

HP 0572 Laura Mulvey – Transcript.

NB Ums and ers have generally been omitted.

Subject: Laura Mulvey[LM] Interviewer: Emma Smart (BFI) [ES]: Date 27th November 2007

Other crew: Christophe Dupin[CD], camera

CD [Inaudible, possibly Come on In] off camera.

00.04 ES: OK so could you just start off with some biographical details, where you were born, your education briefly to start us off.

00.20 LM: Oh, really biographical details! Yes, I was, born in Oxford in 1941, partly I think because Oxford was considered a very safe place to be born at that time, but then I grew up for the rest of the war in the country and did not go back to London with my family until 1946.

00.53 The first film I ever saw, strangely enough, was *Nanook of the North* which I saw quite soon after coming back to London. It was partly because my father was Canadian and had an interest in the far north of Canada and had spent time there, and I must have been taken to see it as a special treat. The next movie I remember that made a deep impression on me, like so many little girls at the time, was *The Red Shoes*. That wasn't when the film was released, but in the early fifties, when I went to the cinema with my mother. Both my parents being keen film fans. So if I go on a little bit more from my film going days,

ES: If you would.

LM: ...living at that time in Bayswater it was very easy when I was a teenager to go along Bayswater Road, to the Academy Cinema in Oxford Street. I was mainly interested in French cinema at that time and, seeing Rene Clair, a late Rene Clair[Note by DS: LM misattributes this Autant-Lara] film *La Traversée de Paris*; *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Échappé*. One day I wanted to see one of these movies again, I went straight into the cinema one day without looking at the outside and saw *The Seventh Seal* by accident and I was of course very very impressed. I think it brought my cinema going onto a higher and more sophisticated level and although I didn't grow up to be a Bergman fan, Bergman was very important in that later part of my teenage movie going. What else?

03.02 ES: So this is all quite early...

LM (interrupts) this is all when I was a teenager

ES: and you obviously fell in love with the movies at an early age so how did you then, did you want to transfer that to your academic life or was it just an interest that you had, were you thinking along those lines...?

LM: When I went to university I really stopped going to the cinema in the same kind of way, and it wasn't really until I left Oxford that I really started to become passionately cinephile and those were the days of the influence of the *Cahiers du Cinema* on me and a group of friends and other people in the same kind of milieu, which specifically involved our revival of interest in Hollywood or, rather a re-evaluation of Hollywood that came to us as a kind of new interest so my 04.10 first passionate involvement in the movies was really around this, diving into Hollywood cinema. I think it's interesting to think back, that at this time, now in the mid-sixties, was probably the time when the actual studio system, that produced the films that we were so entranced by, was in fact coming to an end and so it was one of the ways in which one sees the strange kind of pathos, in the intellectual discovery of something which has previously not necessarily been valued in the same kind of way, so most of the sixties I spent with my husband Peter Wollen, various friends, 05.06 tracing obscure Hollywood movies into Sunday only cinemas, films that were probably at the very last phase of their actual exhibition life when they ended up at down at heel movies as Sundays Only double bills, you know, Sam Fuller westerns that were finishing going the rounds, perhaps Nic Ray movies, Anthony Mann's, westerns, perhaps rather particularly, Raoul Walsh and also around that time the NFT were beginning to show serious retrospectives of Hollywood figures, perhaps the kind of more elite ones. Certainly Josef von Sternberg, Hitchcock, Hawks, Ford, so that this passion for Hollywood was also being fed from that side too, and I think that by the mid-sixties when BBC2 arrived on the scene that there was a very very high level of film programming on BBC2 that we might just note that can be

now greatly mourned, but I think that that was another source of accumulation of, of, knowledge of movies, so in a sense my whole foundation, in, my love of cinema, my engagement with cinema, was very very different from the kind of cinema I then got involved with later, later on.

