RESEARCHERS' TALES – PHIL WICKHAM
as presented at the BFI National Library 8 December 2008

Thanks very much for inviting me – hopefully this won't just be ramblin' Phil Wickham shuffling down memory lane, what I hope to do is to revisit some of the research I've been involved with and think about the questions it raised. By looking at the specific we can think about the bigger picture.

There are three parts to the talk, which all involve different types of research problems and solutions. The first part is centred around my long years in the BFI's hallowed halls in the Information and Curatorial Units, especially work on two big Channel 4 'list shows' – *The Ultimate Film* and *Britain's Most Watched TV* and my BFI research swansong, the conference *Channel 4 – The First 25 Years*.

Secondly I'll talk about my recent books; a textbook called *Understanding Television Texts* – particularly a research exercise I undertook to examine news coverage. In rather greater detail, I'll talk about my BFI TV Classic on *The Likely Lads* and how I used archive sources in conjunction with interviews and close readings. I'll also think about the specific issues around TV research.

Finally I'll talk about my new role as Curator at The Bill Douglas Centre of the History of Cinema and Popular Culture where I've tried to apply my research skills to a new environment – a centre that is both a public museum and a research and teaching facility. I'll consider how artefacts work as a research tool.

What do we mean when we talk about research? If we think about 'researching' we probably imagine a reporter searching to find the facts – so are we attempting to get at 'the truth'? If we are researching artistic media like film and TV there is not necessarily one truth, however many facts we uncover. Instead we aim to uncover another layer of meaning – for there can be many meanings within a film or TV text.

As film and TV researchers we have a number of tools we can use to dig:

- the text itself
- extra-textual material
- industrial and cultural contexts.

There are primary sources that fit all these criteria – programmes, films, box office and production data, contemporary interviews – as well as secondary commentary.

How do we sort through all this to produce anything cohesive? It is about situating facts in some kind of context – in isolation they have a very limited function, ultimately knowing the production budget, the name of the lighting cameraman or the transmission time, don't mean much in themselves. But if we find out that it was more expensive than another film, the cameraman worked on this other title previously, it was scheduled against this programme – that gives some kind of significance and resonance. We need to ask; what do these facts say? And of course one of the golden rules of research is that you don't start with your answer or your argument and find the evidence to fit it, instead you shape your conclusions

around the evidence you uncover and you allow that evidence to constantly question what you thought you knew.

The BFI

So to my halcyon days in this august institution -18 years man and boy and I can say that this library made me what I am. In the Information Unit I learnt my research trade through dealing with thousands of enquiries about every aspect of film and TV, from pensioners doing the *Mail on Sunday* crossword to programme producers and executives.

You get a feel for what people want to know, which isn't the same at all as what they initially ask you. We believed that research is a beginning not an end, so we were keen to put information out there to stimulate debate.

For years we produced statistics for the *BFI Film & Television Handbook*, for example. We tried to make it more than just a list of figures. One list of film productions with any kind of British connection wasn't that helpful – it could mean anything from a Shane Meadows film steeped in British culture and funded by a range of UK public service bodies to a co-production tax break on a film with no UK crew set in Toronto. So we produced a list that made these distinctions clearer by breaking down the films into different categories. It was an approach that people found useful and made some sense of the material – and allowed further, more detailed research. By interrogating the numbers we were making an intervention into the cultural debate.

We were also commissioned to produce new research where figures had so far feared to tread. The early noughties was the time of TV list shows, which for all their faults could present evidence to a new audience and spark debate. We were also able to fill in some gaps in knowledge and create a path for other researchers to follow. Matt Ker and I worked on two such shows that threw up some interesting questions and asked questions for which there were no existing answers:

a) *The Ultimate Film* (prod. North One Television) – the most popular films ever at the UK box office,
b) *Britain's Most Watched TV* (prod. Objective Productions North) – the most popular TV programmes ever in the UK.

We found that numbers can be deceptive, that answers are never as simple as you think, and that you always have to question your data – asking yourself what contextual reasons there might be for that result.

The Ultimate Film was very challenging because we were creating a list with very few hard facts to call on. It seems an obvious need to know, but there never has been data collected in the UK on admissions to particular films. Inevitably we would have to speculate to an extent on the basis of interpreting and evaluating whatever bits of data we discovered. There were two big concerns:

1. Post-1970s there is only box office data (in £) and you have to take account of inflation. In addition the obvious way to determine admissions from box office is to divide by the annual average ticket price. But children's films, which form many of the best loved and most successful titles are seen by child audiences who don't pay full ticket price. So the formula has to be altered to reflect this –as to a lesser degree do films with a crossover audience e.g. *Star Wars*.

