the river and it's gone now

Interviewer: In Bedford?

Respondent: Yeah. It was really clapped out, you know...

Interviewer: Because Bedford's got one of the oldest film societies I remember now.

I've come across this somewhere else, yes, it's got a long established film society.

Respondent: They took themselves quite seriously

Interviewer: Yeah. They showed quite a big range of films. Was that when you first remember encountering more interesting or diverse...?

Respondent: Oh yes, I mean up till that time my film going was usually you know family focused or with a bunch of friends and it was going to see whatever was on general release and I don't think, you know, the general release films were not, you know, there were lots of good films but I don't think I was particularly interested in what was interesting and what was outstanding at all provided it was fast paced and fun and so on. It was for...

Interviewer: Entertainment purposes

Respondent: At school we used to have, we had showings of films but they were usually older but in the same sort of pattern. Suddenly going down to the local cinema, you know with a bunch of adults and seeing black-and-white movies which told a different sort of story was definitely...yeah...

Interviewer: The cinemas...up until that point when you joined the film society you were presumably going to the cinemas in, the local cinemas in Bedford were you?

Respondent: No we??? Yeah I mean the school showed films but they were pretty selective and pretty anodyne.

Interviewer: So you didn't...oh I see so you didn't really get much opportunity to...because some people I've interviewed would go to children's cinema and Saturday cinema, that kind of thing, you didn't really do that when you were young?

Respondent: Well, in the holidays, because I was a boarder. In the holidays that was the pattern I suppose, particularly in Germany because I suppose entertainment was a bit more limited our parents could say on salary go down to the ?? or the ?? or something like that and there'd be a B movie with it and cartoons and stuff like that. So you know we did have that.

Interviewer: Yeah. What were the cinemas like...you mentioned in the early 60s you were going to these cinemas in Germany but then in the mid-60s as well as the Academy and the ?? you mentioned the local flea pits, that contrast between the different kinds of cinemas is interesting in many ways, that's the landscape of cinema's changed now. Can you remember much about those local flea pits? Were they...I mean was the fact that they were sort of run down and a bit unkempt did that change people's behaviour in them at all or was that sort of...were people a bit more rowdy or less...was it... less sense of occasion perhaps or....?

Respondent: I mean I'm sure there were cinemas...if you talk to somebody who came from a different, I don't know, social background or something like that

maybe that was the case and I'm sure in lots of provincial towns there were flea pits which were regularly used by hordes of people there for a laugh and probably it was quite a communal experience. My experience was a bit more rarefied going with the film society everyone's kind of a little bit solemn...

Interviewer: Very middle class...more well behaved

Respondent: In a way yes that's right. So I can't say that it was something that...

Interviewer: That you noticed

Respondent: Well what we noticed was that they were definitely run down compared to the West End cinemas you know if you went to see something like one of the epics for example..was that the 60s? Yes that was the 60s. All sort of large scale movies they were very well designed and looked after auditoria. Film was, I suppose, I don't know, was it on the decline then I suspect it was so...

Interviewer: It was. I think one of the interesting things about the 60s is that at the beginning of the decade a lot of cinema going patterns are quite like the 50s, so you've still got people standing up for the national anthem, lots of people are still going two or three times a week and it was relatively cheap so pretty much everybody could go to the cinema. By the end of the decade a third of screens had closed in the UK, which is quite a lot actually, so cinema attendance was in decline it hadn't gone up too much in price so people still went but there was a sense in which cinemas were less full and

people were kind of looking at splitting up the big picture palaces into smaller screens to try and make more...you know the patterns of attendance were definitely changing and going into decline; but then alongside that I mean what I found interesting is that the actual films released during the decade are very varied, some great films, British films and European films and so on. A lot of really significant directors made their first films in the 60s. It's funny there was a kind of flourishing of cinema but the attendance of it was in decline so there was interesting things happening throughout the decade. Can you remember cinemas closing or not really? I think there was some of those very big 30s palaces closed towards the end of the 60s

Respondent: I did become aware of...I was, I am an architect and I began in the 70s to take an interest in the styling of a lot of those cinemas and I did then become aware that there were some absolutely wonderful kind of modern palaces that were in a bit of a wrecked state and I noticed that. Some of them survived like the Alhambra down in Tooting, but there were others around the country which you could begin to see which were absolutely amazing sometimes externally but they were actually shells or you know ??

