

The GLC Story Oral History Project

Interviewee: Paul Marris

Interviewer: Lucy McFadzean

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L: This is interview with Paul Marris, who was film and video officer of the GLC, okay Paul, can you tell me a little bit about how you became involved in the GLC

P: Yep, I was involved in the GLC in my early thirties, uh, I'd spent my twenties, I'd graduated from the Slade School of Fine Art studying film, and, I'd then gone and worked for a film distribution and exhibition group called the other cinema, which was a non-profit, ummm left wing cooperative, importing, distributing films from Latin America, independent documentaries. Um, in those days the format was 16mm film and that was, there was quite a wide circuit in which the core was universities, but there were also schools, community groups, trade union groups, used the films that we showed, and sometimes if it was a feature film it would get exhibited in, in art house cinemas. So I'd been doing that and I applied for the job when they advertised the job. So they advertised the job for the film and video officer, in the Recreation and Arts Department. The GLC had, the Recreation and Arts Department Basically previously were responsible for parks, owned by the GLC, and for the Southbank complex, but basically the festival hall, so that, which had a programme of classical music. So their arts policy was very much oriented towards classical music, above all. I think the Hayward was also included. Er so the Livingstone administration had taken a decision, led by – I think pushed by Tony Banks who was the key politician in the arts department – they ought to – they wouldn't abandon the traditional responsibilities of the parks, it was a valuable Victorian introduction, but they would extend the art, their attention to the arts to some of the modern arts that had arisen since the days of classical music, so we'd take on board the fact of er technological reproduction, which was a fairly novel concept. Er in those days there wasn't no attention, there was the arts council that had a panel to do with film – that was originally about documentaries on the arts – but they were gradually extending towards what we would now call moving image, artist moving image, and then alongside the regional, alongside in the regional arts association they all had regional divisions at that time, and that so it wasn't completely novel as a concept. Er and of course the film officers in the regional arts associations orientated towards the British Film Institute rather than towards the Arts Council, at that time, so there was, the fact of the creation of the British Film Institute has meant that there has been state support for film for longer than practically anywhere else in the UK. Um, so they needed someone to be the um local government officer, who would be the grants officer for Film and Video, so um I applied for the job was interviewed and eventually got the job, [laughs], um and, started a-at the GLC in '83 I think?, I started there. At that time of course we thought it was gonna finish in '85.. um, that that administration would finish in '85. It was, it was, er only extended to '86 in order for the Tories to bide time to abolish it [laughs]... eventually.

L: Um, and, I wanted to just ask you about, kind of, what was, what was your remit in terms of the GLC, being video officer and funding different things and deciding who, what projects. How did that work?

P: Well, it was a local government officer type job. In other words, like a civil servant job in national government, your working, the policy direction, the political direction is gonna be set by the politicians, and um, you, you have to do the donkey work to make it happen, kind of thing. Um, there was also an intermediate layer, what the GLC did. Because when I got to, when I got to the Recreation and Arts department, and um, the chief exe-the head, of the director of the recreation and arts department, was a rather eccentric, member of the house of Lords, he was called Lord Birkett. Lord Birkett who's father had made his name as a kind of crusading barrister, I think in the Nuremberg trials, anyway, he – Lord Birkett had been a kind of umm Wardour Street producer for some of his time. So funnily enough, he he was, although he was quite a traditionalist, he was not unsympathetic or ignorant about film as

an art form...

The whole of county hall, was – those on the staff – essentially fell into two groups – who were career local government officers, who who'd worked, were building a career over the years, serving the administrations of different political colours, and then a new wave of then young officers such as myself, who were clearly being brought in in order to be sympathetic to drive a more progressive policy in the image of the Livingstone administration. So there were quite some tensions within the workforce, because there were more conservative lifers, and there was, and there was a new wave of officers. So, in – handling that, is quite an interesting side of any progressive local government takeover. Someone from the future needs to be able to handle that contradiction, in your workforce...

L: Do you have any stories about that, any examples of how that played out?