06.55 So, there's a huge shift really in the late sixties, early seventies, when I think a couple of things happened. I think that, that I think in some ways we were falling out of love with America and that love of American culture, its movies, its novels, its jazz, popular music and so on, was being overshadowed by Vietnam, politics, and that kind of change of atmosphere around sixty-eight, sixty-nine. Also for me, I became involved with feminism and the women's movement and I remember thinking at the time, what a change of mentality it indicated that movies that I loved 08.06 so much and moved me to tears, now in a sense seemed rather more irritating in the way in which women were shown seemed to come to the fore in a new politics which shifted my involvement with this cinema. The other thing I think that happened was that there was a greater sense of what is now called World Cinema, new cinema coming out of Brazil, Argentina, Latin America, even out of Africa by this time, there was a sense that just as the new cultures of the Third World were disengaged, so were their cinemas and that there was a kind of excitement in that, and then gradually I think I began to catch up with the significance of the avant-garde and I date that rather to the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1972, when Linda Myles, and Claire Johnston and I, organised an event, kind of historical screenings of films made by women, and it became gradually clear that women hadn't been able to make many feature but their strength had been somewhat kind of on the margins of the margins and their presence in avant-garde and experimental cinema had outweighed their presence certainly in mainstream industrial cinema although of course Claire Johnston and Pam Cook were interested in Dorothy Arzner and wrote about her, organised a retrospective of her, of her films, but in a sense all during this period there wasn't any possibility of even thinking about making films, though I began to be interested in the way in which 16 millimetre was beginning to develop, put it another way, the way that a new cinema was beginning to develop out of 16 millimetre and particularly out of 16 millimetre synched sound and here you could see this wonderful stretch from 16millimetre non-synch which produced the artists' films associated say with the London Film Maker's Co-op and the great films of the new American cinema that was really beginning to influence us.

10.49: The important political documentaries that were emerging at the time, particularly perhaps in the United States, as protest films, the Newsreel collective, the Women's Newsreel Collective and so on, and, then the beginnings of the possibilities of new, experimental feature work. And then particularly perhaps, women's work. But the turning point probably, the turning point probably for me, was when my husband, Peter Wollen was, got a job at North Western University, where there was a quite an energetic, lively, film making department and probably Paddy Whannel who was head of the department there, probably said to Peter and me "Not many people use this equipment in the holidays, why don't you make a movie?" And although Paddy wasn't himself a kind of an aficionado by any means of the avant-garde, he still saw it's point, and realised that Peter's interests at any rate were moving more and more in that direction, so the first film we made actually arose out of this very particular conjuncture of being in a film school and having willing helpers around, and one of them Larry Seider who did sound for us and did editing for us,

12.38 and worked then on all our films really right through until, yeah eighties, and so that relationship began at North Western. So that was really how it started, so 16 millimetre was very important in the way that we thought about film, but also 16millimetre synch sound. Not thinking so much in terms of artists' films but also we never aspired, probably very sensibly, to the technology ourselves. So we always worked with a camera person, a sound person, an editor and so on, so this was not artisanal film, it was very much a kind of old fashioned distribution of roles film. Peter, I think so far as I remember, and I think I'm right about this, felt very strongly that there was a place in the world for 14.00 ideas films, films about ideas. Nowadays there's quite a genre, known as the essay film, which we were unaware of at the time, but put ourselves very much within that category, so the films we wanted to make were to try and think how you could use the cinema to express ideas.

14.25 and particularly our ideas about cinema and also about the question of women and cinema, the representations of women. Shall I go on?

14.44 ES: Well I was going to ask you about how well that first film was received and did you enjoy the actual process of making it and the process of thinking about making it?

LM: Um, yes, certainly the process of thinking about making it was fascinating and we decided to move into what we later called a kind of scorched earth policy, or perhaps what Jean Luc Godard would think of as a kind of return to zero. 'Cos one of the things we wanted to do was lose the conventions of cinematic seeing that worked with editing, so our film was going to be made in four chapters, each chapter made up of two sixteen millimetre rolls of film that would be invisibly joined together. Here, no doubt, we were thinking also of *Rope* drawing on our old cinephilia but it was a very austere movie and I think it was probably the right one to make at the time, and we focused on the Queen of the Amazons, Penthesilea and her story, her love for Achilles, filtered through the Kleist version of his unperformable play but I won't say very much more about that except that it was, it was, probably my first experience of the addictive powers of film making, of how, how once you start thinking about the relationship between stories, celluloid, the whole process of producing it, sound and so on, you can't really wait to make another...