Interviewer: Yeah, that's what happened to a lot of them. So you went to the Bedford film society when you were in 6th form and when you went to university did you join the film society at university as well?

Respondent: I did, yes. Although I have a feeling I didn't join it right away. I think I might of...it was quite a privilege to be in Cambridge there were lots of films being shown in the town in the various specialist societies in colleges and things like that

Interviewer: So you had quite a wealth of...yeah yeah. So you've mentioned some of the films that you particularly enjoyed, "Tom Jones" and Kubrick's "A Space Odyssey". It's funny because I watched "Tom Jones" again last week at a screening we did and it's quite a quirky film isn't it, and there's the strange bit at the beginning where it's almost sort of like a silent film where there's no...where there's music and everyone kind of...there's a sort of farcical element to that

Respondent: Oh yes, very much so yes.

Interviewer: I mean did that seem....can you remember anything about that when you first went to see it? What struck you about it? Because obviously it was very well received but...I mean I think it's dated in certain ways and I'm really interested to see how people...

Respondent: Possibly, I suppose it would be quite interesting to see...it's not one I've seen since then so I don't know. I suppose the background against which I saw it was...there were plenty of historical comedies and romances made in those days and I suppose plenty on the stage as well, whereas this one was done in a slightly tongue-in-cheek way, I mean it was very knowing, it

might seem very mannered? now but in a way actually what was just so enjoyable about it at that time.

Interviewer: I mean this was the thing wasn't it, I mean he, Albert Finney's character talks to the camera quite a lot and he puts his cap over it when there's a naughty bit and it's very sort of cheeky and did that seem quite...?

Respondent: It was quite different yeah sure.

Interviewer: Yeah, what's interesting to me is something like "2001" has kind of retained that classic status, so if you go and see that at the BFI Southbank...

Respondent: I took my son last year

Interviewer: Yeah there was a revival it was fantastic. That will attract a wide audience still, it's retained a sort of classic status hasn't it, whereas when we show "Tom Jones" it draws people in who saw it in the 60s and want to kind of revisit it and see what it's like, it doesn't really draw in kind of younger audiences. So I suppose what I'm getting at is it's a film of its time I think perhaps...

Respondent: To some extent some of its approach went mainstream and I think you can now see it in quite a lot of historical films which are done in a slightly sort of cheeky sort of way, and suspect they may not realise it that...

Interviewer: That Tony Richardson was quite innovative in approaching a historical novel, a cinematic version of a historical novel in that very playful innovative sort of way, that was something that was quite different at the time. I mean it won lots of awards it may well have seemed at the time...I think as well that very kind of cheeky culture is quite 60s and that there's something of, you know people can read things into genres now but looking back it's always easy to do that with something of the era the Swinging 60s London kind of vibe that comes through in the film which is quite interesting. It seems to very much evoke that particular time even though it's a historical film.

Respondent: Well it's completely show(?) of course but the early 60s was socially a very relaxing time. I grew up in a military environment where things were probably you know more conservative than they were at large and suddenly to see stuff like this was...you know, it kind of seemed a bit disrespectful and a bit...but I think your wider point is probably about there was a kind of changing focus of films. Films like "Alfie" for example or "Billy Liar" which focused much more on individuals who were...

Interviewer: Individual freedom, sexual freedom, changing kind of morality that sort of thing...

Respondent: That seemed very fresh

Interviewer: Did it...was it quite a marked contrast then towards the end of the decade? Did you sort of feel things shifting because obviously the early 60s

was pretty much like the 50s in a lot of ways so those films that were coming out...I mean actually "Tom Jones" came out slightly earlier than that but they were, in a way, it's difficult to know really whether or not they were a reflection of it or whether they were trying to fabricate something that was being picked up in the press. But you, as a teenager or a student, you picked up on that, you were aware of that kind of shift in social...