2. Pre-1970s there is usually no data at all! So what did we do? There were usually yearly rankings of the most popular films in the trade press. These have no figures attached and are rather scientifically spurious – we suspect that reporters had just called a few cinema managers – but they are all we had. It became clear that patterns of popularity and release were different too. Due to block booking and to cinema's different status as a leisure activity it became obvious that the most successful film in, say 1948, would have had a much smaller share of the box office than the top film of 1995. However, balanced against this is the fact that far more people went to the cinema in the 1940s and it was a rising, rather than declining, market.

Older films were thus heavily represented. We were also balancing research against the commercial demands of the broadcaster. Although much was speculative we felt our chart had integrity and was breaking new ground and we didn't want it to be compromised. Where we could compromise was criteria – so it became fiction films in the sound era. *Gone With The Wind*'s obvious status as the winner helped in our defence against an argument to keep the chart post-war only. The chart also threw up some interesting results that they had to deal with – Anna Neagle, much to C4's chagrin, had four films in the chart, including the number five. We found this fascinating and it opened up great research questions – why was she so popular then? Why is she forgotten now? We got assurances that her position was respected, and so it was, they went for Richard Curtis instead. It also emerged that British films were more popular than usually acknowleged: Nick James wrote a piece on the chart entitled 'Everything you knew about cinema is probably wrong'.

Some of the same editorial issues occurred in our TV chart, *Britain's Most Watched TV*. Some of this was desirable – if you were actually compiling one list of the most popular broadcasts ever it would be quite boring and unrepresentative, the top 20 would be episodes of *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* plus a royal wedding. So in the end we put together lists by decade, restricting each programme to one broadcast within that period. This was a more resonant list that tracked TV history in this country and reflected the public's changing tastes and the growth of the medium.

Again numbers can deceive – we uncovered a large group of very high BBC audiences in the summer of 1979. A reflection of the love of the nation for these shows? Not really – an ITV strike meant there was nothing else to see. Equally we were puzzled by the surprise success of one episode of *Here's Harry* with Harry Worth in 1963. It was broadcast between the newsflash announcing the Kennedy assassination and the next bulletin. Hindsight can often distort our picture of the past – look at the chart for shows that have stood the test of time and you will search in vain for *Dad's Army* or *Rising Damp* – *Oh No It's Selwyn Froggitt* is there though, not to mention the mysterious *Mrs.Thursday*.

When I moved to the BFI National Archive as a TV curator it was because of my research background – and my BFI swansong organising a conference for Channel 4's 25th anniversary allowed me to explore a different kind of research – working with the texts themselves to challenge what you thought we knew. My role here was an enabling one – we had lots of uncatalogued C4 programmes from the early days and researchers needed access to write their papers. So we put them together. Academics came in to view shows from *The Media Show* to *Kabbadi*, *Whatever You Want* and *The Tube*, many of which hadn't seen the light of day since broadcast. It's funny how memories can deceive with hindsight and how we need to track back and pinpoint how changes to our culture began. *The Media Show* highlighted the beginnings of an era when media became its own subject, *Whatever You Want* became less the punky, slick music show you remembered and more on viewing a bizarre cultural experiment – John Ellis used the New Year's party edition to highlight just how alien C4 could be, while Steve Bryant's analysis of the first day's broadcast reminded us of the extent of its eclectic mix. All of it demonstrated how much the channel had changed.

Books

When I came to write a couple of books recently I had to use the same balance between text and context. Close analysis of the material can reveal a great deal but reveals a great deal more when we have researched the context in which it exists. My first commission was a textbook *Understanding Television Texts* which married the two approaches. It was designed for students and undergraduates to make sense of how the production and consumption contexts of TV are reflected within the programmes themselves. One of the themes was the dizzying changes in technology and audience viewing habits and desires over the past couple of years. It's often argued for instance that news and current affairs are affected heavily by these changes and it's a truism that they have dumbed down in favour of infotainment. To test the content of news and its presentation I decided to watch a whole day of news and analyse the agenda throughout the day. It proved very interesting – as a day when nothing particularly exciting happened we could see the balance of stories – hard news and entertainment, exclusives and reportage, planned coverage and breaking events. The close analysis gave me the data I needed to support the contextual arguments, and indeed sometimes challenge them. It showed on the one hand that newsreaders do indeed intersperse their address with 'we' and 'us' but also there were still investigative stories on social and foreign affairs stories. To look at current affairs programmes I tried a different route through written, rather than visual sources, to compare the past with the present. By comparing the subjects in *World in Action* from 1981 with *Tonight with Trevor McDonald* in 2006 (same channel, same slot) we could see a real change in news agendas – the 1981 set was much more based on foreign affairs and political conflict – episodes on Uganda, El Salvador and Northern Ireland – *Tonight with Trevor MacDonald* was all about the personal, the domestic, and based on the testimony of individuals. That reflects a cultural shift in the way the media feels it has to engage its audience, it might be what you expect but those presumptions need to be backed up with proof.