P: One of the most interesting um, examples was in the affair of the RAT [laughs]. RAT was racism awareness training. Because of course amongst the new staff that were being brought in there were a lot of black staff, and, the the, they, and the Livingstone leadership – and of course Boateng was a black Londoner amongst the politicians, Paul Boateng – were worried about residual racism within the lifers in the organisation.... Um so they thought to tackle it by sending everyone on Racism Awareness Training. And, there was a twofold movement against this. The conservative lifers, didn't like the fact they were being sent on racism awareness training, and thought it was patronising. But the black workers thought it was patronising as well, because they thought it, they thought it made the issue of racism a matter of individual opinion, and you had to somehow change your opinions, whereas they said we don't give a shit what people think, we just want fair structures. So the idea of institutional racism which obviously was to come out over the, was to first gain public currency, over the Steven Lawrence case where the metropolitan police was found to be institutionally racist, was actually what was at stake in this argument inside the GLC. So the GLC learnt quite a lot from um, American, affirmative action programmes, and introduced forms of racial monitoring and um, policy for equalisation. Which, which didn't try and delve into your head. That would be, that was peoples own whatever they wanted to think, and hopefully they would change over time. But the key thing was to make all public policy matters decisions, examinable in terms of their impact on ethnic minority Londoners. And obviously fair and equitable, with various positive programmes in different areas. For example, one of the areas was that the GLC had responsibility for was the fire service, so the whole issue of, that they redubbed firemen firefighters, was um --- to a lot of female fire fighters and umm quite a lot of black workers went into the work – because its dangerous but it's well paid the fire service, quite rightly, so they were quite nice jobs to get. Umm, so that was an interesting example of the tension around the RAT.

10.00

L: Um and I guess, I wanted to ask about the different, the kind of I know there were different years the GLC had

P: Different what?

L: Different years like London against racism, and I was wondering if you could talk a bit about how that related to film and video, arts and stuff mmm.

P: I mentioned that as a local government officer that we were answerable to the politicians

who set the direction, and of course that was ultimately the case, but there was also, in order to push things forward, the GLC, the labour political leadership brought in lots of advisors on sub-committees. So they err, the recreation and arts committee, which was a big long well established set piece for the committee, established two sub committees, one of which was called community arts and one of which was called ethnic minority arts. And, then, and those committees had some, were chaired by a politician, but they would mostly consist of people drawn from the field, people who were sympathetic to the Livingstone administration and who could advise on different types of policy. Um, and they in turn each had an officer, who led them, the um guy from community arts was a Liverpudlian who's name I can't remember, um a white guy, and the ethnic minority arts was a woman called Parminder Vir who, if you google her now you'll see she's quite well established as a film producer, who I think she got a CBE the other year or something [laughs], well anyway you'll see Parminder. Um. But, aaand we were all answerable to this Lord Birkett ultimately, um, and sort of convention, myth, convention that if you, anything [cough] that we wrote or said went in the name of the Recreation and Arts department, umm, what was the question you asked me because I don't think that quite met that?

L: Umm, I was sort of err. Talking about the identity or social politics that the GLC focused on each year, and any other anecdotes you have on how that changed what you were doing, how maybe you talk about the videos or film that you decided to, projects that you worked with.

P: Umm, my core, I was, my core appointment was as grant's officer. In practice, they didn't have anyone else around to anything about film, so I was, anything that involved film I tended to get dragged into. One of the reasons that I was talking a moment ago about the fire service, is that I would be dragged into fire safety in cinemas for instance, er, so, there were a number of, sometimes the GLC made films, commissioned films, and then they would need someone to assess whether the budget was appropriate, assist the finance department on stage release – what was appropriate stage release payment and so forth. So, one of the, during anti-racism year the er, errm, the GLC funded, um, a black London film maker of African descent to make a film about, a film portrait of Mandela, you've gotta remember that this is the time when the young conservatives were running around and saying that Mandela was a terrorist and should be hung. And so although Mandela later became recognised for the political stature he rightly has now, that was not the case at the time, so the Livingstone administration was going out on a limb, there weren't these friendly documentaries about Mandela's life floating about on the television that people later became familiar with in the 90s. So, so, that was, that would be an act of... In 1982 Channel 4 had gone on air, and Channel 4 was, did not make programmes, as it doesn't today, it had a series of commissioning departments. And one of their commissioning departments was sort of their off beat, left field commissioning departments, called the independent film and video department. Which was headed by a guy called Alan Fountain, who's umm, sidekick was Rod Stonewall, who, we had been at the Slade together in the film department [laughs], he later became head of the Irish Film School in Ireland. Um, and, in a four part arrangement between the British Film Institute, Channel 4, the Greater London Council, under a novel industrial agreement developed with the ACTT, the film workers union, what was then-what is now, called BECTU – Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union – um there was funding for a series of film workshops, and so this novel industrial agreement, that the ACTT developed was called the workshop declaration. And um most of the agreements that the ACTT did were for productions, for feature films in the film industry, or for, or with television stations for television workers, and at that time, the money, the, the film industry was at quite a low ebb, the mainstream feature film industry, TV was riding