Respondent: Oh yes that's right, you know, mainstream films you could see that often they were very well made, I think of films like...the sort of things that Laurence Olivier starred in, you know they were quite impressive in a mainstream sort of way, but you didn't feel that they had anything to do with life going on outside the cinema and suddenly in the 60s they suddenly began to look at least an approximation to some of the things going on outside.

Interviewer: Yeah, I find that really interesting and I wonder if maybe that is also connected to the fact that you were in London and then you were a student and possibly you were moving in circles with people who were perhaps slightly more progressive. I mean other parts of the country things hadn't perhaps shifted to quite that extent?

Respondent: I mean yes I was conscious of that and my family background was conservative with a small and a big "c" and my school environment was very conservative but there were these outlets which were....

Interviewer: Can you remember...it's interesting that Tony Richardson made that film because obviously he did a lot of the kitchen sink films and perhaps you would have been slightly too young to have seen those when they first came out, do you remember them at all?

Respondent: I was certainly aware of them because there were a number of films like "The Sporting Life" and Lindsay Anderson and stuff like that which were brilliant and you know really yeah captivating actually

Interviewer: Did they seem...did they seem to reflect what you saw around you, because obviously a lot of those films were setting out to tell working class stories and kind of draw on different geographical locations...?

Respondent: I suppose they seemed exotic in the sense that I didn't know the north of England and so they did seem to be... you know I thought it might still be like Wigan Pier or something like that I wasn't quite sure what people were like up there, it was only in the mid-60s that I made my first trips up there and discovered that perhaps there weren't quite as much difference as I thought, so there was that sense of the exotic even in the gritty you know North...The lives that they were depicting were lives that you could relate to. You know, "The Sporting Life" wasn't a problem for me to relate to because we played rugby at school you know it was actually...

Interviewer: It wasn't that alien

Respondent: No, in fact, because it filmed it in a tabularistic way, quite brutally realistic in certain sequences you suddenly thought yeah, it was not glamorising it whatsoever. And the long distance running one...

Interviewer: So you picked up on a different part of Britain, the attempt of realism that they were trying to capture was something that resonated. You mentioned directors which I find interesting because you said the directors were more important to you than stars, I think you kind of prioritised them a bit, and when I've looked through programmes from the 60s, it's very much films and seasons at particular cinemas in London are very much marketed around stars and the culture of the director that we have now wasn't so firmly established; someone like Hitchcock might be an exception to the rule because he promoted himself, but a lot of other directors didn't and quite often when I've interviewed people, people don't know who directed quite big films. Can you remember how you started to take an interest in who the directors were, was it through the film societies or...?

Respondent: I think that would have definitely have raised my awareness about it. I think I had a bit of interest before and this is just something about my temperament I guess, I've got a sister slightly younger than me, we both went to see "Lawrence of Arabia", wonderful film, and I think we liked it for entirely different reasons. You know, even now she occasionally talks about Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif and so on and just picking up on things that weren't the focus or the themes as far as I was concerned.

What I loved was the sweep of the film, the wonderful...the economy? Of the filming and that made me interested in who had actually...

Interviewer: In who put it together? The direction

Respondent: Yeah, and maybe because I was thinking about becoming an architect at that time so I was thinking...

Interviewer: About construction and shapes and so on yeah.

Respondent: it just appeals to me more yeah.

Interviewer: So you can remember certain aesthetic things about the film resonating and that sort of led you into well who made this. Whereas your sister was more the traditional film goer in the sense of...a lot of film goers particularly in the 40s and 50s had favourite film stars and people would you know collect posters and things like that and that was the draw and still is today for a lot of people. So you remember "Lawrence of Arabia" in particular, I mean I think it was quite a land mark film in terms of its scale and what it tried to achieve.