TV has some particular research issues – many based around the lack of availability of the texts – that may change in the light of new technology. Its other main problem is a related one – the lack of substantial secondary material. Even major programmes may have very little written on them other than 20-word reviews. All the more appropriate then that the BFI started the TV Classics book series, using greater DVD availability to make cultural interventions so that we can appreciate the context around the text.

My other book project was both more personal and more fun. I was commissioned to write a BFI TV Classic on the 1960s/'70s sitcom *The Likely Lads*/*Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* I have been writing about sitcom for some time and I thought I knew the series pretty well but I also knew that the research for the book would reveal new things about the series and what I wanted to say about it. I wanted to look at the show in itself – its humour, its construction, its characters - and its context. That included extra-textual material on, say, social history and literature, the way the show itself comments and reflects on issues like class, gender and the politics of age but also the cultural context of production at the BBC. I took three approaches into the material: close analysis of the shows; archive papers; and interviews with the show's writers Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais.

Looking at all the episodes in details again challenged some of the preconceptions and myths that surround the series (this is true for many texts that haven't been seen for a while). There is a folk memory of the character Thelma as some kind of trouser suited harpy holding back the lads. Viewing the shows reveals this as a false memory – Thelma is portrayed as witty, tough and long-suffering – she is rightly suspicious of Bob and rightly wary of Terry's influence but constantly does try to understand their position. It is made clear in the show that the idea of her as an obstacle to the friendship is a creation of Bob and Terry, and indeed they explicitly acknowledge this as such. So why has received wisdom fixed on this idea of the character? Discussions with Clement and La Frenais revealed that they were very explicit in trying to give Thelma a fair voice in the writing of the show and they were annoyed at this false memory – a documentary from the '70s also showed this misperception started quite early. The writers blamed a Clive James review and sure enough his reference to the 'dreaded Thelma' in a review seems to have caught on, perhaps transmuting the more ambiguous 'dreaded' to 'dreadful' in the public mind.

I had one obvious problem with my close reading approach to the text. Around half of the '60s series do not survive, wiped in the late '60s to accommodate local news, snooker and the like. Clearly I wanted to have some idea of what these programmes were like – and fortunately the BBC Written Archives came to the rescue. They still have all the original scripts for the episodes so I was able to visit a very comfy bungalow in suburban Reading and examine them all. Now this isn't as good a watching the original shows – I'm missing details of performance, aesthetics, delivery, etc, but it is useful in assessing the quality of the episodes compared to those that survived and tracking their thematic and formal approach. There were a couple of real gems that illuminated the arguments that I was making in the book. The last of season two, '*Where have all the flowers Gone?*' pre-empted the themes of memory and failure that dominate the '70s show and '*Love and Marriage*' from season three is one of Clement and La Frenais' most articulate dissections of the

confusion between gender relations and men's self-defeating attitudes – I used the script extensively in exploring the shows approach to gender.

The archives proved useful in other ways too – there are few secondary writings on the show so I was the first to plunder primary sources. The written archives held programme files with internal correspondence and reports – containing fascinating stuff. Being a mere twinkle in the eye at the time of the first broadcast in 1964, I needed evidence of reception and I was particularly interested in class. *The Likely Lads* is a show about working class life by two middle class writers. How did working class audiences respond? The written files, which garnered responses from viewers and had appreciation index responds answered that the reception was emphatically positive – comments like 'a good working class story without the kitchen sink' and 'portrayed exactly the true feeling of class distinction in a Northern factory' showed that authenticity was never an issue for its audience and the appreciation scores were extremely high.

Melding the archive discoveries with interviews was an interesting process. I wanted to test my initial reactions to the data I had found by asking Dick and Ian for their memories – it's easy after all to jump to certain conclusions about significance that might not have the importance you attach to it for the protagonists. That doesn't mean it is of no value but it should make you question your assumptions. For instance I was intrigued by a very caustic exchange between Dick, the producer as well as writer, and the editor of Radio Times. Dick complained about the billing of Bewes and Bolam, both already names through roles in the kitchen sink films, only to receive a reply suggesting no one had ever heard of them. Was this evidence that the shows emphasis on working class youth ruffled staid feathers at the BBC? I put this to Dick but he had no recollection at all of the exchange. He did however give lots of interesting information about the production process and the freedom he had to develop the show. I was able to incorporate Dick and Ian's contributions to the debates in the text, not as some kind of authorial last word but as another piece of evidence to stimulate questions in the reader. Hearing about their writing style increases our understanding about how the humour works – the double act dialogue mirrors their process of creation. Equally their take on social change in the early '70s was interesting – it was consciously in the programme but to their eyes to a lesser extent than individual change as a consequence of getting older. The balance between the two is an important motif and the point needs acknowledging but equally viewed from afar the show is an important window on the mores of the time, something that is as unconscious as it is conscious. The detail is illuminating too – when talking about the gender divide in working class life, Ian's anecdote about going out to club's in the flush of fame with the Newcastle United team and finding himself lined up on one side with a beer while the wives sipped martinis on the other tells it all.