16.48 ES: Mmm

LM...and I certainly think that at that moment we both felt that this was the beginning, a first step, in making a whole series of movies. And I think what the, when we came back to England and to London a couple of years later we made *Penthesilea* in '74 and so just soon after that we came back to England, and in that mid-seventies period, there were very important changes going on in independent film making in this country and probably the most important one was the shift at the BFI Production Board, where Peter Sainsbury, who had been the editor of *After*, *After* [CD, off screen prompt] *Image*, Peter Sainsbury had been the editor of *After Image*, so someone whose journal had brought together Glauba Roscha, Godard, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, for all of us, The Straubs, Jean-Marie Straub, Daniel Frier, all these great figures in different parts of the world and in very very different ways, he saw inspire, as a kind of inspiration point for this new cinema and so once he became appointed as the new responsible person at the [BFI] Production Board – I don't know exactly what his position was – in charge of an increased budget and also, with that, looking for films that would make an identifiable British avant-garde, contribution to the avant-garde, and so he was, he had seen *Penthesilea* and thought that it would be worth encouraging us to put in another project, which we did; now I think it's probably important to make the point at this stage, that not only was this a very important new development around funding, but also there was a real sense of a movement building up from different parts of a kind of experimental and independent film community 19.32 around this time, which came together with the Independent Film Makers Association, which was formed I think about 75, 76; 75? Yeah and that included people from the London Film Makers Co-op, what you might call the most extreme of artists' films, artisanal film, right the way through documentary, workshops, Lucia Films, and right the way through to people who are beginning to work on these new experimental type fictions which weren't really fictions but a mixture of storytelling, documentary and so on, which our films really came out of.

20.25 ES: What was your involvement with that, with the movement, how, how did you get involved?

LM Erm, certainly someone invited me to come along to the first meeting of the Independent Film 20.40 Maker's Co-op which took place in Marc Karlin's office in Earlham Street, and certainly Steve Dwoskin was there but I'm not going to remember exactly who was there, so, I was involved early on, also I was involved with the Other Cinema, which only survived for a very short time but it survived long enough, to have a very interesting two week run of our next film *Riddles of the Sphinx*.

Which was a very fascinating experience because they ran it in a straight forward way during the week, but at weekends they had panels, discussions about everything from, you know, experimental film, can't remember if there was anything about child care, but certainly about psychoanalysis, and big debates about the relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis, and it's kind of critique of the *Riddles of the Sphinx* use of psychoanalysis, but that was perhaps jumping rather ahead... ES: Really?

LM: ...to the end of the film when I might have said something a bit about its making. ES: Do say something about its making. You were talking about Peter Sainsbury, the production board [CD: background off camera "about its funding"]

LM What did you say Christophe? Oh, it's funding. Exactly. 22.15 I believe that the film only got funding by the skin of its teeth and that there was probably a big battle but I kind of just heard this informally rather than formally. We applied for, to make, a ninety minute again, the previous film being ninety minutes, as we had this kind of reverence for the standard feature film length for some

reason so however much we were absorbed into the avant-garde we still had this kind of fetish of the ninety minute film, so this was a ninety minutes which was not written down as a full script but was submitted as a very very full outline, and it might have been difficult actually in a way to submit it as a full script and it was budgeted at £20,000 but I remember it included child care for those people involved in the film who needed child care and as it turned out this was quite important.