Respondent: Yes, I didn't sort of single it out in my response because I think although it was certainly by the standards of the time exceptional in terms of British cinema actually secretly, well it's not secretly any more, that it was, as often with David Lean's films, he kind of stretches out a fairly simple narrative or theme to a point where I think perhaps it kind of gets a little

bit empty. Whereas when I saw what the French directors were doing you could often...

Interviewer: You mentioned nouvelle vague and films like that

Respondent: Could often...Godard would sort of put it into a nutshell in a way that was very much more impressive.

Interviewer: So when you talk about the fact that you liked those nouvelle vague films was part of it that element then, the way in which they were able to construct them, the kind of economy of storytelling? That was one of the appeals?

Respondent: Yeah

Interviewer: Can you remember when you first saw the nouvelle vague films because they came out in the early part of the decade, did you see them a bit later or..?

Respondent: Well I saw them with the film society in London the first one I would have seen would have been 1963. I'm fairly certain it was "Le Quatre Cents Coups" and that was amazing, to be honest I didn't like it a lot when I saw it.

Interviewer: Why didn't you like it?

Respondent: Well it sort of, I suppose because it was different, it sort of had a slightly inconclusive ending, the boy runs away and kind of ends up staring at the sea and I suppose by the standards of films, mainstream films...

Interviewer: It broke a lot of rules and set out to break a lot of rules.

Respondent: But it stuck in my mind and certainly the idea of making such a beautiful film about, you know, a young lad that was part of what we were saying early about some of those British films.

Interviewer: So did you...the way in which that group of film-makers sort of set out to do something differently in terms of storytelling but also the construction, the way the films are edited, would deliberately...they were deliberately sort of anti-Hollywood in many ways, did you develop a taste for that in a way an interest in it?

Respondent: Oh that's right. Frankly I was getting pretty bored of Hollywood

Interviewer: Yeah. So you know something like "A Bout de Souffle" where there's all these jump cuts and things can you remember seeing that and starting to think "well this is actually really interesting and"...

Respondent: Yeah

Interviewer: Did you...how did you feel about British...what we call now British new wave, slightly pretentiously in film studies, but those kitchen sink films?

Did you feel that they were as equally interesting or was it those European films for you that were particularly...?

Respondent: I don't think I...I thought they were great, I didn't think they were quite as great as the continental ones or when I say continental I mustn't forget ?? of course in his Mexican period or even ?? but I mean I think Joseph Losey got it incredibly close and funnily enough I saw for the first time just the other day Nick Roeg's film "Performance"

Interviewer: Oh did you? What did you think of it?

Respondent: Well it was a...strange in some ways but you could see how, I mean you could see why it remained a cult film. It is very odd though in lots of ways but he did get very good performance out of the various participants and it did catch that sort of weirdness of the late-60s.

Interviewer: I can't...I'm just trying to remember what year it was.

Respondent: It was about 1971, something like that

Interviewer: But it has that vibe to it. What about that sort of...there's a couple of films that were a bit more crossover I'm think of Antonioni's "Blow-Up" and films that were slightly experimental but were actually playing to more of a mainstream audience by the late 60s.Or ?? or something like that, there was...

Respondent: I loved... I did enjoy that when it came out and funnily enough it was playing again at the NFT just the other day so I went to see it again and actually I think I like it as much if not better than I did the first time. Looking back on it, it was an artificial construct and it's what you get if you bring a rather intellectual Italian over to the swinging 60s you get a rather odd sort of mash-up actually, and the thing that makes it work is again the actors are just very brilliant in the way they...they just know how to do it, they're very in part you know.

Interviewer: Yeah I think it's a great film. Those films towards the end of the 60s, what I find interesting is that they started playing to a bigger audience, so whereas in the early 60s when you have that more classic division between mainstream, Hollywood, things that were on at your local Odeon, and then arty, European films, by the end of the decade it's slightly less...the delineation between them is blurred a little bit and people are maybe, not everywhere, but there's a sense that people are more interested in those films.

Respondent: Yes

Interviewer: You mentioned Julie Christie as a prototype feminist?