high. There was so much money sloshing around in television it was unbelievable. I, I think one of the reasons I contributed, the GLC recruited me, was that I'd been chair of the London Grant Aided film branch of the ACTT. So, organising amongst young, independent, political and Avant-garde filmmakers. And um the workshop declaration was a declaration that said we recognise that there are, in this sector, these agreements, like in the ITV agreement if you went like five minutes over at 6 o'clock you got an hour's worth of triple pay – the so called 'golden hour' agreement. Because they had, they could afford it. Um, but obviously that kind of money was not around in the independent film sector. For penurious young professional filmmakers. So the workshop declaration was an agreement that the regional arts associations of the British Film Institute all signed up to was that they would, you could, and if you got funding you got funding for a, um, you weren't being commissioned to make a film you were being funded to work, as a film maker in your community. With a group of, so you had a minimum annual wage was met for a group of four of you if you were operating in a non-profit, if you established a non-profit cooperative. So, in anti-racism year, we, the GLC co-funded with the British Film Institute and Channel 4, a number of black film workshops, black and Asian film workshops, to get, to help get that sector moving. Because there were no ethnic minority film makers to speak of at the time. Err, of whom, Sankofa was one group, of whom the superstar is now Issac Julian, I don't know whether you know him he's an internationally renowned film and video artist, showing at the Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern etc, umm, Black Audio Film Collective, who made that, of the best film that I think that came out of the GLC funding, which was Handsworth Songs. And of whom the superstar was John Akomfrah. Err, and then there was an Asian film group, which never gained anything like, the, the artistic stature of those two, I can't even remember what the name of the group was now. That didn't go a long way. Umm, but that was a, that was a progressive policy I think. And tied in with anti-racism.

L: And how, I was going to ask you, so you've kind of mentioned how successful they were but, do you feel like the

P: How successful what was?

L: The GLC's policies, how successful do you think they were in the long term, aside from creating these sort of superstars?

P: Um... well.. I think it, I think it played a progressive role, a-as a midwife in terms of, the transition that we now, that we've now seen come to fruition. By the end of the 70s the film industry and the television industry, were pretty much completely closed industries. The film industry wasn't up to much anyway, and um, because the heyday of Rankine and all that had ended, and um, there was a generation of young trustafarians who would make a vanity feature film occasionally, and, and that generation that came out of the ad industry led by David Putman, and Alan Parker – what's he called Alan?..- umm, so, and now, where and now, everyone's got video on their phone, so that's – that's an incredible journey and that, erm, intermediate phase that was beginning to democratise the medium – actively, not in that passive consumerist way that everyone's got it on their phone but nobody knows how to use it or what to do with it, but um, that idea of establishing facilities, so that in most boroughs – in most inner boroughs anyway – inner city boroughs, young people could have access to equipment and facilities, so umm that was important, that was a really important role that was played at the time, because that was a key – there was partly funding these groups and then there was partly funding facilities in different parts, and sometimes the two would go hand in hand so that say, four corners film in East London, again the GLC co funded them with the British Film Institute, they were as East London was opening up and the

Hesseltine Docklands policy was unfolding, they, they were able to establish a community moving image facility there, which had equipment for community use, and a small cinema, and they also made their own films as well, the group, and so that model, which was a progressive model I think. The GLC did also contribute to supporting some of the independent cinema's, most notably the Rio Cinema in Hackney, which received GLC funding and, the Phoenix, Cinema, in Finchley, which I think was really because it was in the constituency of one of the leading politicians, [laughs] it got money, it is still going though isn't it?