23.28 So the film the film took as its inspiration the relationship between a mother and daughter who'd come to that rather crisis phase in the mother-daughter relationship around two years old when the child is supposedly growing up and moving out into the a more grown up world while the mother feels ambivalent about this, and still might feel, not necessarily, but might feel that she still wants to cling on to her child and keep her in the primary maternal relationship, so that was really the inspiration, but Peter said we should call it *Riddles of the Sphinx* and that inspired a section of re-filming found material, found footage; we'd just collected together lots of travelogues, advertisements for Egypt, and found the bits in it that had the sphinx and the pyramids and re-filmed them and re-filmed them, using the technology that Marc Karlin had developed for *Nightcleaners* too, when he re-filmed the material there and he let us use it in his office and his workshop in Earlham Street, and I feel that this part of the film was definitely influenced by the 25.06 US avant-garde movies, a movie for instance like *Tom Tom, the Piper's Son* and the sense of moving beyond the image, kind of into the material itself was part of our inspiration, but we also wanted to make it into a kind of journey into another world which would then open up and be the story of the mother and child, so that it was a kind of journey into celluloid, perhaps in a more metaphorical sense, using it more metaphorically or allegorically, than, than the more materialist avant-garde film makers would have. 25.49 so it was definitely an influence but it was one that was kind of really adopted and adapted for our interests. Now we were very keen to have this film shot by a woman cinematographer, partly because of the subject matter, but partly also because we wanted to film the story section in this rather eccentric way of shooting each of the thirteen scenes with a 360 degree pan of the camera, going round in a whole circle and we felt that this would need possibly, almost definitely a certain kind of sensibility, finding someone who was prepared to experiment and make this, make this work. And we were very lucky to find Diane Tammes who had just graduated recently from the National Film School and had specialised in sixteen millimetre camera and I think she was probably the first woman who got a union ticket as, as a cinematographer, and she said she'd take it on, and started practising with this huge, what's it called, [gestures hand cranking] I've forgotten what it was called, it was so important to us in those days, it was kind of a large crank that kind of turned the camera around on its axis to very very smooth, very very smoothly, and she turned out to be absolutely brilliant and very, very much not only in sympathy with what we were doing but actually had a strong solidarity with what we were doing and it was also fortunate perhaps that she, herself, had a two year old daughter at this time.

28.00 and Dinah Stabb, who was going to play our main actress, also had a two-year-old daughter. My niece was two and in some sense perhaps had been the inspiration for this idea in the first place, so Diane volunteered Rhiannon Tise, her two-year-old, to play the daughter in the film and so she was the main, the main, character. I think that the films that we did at this point, these two films, depended an enormous amount on pre-planning, everything was pre-planned, nothing really was left to chance 28.47, though of course chance inevitably erupted from time to time and we found when we were filming the little playgroup full of little children rushing around, that the camera had to go round considerably quicker, I think it was the shortest pan, it was a two minute pan, kind of sweeps round, because of the kind of difficulty of controlling the filming situation, but Diane was very very brilliant at using this technology and in one... built up to one pan that was actually shot in Steve Dwoskin's room just across the road from where we lived at the time – you can see Steve Dwoskin's characteristic red curtains in the background – and there she managed to do a 29.42 ten minute take, an actual ten minute take, which actually stretched the length of the reel of film to its end and that was a kind of extraordinary *tour de force* on her part.

ES: [Fading to barely audible] But your influence on it obviously, you were the director, you wrote it could you talk about briefly?

30.00:LM: Well I really didn't do much writing, I mean Peter did much more writing than I did, I mean I think we worked everything out in advance together, some bits of the writing we did evolve

together, but Peter was much more interested in writing than me, and I was quite happy to leave some of, quite a lot of it, to him. I was perhaps a bit more involved with setting up the *mise en scene*, you know, thinking back into my old interest in melodrama and you know, thinking about colours and colour coding and what colours we wanted where, because in fact it's quite heavily colour coded, with red coming in only towards the end of the movie, with quite strong yellows and blues for the beginning, and thinking about those kinds of systems, and kind of symmetries and patterns and when we would see the outside for the first time, and when we would actually go outside for the first time. In the middle of the thirteen pans there's this very complicated shot on a roundabout in Kilburn, where the camera is on the back of a car, I mean it was a specially adapted car, and it goes round in a circle and there's a van, driven by Patsy Nightingale in fact, which goes round as well; so there's a double circle inscribed and Peter worked on that and he worked very very hard to co-ordinate, to choreograph those two movements, and there was movement going over the bridge of the roundabout as well, so it all had to be very carefully put together, so that – but also, of the sections, in fact it's the section with the ten minute pan with all the different mirrors that break up the space, so you can't quite see where you are, and Peter wrote a kind of very complicated text, really designed to produce a set of words which had no connection with each other and he had a system of kind of finding a word in an English dictionary, looking it up in a French dictionary, taking the word that was next to it in the French dictionary, and looking it up in the English dictionary and so out of that producing a completely arbitrary number of words and then connecting them again in an arbitrary way, and this was very close to the kind of literary interest he had at the time an interest in Raymond Roussel and French experimental writing 33.00 So that was very much him. I wasn't involved in that at all.