Respondent: Well I would

Interviewer: I mean she was a big, obviously she was a big star of the 60s and in some ways she almost has come to represent the decade when people look back

at it. Did you feel that...could you sense that women's lives were changing in the 60s and were you aware of that as a student?

Respondent: Well yes I was actually. Although my personal upbringing was a very male dominated one, very traditional, I can remember going to bookshops and what was that famous American woman who wrote in the 50s about middle class American women and their...an absolute ?? of the feminist movement and it's completely slipped my mind

Interviewer: Yeah, I can't remember

Respondent: No I mean, one was aware, I guess by the time I was in 6th form, those of us who were interested in what was kind of interesting outside our very narrow school world couldn't fail to spot that women were dressing differently certainly the ones of my generation were dressing differently, and behaviour was changing. It's quite interesting to read some of the source books that shed a bit of light on to that.

Interviewer: Did you...I find it really interesting obviously when I'm interviewing women how the older generation responded to that, so there were a lot more freedoms for women, there was the possibility of the contraceptive pill although I don't think it became widespread right until the end of the decade but there was a sense in which you know, I mean abortion was still a problem so I mean pregnancy outside of marriage was still very frowned on but there was a sense in which they did have more freedom. Did you, can you remember the older generation being disapproving about that?

Respondent: Oh you bet.

Interviewer: Did that...because I mean obviously you know, it's up to you how you want to talk about it, people took their girlfriends to the cinema on dates and such, did the older generation sort of try and intervene at all, I've had women saying that their mother told them don't go on the back seat and that kind of thing. Obviously the cinema was a place where it wasn't just where you went to see a film, it was where you went on a date, it was a social place, can you remember from your particular background which was obviously very middle class that there were kind of social rules that were in place or that you broke or you ignored...?

Respondent: I have to say it was pretty kind of second hand experience, I was a bit of a slow learner in all these things so I kind of didn't get a girlfriend until the end of the decade really, so I can't base this on a personal experience; but my sister, she was given a hard time by my parents certainly from the mid-60s onwards. Friends and acquaintances were not slow to comment on her miniskirts or her maxi-coat or whatever it was she might wear at the time and there was certainly a lot of nudging about what sort of behaviour she should or shouldn't indulge in. But having said that, and perhaps it was because of our particular part in the social spectrum and the fact that we had travelled a lot as a family unit, actually I do remember my sister being allowed to travel abroad with her friends from the mid-60s onwards and there wasn't really a problem about it. In fact, but she and I

did travel to the Mediterranean and Turkey and places like that in the 60s and...

Interviewer: Things had changed then really for women of a younger generation, so even though there was a little bit of kind of, yeah like you say disapproval, they didn't actually stop them from getting on with things.

Respondent: Yeah if they wanted to do it yeah

Interviewer: That's great, this is really fascinating, is there anything in particular about the cinema going experience not...we've talked a bit about films, cinema as a space that we haven't covered really that you...is there anything that you can remember?

Respondent: I don't think so, I mean I certainly thought about that questionnaire beforehand. I did reflect on it just after you got in touch with me and I thought goodness me, why was it that that seemed to be a bit of a special period and is what then does one think of cinema today and I must say, although I'm not a very adventurous film goer today and perhaps if I looked outside cinema ? I would find much more exciting things going on, it seems to me there isn't the same range and depth of experiment around. I mean there are interesting things that go on in cinema, undoubtedly, I mean there are very clever directors around and there are certainly some wonderful stars too but an awful lot of what gets done seems to be a reworking in a different sort of context of something that

was done half a century earlier. That may be me just being...you know in my late 60s but...

Interviewer: There's a lot of remakes and reboots

Respondent: I mean I went to see Timbuktu for example and that's a lovely film and certainly in terms of African cinema it's a very important film I suspect I don't think it's actually doing very much that ?? hadn't been doing in India in the 50s. Obviously entirely different techniques and story but yeah...

Interviewer: Okay, thank you very much, that's been great