L: Yeah, the Phoenix is like one of the oldest cinemas

P: Yeah, yeah, it is a very nice cinema. So, so that was a good example of how it was opening out into, it wasn't just film it was cinema as well. And um, and, so yeah I got dragged into these ancillary areas as well, including the Greater London Enterprise Board. And the Greater London Enterprise Board, had a-er-a distinct remit which was, part of jobs, so it-it was an arms length board of the um- of the economic division of the GLC, which again was a Livingstone administration idea. The idea was that the, a local authority should actively try and develop the economy, and employment in it's area was fairly novel and not approved of by Thatcher. So the Greater London Enterprise Board, was a kind of arms length board that was funded by the GLC but had a certain kind of independence, as an economic development organisation. And they [cough] rather impressive for it's time, the GLC acknowledged what is now become called the creative industries, and is now recognised as a creator of jobs, growth and prosperity, for London and for the wider United Kingdom. At that time that was a novel and innovative idea, so one of the divisions of the Greater London Enterprise Board was what we would now call the creative industries division, I can't remember what it was called, Cultural Industries I think. And, umm, ... two key figures in that were Ken Worpole he's called, I don't know whether you know him he's a, had been associated, he's an author, still kind of pushing Hackney very much Hackney based, but worked with umm, had a community reading and writing bookshop project in Hackney, um and a woman called, Lisa Appignaes, who's also a successful public author – you can google her – and their policy was, was very much influenced by the thinking of Professor Nick Garnham, who was err, a Professor of Media Studies at the University of Westminster, or Central London Polytechnic as it was then, and, her argued that in the cultural industries, real power rests with editorial and repertoire. So that there are always lots of young, would-be artists, writers, singers, musicians whatever, only a minority are gonna make it, err, and, it's the people who assemble the repertoire – whether they're A and R men in the record industry or whether they're editing a magazine pulling elements together, or nowadays it might be editing an internet site, although that was not foreseen at that time [laughs], um in TV he said it's assembling the schedule, that's where the power in the industry lies, it's in the selective editorial. So um, the policy of the Greater London Enterprise Board in relation to the creative industry, was for that level of supp – like Virago for instance, in women's publishing, would be a good example, and that attracted support, became part of the economic policy for the- for the GLC, so rather, if they wanted to support a young, female writer, they'd use the grants system through the Recreation and Arts, grants subsidy, but if it was seen as an economic development, that would be, you'd come in at the level of publishing. And that was, progressive film distributors, was where the Greater London Enterprise Board, creative industries division intervened in the film and video world, so um.

L: Just so we don't run out of time, I'm going to ask you about, I guess first of all about the... when you knew the end was coming and kind of how that played out, what that meant for what you were doing with the GLC?