ES But your interest in psychoanalysis...LM Yes. Definitely. Yes. Oh Yes. Yes. And particularly in trying to think in a feminist way, beyond the limits as I saw it, of rather rigid Freudianism and Lacanianism. I've found Freud much easier to work with and much, much more flexible in terms of the female psyche and so on, whereas I found Lacan much more rigid and much more difficult in which the presence of the mother, what we wanted to put into the foreground, was resolutely relegated to what he called the imaginary, and the function of the father was very much that; the symbolic, the law, culture, language, the word and so on. So in a sense we wanted to try and think through the mother-child relationship in a way that wasn't necessarily going to produce culture out of it but by making, turning, it into an image which wasn't the traditional iconographic relationship of mother and child but trying to work through its complications 34.30 was really what we were interested in, and indeed what we then got criticised for

ES It sounds from that...there was quite a natural progression...

LM Yes, there was just one other thing I wanted to say about, about *Riddles*, two things very briefly: the section that probably was most to do with me was the section with the acrobats, which I'm not sure what I think of it now but I was very keen to get that kind of sense of kind of little girls play with their bodies, which wasn't necessarily kind of exhibitionist and was kind of pre spectacle as it were, and so, and it seemed to me part of little girl culture which I'd certainly had, and I wanted to put that in. It looks very strange now because of course all of the colour, colourisation was done in a very old fashioned way and it looks extremely primitive, but one bit that I wanted to draw attention to, as my special contribution to the film was the ending which is called a puzzle ending, has a little game with mercury in it and that was indeed me, getting the mercury into the middle and it was a very hard thing to do...ES: [interrupting in background] it looked very hard LM ...and Diane kept shouting "I'm running out of film, I'm running out of film, hurry up, hurry up" ES: So you were really under pressure. LM I was really under pressure, but I did it. Yeah.

ES: Just stay with *Riddles* a little bit... while we're here – would you make it the same today if you were given the opportunity, or would you do it different influences with.. LM: [interrupts, points] Do you think that's alright there, is your camera complaining? CD: No it's fine it's just telling us there's another five minutes. LM: Oh it's telling us... 36.32 Sorry, can you say that again Emma?

ES If you were making it again today would there be other influences as your own intellectual influences have changed or moved on or would it be the same, do you think you could make that film in today's environment? 36.48

LM: No, certainly not. No. I think it was a film, like so many others at the time that came very specifically out of that conjuncture, if you know what I mean, between sixteen millimetre, the

available funding, the sense of a movement both from experimental and independent film makers and the women's movement: All kind of coming together with an extraordinary optimism and a sense that these films would really make a difference. Of course, we were quite wrong but that doesn't mean that we didn't feel at the time that this was just the beginnings, the first inklings, the first moments of a new kind of cinema. And I think this era came to an end around 1979-80, and I could talk about that for a bit. Shall I? [ES: mm] Shall we change the tape? CD: Two minutes left, up to you.

[Change of tape]