The Bill Douglas Centre

Last year I went west to my native pastures and a different kind of research. The Bill Douglas Centre, of which I am now curator, has a dual purpose as a public museum and as a research and teaching facility. We use extra–textual material to show the complexity of the moving image as media, the many disparate parts of the collection

united by their insight into the experiences of the audience and the relationship between what is produced and the people that consume it. That includes some of the same things as the BFI library: books, fan magazines, press books, the archive papers of filmmakers and the like but also other kinds of artefact – what is often referred to as material culture.

The collection, put together by Bill Douglas and Peter Jewell, and added to greatly since, aims to track the development of popular moving image entertainment and responses to it. This goes back way before the Lumieres to early shadow shows, magic lanterns and panoramas. This pre- or proto-cinema area was new to me but is incredibly interesting. It is an area used extensively for research at Exeter for its insight into ways of seeing and of understanding the past – popular entertainment remains a useful research route into understanding societies. For instance: this mid-nineteenth century handbill for a diorama (Athenaeum, Goldhawk Road: Bennett Brothers' grand new diorama of France, India, and Africa)

Athenæum, Goldhawk Rd.
On THURSDAY, Oct. 29.
BENNETT BROTHERS
DIORAMA,
TAJ-MAHAL,
PALESTINE.
STANLEY'S TRAVELS
CINDERELLA

tells us something about attitudes to the empire in Britain and the mindset that was encouraged – also how such entertainments were used as a propaganda tool. Equally this magnificent peep egg of scenes from Weston-Super-Mare shows that the idea of immersing yourself into the image was already very relevant before cinema – in a number of different visual media.

When it comes to cinema itself we have a few obvious and valuable treasures that aid research on significant developments in cinema history – an original Lumiere camera, original Disney animation cels – but much of the collection is made up of ephemera. The ephemera of the present is of course the evidence of the future,

however taking on a resonance from having been produced and consumed at that time. Again much of this evidence can challenge what we thought we knew, or it can illuminate attitudes. Some examples – our collection of Chaplin postcards from World War I shows that his fame was already established long before he made features. Cards from France and Germany demonstrate the extent of his fame, while the references to 'Chaplinitis' assume saturation consumption and coverage of the little tramp. An early Mickey Mouse doll from 1930 shows how ratty he originally was and the extent of the efforts to anthropomorphise his image thereafter.

Sometimes it is the sheer variety and depth of memorabilia that is most valuable for research. Within that individual objects can take on a new meaning. Take Marilyn Monroe. We have a vast collection of Marilyn material from the earliest part of her career to the present day. The list of objects under her name in our online catalogue shows the range of merchandise created in her image. The contemporary material shows her as a film actress, and researching that material places her in a context with other stars – how was she different in her construction and appeal to say Audrey Hepburn; how was she differentiated from Jane Russell or Jayne Mansfield? Following her death she becomes something else – a cultural icon. Marilyn becomes a shorthand to encapsulate female sexuality or more often male desire. The same images (especially *The Seven Year Itch* picture) are repeated and particular features, eg. her red lips, are accentuated. The merchandise widens in scope and becomes more and more tawdry – there seems to be a particular push in the '80s – forming a nadir with the 'Marilyn Moonrow' car window ornament and a particularly alarming lime green bust we have just acquired. All this says something about cultural discourse – why is that iconography suddenly so redolent, or at least commercial in the '80s? What does it say about people that buy it?

One interesting, if grotesque, piece is this Marilyn Monroe soap dish.

I believe this raises some interesting research questions and ideas. For a start it looks very little like Monroe – it is almost a cartoon of her iconography – based on her lips and hair. Also – it's a soapdish! The iconography and the star image of Monroe has reached the point where it is replicated in household objects for adults – consumers are not expected to find it weird to lift the face of a long dead film star to retrieve their Imperial Leather.

Material culture can open up research on film and TV, particularly in raising questions about the audience. Of course it doesn't provide an easy answer – we

don't always know how popular an item was or who it was meant to address but it can provide a compelling piece of evidence.

I've been lucky in working in these different research environments – hopefully what I've learnt through all these approaches is that there is always another question you can ask, another angle to consider – a rating that might show a TV show's relative popularity, a textual moment that might run counter to expectations, a production note in an archive that gives us an idea of what shaped a decision, or an ephemeral object that reflects a public's enthusiasm. A moving image researcher's work is never done.

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