P: Err, every, report that was developed that went to committee, umm... had to be signed off by the finance department and the legal department, and the – it's standard local government practice- but the GLC was, the legal department had a problem because the GLC was forever stretching local government powers, they were right up against the limits of what - there was some torturous legal justifications saying that what the GLC had the legal power to do this that and the other, umm, and in finance department, you've got to show that it's good value for money in terms of the number of rate payers, or Londoners, the number of citizens things benefit. So again some of us err, were stretching things on that point in some way or another, [laughs], if they were pet projects they were gonna benefit a particular section of the community in a particular borough, then the finance department might say that's not good value per pound. And then, the other novel thing was umm, that, every, report or activity had to be signed off by, umm the women's unit and the ethnic minority unit, to say that it was satisfactory in terms of umm, equal ops. And nowadays in quite a lot of institutions, in government or like in the universities where I work now, that's not that's not a novel idea, but again it was a novel idea at that point. Umm, and so at that time, the tensions were because, because the finance and legal pulling in a conservative direction, saying 'well err are you sure this is legal, are you sure this is good value for money', and the equal ops units were pulling it in what was then a very progressive direction, so there was a tension there all the time, that, as a grants officer on the ground trying to write a report, I had to resolve that somehow, to get the thing – because the politicians were screaming, 'where's this, we wanna fund this thing where's the money'... Err and all the time, over – and this is one of the reasons the legal department were so careful, - because over the river, Lady Porter, who extreme right wing politician running the Westminster borough council, had her legal – had her, she had a section of her legal department scrutinising everything the GLC did waiting to pounce to prove that it was ultra verism, they did try it on a couple of occasions. Taking the GLC to court saying they couldn't do this and they couldn't do that. So there was always these rits flying across the river saying – therewerea being watched what you did all of the time. The reason, the fundamental reason that the GLC was a success I think, well not a fundamental reason that's a bit glim – the fundamental reason was because it was going in a political direction that was recognised by hundreds of thousands of Londoners as being the direction they wanted the capital to go, and it was obviously of stark contrast to what the Thatcher regime was doing, so, over the river opposite – we were opposite the houses of parliament, we would have, um, receptions on the terrace on our side of the river and you'd look over and see the receptions on the terrace over on [laughs] the palace of Westminster, umm but you'd go to the canteen and there sat in a huddle would be Ken Livingstone sat with Arthur Scargill and Terry Adams, plotting against the Thatcher administration [laughs]. But what, something that's been overlooked, I dunno whether, whether this has come up in the interviews you've been doing, is that, the Livingstone administration, the first Livingstone administration, was elected on the basis of – again which rang a bell with hundreds of thousands of Londoners – on public transport, making public transport great and efficient and cheap and affordable. Which is, which has been continued throughout, which Livingstone continued when he returned to power, Sadiq Khan is now really conscious of transport policy, the night tube policy, which actually Johnson, Johnson want's to claim responsibility for the night tube policy, but its actually only Sadiq Khan who's made it work. The, so the Livingstone administration came in with a Fare's Fair policy, which was a, which was a policy for making public transport affordable by massive transport subsidies. And they set a rate, to pay for this policy, they were then taken to court, and the court ruled that they that the-the policy exceeded their powers and they couldn't do it. So they got massive kudos amongst Londoners, for having had a go at making a cheap and efficient fair and affordable public

transport policy. Which is obviously crucial in a dense city like London. They got the, they got the political kudos for that, but they never had to pay for it, they never changed the rate. So, they had, and then, although they were abolished just about the time of the big bang – it was already go-go years, Thatcher, Regan, years, it was go-go-years for the city, were building up, so the rateable value of city property was shooting up – so, they had money pouring in from a rate set to pay for transport they couldn't pay for, and, far higher rates coming in from the city offices than they'd ever expected to get, so we had more money than we knew what to do with. I was under pressure, to write the report – I once as end of year approached, spent 24 hours in the office, I went, I went there on a midday Saturday and left Sunday evening, to write all these reports to get them ready for the Monday, to get the money out the door. And then at the end, when we were – when abolition was clearly gonna happen, we were doing these, what we called 'Tombstone funding' which was we were tryna get the money out the door to these various arts projects, community groups, film collectives, to fund them at least for the year ahead, so they could get a bit of a bonanza as the GLC disappeared.

L: And, can you talk about what you think the biggest successes and/or failures of the GLC were? So you've already talked a bit about the successes there but what do you think some of the failures might have been?

P: Well the failure was obviously that it was a straight political defeat ultimately. It was abolished, umm, as were the comparable metropolitan councils in the other urban areas, all of which were labour controlled. Umm, and that and that was part of the wider defeat of Labour in the Thatcher years, where obviously the Labour movement was gone and has been defeated. So the abolition of the GLC and the dismantling of the metropolitan county councils, err, in the early eighties she smashed the steel workers and obviously in this period, one of the things we knew sealed the fate was when the miners went back to work in early 85, and, we knew then that that was never gonna win it then, um and you can see retrospectively more subtly how um, because the big bang unleashed forces which would destroy all the building societies, all the mutual organisations that the labour movement had build up, were destroyed, er, ones that never were – the most abused word now [laughs] are football clubs – these premiere shit, biz-massive multi-million businesses, which bear not a single resemblance to a club. But there, which is what they generally were originally, but they came out of the working class communities, created sports clubs, er built them in the late 19th century. They were clubs they were mutual associations. So a-all the mutual associations that the labour movement built um, I mean the last one that's dying now, breathing it's last gasp is obviously the coop bank. Err, so at that time, ob-the err movement traditionally was thought to be led by the trade union movement. Livingstone pointed out that there were other institutional basis which it was possible to capture which was – and it sort of wasn't completely novel because obviously Morrison had done the same, during the wilderness years of the 30s for the labour movement, that what presaged the 45 victory was was the Morrison's control of the LCC, and using that to build a lot of affordable housing, introduce inner city health policies and so forth that um, Mandleson's grandfather was he? Great Uncle I think he was, um, thata Morrison carried out. So it had been tried before but Livingstone gave it a new, for that time a new, progressive innovative inflection which was – cos it was a-all, what we now, was institutionalised by the Blair government and was accepted by the Tories even, at least they give lip service to it - which is equalisation of opportunities. All that was introduced by the, the GLC was the channel by which that entered the mainstream of British political life, was equalisation of opportunities. So across a range of parts they had the parks, but the idea of having these various festivals of the oppressed, was a- was again an idea I think the Livingstone took it from the big communist