LM: OK So I'll just say a little bit about exhibition of *Riddles* and I said about the wonderful experience of the Other Cinema, but I also did an Arts Council tour, the Arts Council were setting up tours around different parts of Britain to try and get these films seen and BFI was working in collaboration with them, and I did a west of England tour, I remember going, I must have been to the Arnolfini in Bristol; Exeter; Falmouth School of Art, must have been about five or six places, travelling around with this weird film, which was then projected on a kind of unsuspecting responsible citizens, who bothered to come to this film if it was shown in a public library, and students, in a sense it was more of a kind of captive audience, and supposedly more interested in, essentially interested, but it was the kind of public screenings that interested me particularly. Of course lots of people walked out, and I knew at what point they were going to walk out, and so after a bit I got used to it, and didn't mind so much, and in some ways wondered why they didn't all walk out, and I was very grateful to people who did stay, and then of course there was a discussion period afterwards, which was more or less painful and one of the things that struck me was 40.00 was that very often the first question came from an interested man, whose immediate question was "Why didn't you show the face of the woman at the beginning of the film?", because you don't actually see Louise's face for the first three pans, and the obvious answer to that is we were showing the relationship between the two, and it was that relationship that was asking, that was asking for recognition, you might almost say identification from the audience, rather than the usual one with the face, which would have undermined this one of relationship and it was just interesting to me that this was very obvious to women in the audience who had been through that "two year old" experience carrying the child around even when she's a little bit too big, and how unfamiliar it was to – well, to the men in the audience who found it alienating, and so there was a very strong gender difference in the response to that opening sequence of the film. I think that's the main thing I remember actually. I also did a tour later in the United States, where I got really very, very good audiences going right the way across the United States., using the way in which film exhibition had grown up, very much in art galleries, alongside art galleries, which was much further advanced there than it was in this country, so I did that as well. That was it.

ES: And then on to *AMY!* Was that quickly or jump a few years?

LM: *AMY!* must have been in 1980 because it was fifty years since Amy Johnson's flight across from London to Darwin, to Australia. *AMY!* we put together on a much more, *AMY!* we didn't really have a budget; it had two thousand pounds which we got from South East Arts, I was working at Bulmershe College at the time and they encouraged me to put in money, and I also live in Sussex too, so I had a kind of genuine South East England residence as well, so we applied for £2000, got £2000, from them, and made this film about Amy Johnson which we thought of, or as Peter called it, a kind of cubist portrait, a putting together of different kinds of ways of thinking about this, this woman, and thinking about the way in which her femininity returned or was inscribed on her, and so on. We also did re-photography in that film in a long sequence, well quite long sequence, of a bird flying in which Yvonne Rainer read, again, a kind of text put together by Peter, a collage of different kinds of thoughts, and about flying and, from people who had, who were, fliers, aviators and people who were kind of fascinated by flying, so that was a very kind of dense text. I think we felt that *AMY!* kind of fell together, it was only thirty minutes, in some ways less of a strain, both to make it and to show it, so it somehow worked very much within its own rather, its own, kind of montaged series of sequences, in which the central one was a map, and seeing the film over the years, it's interesting to see the way in which one's perception of the map changes, in that places that one would have not heard of in those days have now become well known, really through kind of war and trauma; when you look at former Yugoslavia, and when you look at Iraq you can see the map kind of pitted, as it were, with these sites.

45.20 So, that was 1980.

ES: You talked about that movement, where there was just a short time for that movement to come together where these films were able to be made ...mid-seventies.

LM: The way I see it, there were two important shifts. I talked about the shifts at the beginning of the period that in a sense enabled this moment to come into being: I mean two things happened, perhaps one could say one positive, and one negative, and I think the negative one, as you can probably guess was the election of our first woman Prime Minister in 1979, and the immediate impact of this new Conservative regime on funding and also on the political optimism of the people involved with that kind of movement, it became harder and harder to get these kinds of movies, which didn't really have a place, they didn't have a place in a market place, so couldn't in a sense be justified, their existence couldn't really be justified, and although looking back it seems as if not very much money was being invested in them, of course, it seemed a lot, and the direction of policy began to change. Actually it quite quickly began to change. The other thing that happened was the coming of Channel Four, which opened up new possibilities as the other ones were closing down, and in a sense inaugurated a very very interesting era when people like Peter Sainsbury at the Production Board or David Curtis at the Arts Council found ways of managing to continue to make films in collaboration with Channel Four, but I think for a number of us, it became very difficult to carry on. For one thing it might seem odd in retrospect but I think working with sixteen millimetre had been important and there had been a kind of cult of the specificity of film, specificity of sixteen millimetre, and it's kind of enabling power if you like. Secondly that sense of optimism, of utopianism, the way that people saw things, and as I say this was just the kind of very beginning of what was going to be a longer and wider movement and that political optimism changed. I think it was difficult for people like us to make the shift into television, though with *The Bad Sister* which we did for Channel Four, which was one of the first of their independent features that they, that they, shot, we did try, but it was difficult; in some ways *Bad Sister* was the first film that we tried to make that wasn't an ideas film, that was more like a conventional fantasy film and although there were lots of things about it that were very interesting to us, with all this kind of confusion of consciousness and unconsciousness, and so on, in many ways it was moving into a world of large crews, large numbers of actors, that was a world that we'd kind of moved away from and that was coming back in and catching us up again. I also think that with Channel Four, a new generation of work started to emerge, you know, a much greater connection between music, independent music, independent videos, Channel Four, the opportunities that Channel Four gave for that kind of new generational work. So that was the end really.

ES: That seemed such a brief time. Almost too brief.

LM: The only thing I didn't mention was *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, which we made for the Arts Council, in 1982 and that was really a record of an exhibition that we'd done at The Whitechapel Gallery, which had really been the first relaunch of Frida Kahlo into the enormous star and cult status that she now has today. We filmed it perhaps, we rather perversely, we were very against cameras wandering over pictures and picking up details and so on, so it's a very, very, austere film, but I really enjoyed making it a lot, and I found kind of thinking through those kinds of constraints very fascinating. But, really the last film that Peter Wollen and I made together, was *The Bad Sister* and which wasn't, and which made us move into a world which I think made it impossible for us to collaborate in the way that we had before, with that kind of preplanning and so on, that kind of preplanning, yup. OK?

ES: Can – you just, then you came back later with *Disgraced Monuments*?

[Siren sounds from exterior] LM: Shall we just wait for the sound to pass?

ES: Well, you've got a long gap...

51.31 LM Yes *Disgraced Monuments* was a very different kind of project. That wasn't made with Peter, it was with my friend Mark Lewis who is [an] artist – at that time was a photographer working in Canada, he's Canadian, and it really started when he once came to stay with me when he was just visiting London for a short time, and he told me that he'd become very fascinated by the place of statues in, the removal of statues, in marking a revolutionary moment, and what that meant and he'd done an enormous amount of research on the whole history of all of this, and he, so I said "That sounds like a nice little documentary", and he hadn't thought of it as a documentary at all, so he said immediately that that sounds like a very good idea and immediately started to raise money from

Canada Council [sic] and things like that, and we got a small amount of money and then when the Dzerzhinsky statue came down during the failed coup in August 1990, Mark rang me up and said if we are ever going to do this, we have to do it now, and I think I probably said but we haven't got a budget, we haven't got a schedule we can't really go ahead in these circumstances and he said "Oh well if you really don't want to do it, well I'll just do it then" So I said "well of course I'll come to do it", but it was then very very fascinating 53.00 working on that, trying to get the ideas into the film, and it was also shot on sixteen millimetre, so it was very much towards the end of the era of sixteen and, but at the same time it was a hybrid object, because it was edited on AVID. On one of the first AVIDs that went into circulation. I was working at Ohio State University in Columbus then, at a wonderful arts centre there called the Wexner, Wexner Center for the Arts. And Bill Horrigan, who was in charge of film, said, knew I'd done this film and said would you like to, we need something to work on so that Tom, the editor, can learn how to use the AVID, and so we had this wonderful free access to a very early AVID, which was constantly going wrong and so Tom was always having to ring up AVID and there was always a team of people on day and night, ready to pick up peoples' questions and problems.

ES: Did you find making a documentary a different process to making a...LM: It's still a kind of essay film, it's still very much an ideas film: it's very constructed, there's nothing, there's no *vox pop* in it which people criticise me for, there's nothing spontaneous in it. 54.36 its either very, very clearly set up all interviews done as kind of oral history rather, rather than as popular intervention, so in that sense I would think it's much more in continuity with the things I've done before, but then Mark brought a very new element into it, and it was the first – he now, you know he's just had a show at the BFI Southbank, and now makes films as artworks and that's the first film he made, and as I generally say, also the last one that I did.

ES: Please don't say that

LM: I dunno, you know when I retire, with all this new wonderful new technology, who knows?

CD: Do you have ideas? Of things you'd like to..LM: No, I don't have time. When I retire I'll have more time. I hope I do more than film my granddaughter. Yup. Sorry Emma?