party festivals in Italy and France that they'd always hold, so it was it was modelled on that, the L'Humanité festival and so forth, that were brought, brought in. And this progressive address to culture that was not, culture didn't mean high art, necessarily, culture could assess the new art forms that were, had arisen in the 20th century. So yeah, it was a range of, it was a strong legacy. Umm, I dunno whether, you've got ideas on why it was defeated?

L: Um

P: Whether you think there were things it should have done it didn't do?

L: I, um I'm not sure about whether it being defeated or, I'm not sure what they could have done, but if you have any ideas about perhaps what they could have made the structures, could've outlasted the GLC which obviously they did in funding a lot of different things but I guess this is kind of going off 'Oral History' now we are just having a bit of a chat but you're gonna have to go...

P: I'm gonna have to go shortly yeah, I'm gonna have to go in about ten minutes.

L: So, err I guess it was about how things were funded and then suddenly things were gone, so I guess it's just sort of time when they had money to do certain things and then how that effected, I don't, I don't have a strong opinion but I'm interested to know what, what happened there.

P: Yeah well, there's always that issue around grant funding isn't there, where there, whether you say some things are not gonna market survive but they're worth having, so you pay for them, or whether you, ssssee it as a transitional phase to them getting on their feet and then making a living for themselves. I think one of the reasons that the Issac Newton, John Akomfrah, have, because, the, umm, the opening of Tate Modern, s-signaled this completely new direction in that, now, in the 21st century, people have got used to, massive more social salience, for the, for the institutions of the art world, than there was before, of which Tate Modern and it's massive success as a tourist attraction signals. So, err, modern art, a-and people, has got a huge following now, the Turner prize, the Freize art fair, the Tate Modern, err, so there's a massive following for it, so there's an umm, which was an institutional base that was not open to the other filmmakers, so um, in the same way, at that period. A key mid-wife to that was Liz Rhodes, I don't know whether you've run into her, she was umm, a filmmaker who came out of the London Film Makers Cooperative, err, was an art school lecturer and filmmaker and, was on the community art's panel, as an advisor – she was a strong feminist, eerm, and so that, that idea was very much [ssss?] with her. So, that transition of Avant-garde film through to a, some, taking up to try and find feminist art forms, and then the, the wider social salient's of the art world, so that's given people institutional basis on which to survive, but most of those are predicated on the assumption that it will always need subsidy. That, that's that's not usually questioned nowadays, at least not to the advanced industrial nations, so that's Germany, America, France, - they subsidise art. They don't expect people to be able to make a living on the open market.

L: Umm, so just before you have to go can I double check some name spellings from you. So the head of the community arts committee

Ethnic arts committee – the woman who was head

P: She wasn't head of the committee, I can't remember who was now, umm, she was a paid,

she was Parminder – Parminder Vir, Vir. So she was yeah a paid ethnic minority arts advisor. Worked in the next office to mine.

L: and, the two the committee that we were talking about the film distributors, so there was your committee

P: What you mean the Greater London Enterprise Board?

L: Yeah what was the...?

P: I can't rememebr who was head of the whole thing, it was the cultural industries division, was umm, Ken Worpole and Lisa Appignaesi,

L: and they were influenced by the theories of...?

P: Professor Nicholas Garnham. Who was a rather fierce whickamist(?)

L: Okay that's great!