ES: No, I was just then thinking there's not enough female directors within..

LM: Yes, yes, certainly yes

ES ...so I wondered, if at the time that you talked about in the mid-seventies where it could have happened, the mid 70s there could have been more, and yet... thirty years later still waiting for that breakthrough LM: That breakthrough, yes... ES:I was wondering what you thought about not just British directors...

LM: I'm so out of touch – so out of touch. I very much admire Rakhshan Bani-E'temad who is an Iranian film maker, she's probably my top woman film maker at the moment, and there's always Agnes Varda. ES: Mmm LM: *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* There are increasingly you see, there are the very very interesting, very, very tough French like Catherine Breillat I admire, but they come out of a very different spirit which they wouldn't call feminist, but it's very much coming out of femininity. These films can only really be made by women but they're not making it in the spirit of feminism. Who else?

ES: No it's ok, we've run out of names. LM: OK. ES: I think that's everything. LM: Great. [Looking at CD] Do you want? CD: Actually,.. ES: [interjects] we could actually talk all day. CD: Because it's supposed to be a BECTU interview can you tell us how the IFA Worked, and its relationship (or not) with BECTU? LM: Yes, Well it was ACTT, it was ACTT in those days, well yes I do, I think this is a very complicated story, [pause] I mean at the time when we were making films at the BFI, the ACTT was beginning to acknowledge the fact, in fact they always had had that category for documentaries and short films, in which they didn't demand the same kind of crewing levels as they would on normal fully funded industrial features and so on, so there always had been that kind of loophole or gap for independent work to develop and certainly at that point it was possible to get an ACTT card, which we all did, and the ACTT didn't seem at that point unco-operative in any way, but of course, once the Thatcher period started, all unions were, er suffered immediately, and the ACTT worked I think very well with the BFI and Channel Four set up Workshops agreement, during the 1980s which again brought a younger generation – I should have mentioned this when I was talking about Channel Four, where a younger generation came in, really, really brought a younger generation into film

making, but I think the trials of Thatcherism were so hard, and I think the shift in, in, politics was so extreme and I think the under, undermining of all our assumptions about what political life and society was, really came to a head with the war against the unions, of which the Miners' Strike was of course the most significant but of course all the others were the same, and now, without union backing, people in the film industry are desperate, absolutely desperate, and if you talk to them they say that not only is there the insecurity, difficulty of work, but that 1.00.09 productions are under so much pressure to work cheaply that you can't, even if you're a skilled cinematographer, it's very difficult even to do your best in the way that the union defended it before, so in a sense one has to realise that the union are not only defending as it were perhaps somewhat over protective practices, but also was allowing time for very skilled technicians to actually do the work that they knew how to do, which isn't possible any more. Or less and less possible.

CD: Did the ISA/IFA evolve? Did its role evolve? 'Cos I remember you telling me once that it started as this kind of platform for ideas, for film makers' ideas LM: Yes... CD: and slowly turned into...

LM: Much more a pressure group; into a pressure group, yes. Yes. And then there were all kinds of conflicts developed and, it got – what's the word – diluted by all kinds of other interests and tendencies, it got itself involved in a head-on confrontation with Peter Sainsbury about the whole question of copyright of films so... all that in a sense was almost a sign of how the utopian times were coming to an end, when I imagine, I'm not sure this is true, my imaginary memory is that we all sat round drinking wine and talking about ideas and revolutionary cinema and so on. But it was a short period and I think if one thinks of it in terms of how a movement could work before Thatcherism, the way that sixteen millimetre had evolved since the coming of synch sound in the early sixties, and the way in which since the late sixties, and with feminism a kind of political consciousness around film had developed, and I think it's really those three things that bring this period into a, into some kind of coherence.

CD: and would you say it's been replaced by anything now? Is there anything that.. you know not necessarily underground, but quite radical political film making, political and aesthetic, you know...

LM: erm, Not that I know of. Not really. But as I say, I'm really out of touch. I think you're taking me out of my area which is my own memories Christophe, and trying to push me kicking and screaming into the 21st century you know.

OK?

ES: Well thank you Laura. [End]

[Transcript by David Sharp, corrected by Laura Mulvey 2015]