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Kieran Connell: So what brought you to the Centre in the first place? Was it the late '70s, was it, mid to late '70s?

Roger Shannon: Yeah, I came to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in '77. I'd previously applied to start in '76 and didn't get offered a place. I was encouraged to reapply, which I did do, and I started on the taught course in the MA in Cultural Studies in '77 and I was on a part-time ticket, so I was going to do it over two years. What attracted me to go to the Cultural Studies Centre was something that was coming out of my first degree which was at Teesside Polytechnic and I was doing a whole range of modules mainly to do with English Literature but during the course of that degree we were also doing modules in Sociology and I got interested in Sociology of Culture and Sociology of Literature and it seemed to provide a way for me to interpret and understand literature better because it was... I was really looking to connect literature with society. A lot of my tutors were, I would say, coming out of a Leavisite tradition and doing Sociology of Culture reading – I'm trying to remember the names now – William Goldman, (György) Lukács, Raymond Williams, Brecht, etc, the Frankfurt School, this all brought a whole load of new ways for me to rethink literature. And as part of that I came across some of the early working papers in Cultural Studies, particularly one on literature and society, where I used that a lot in my final year. In my final year I did two big pieces of writing at Teesside Poly, one about *Germinal*, Emile Zola's novel, and a dissertation about Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, and I found the writings of Terry Eagleton really influential in some of my ways of understanding Joseph Conrad and of course Eagleton was emerging as a writer about Marxism and literature. So these things kind of like attracted me to the Centre. But the other thing that attracted me to the Centre was that some of the work that I had done before going to Polytechnic and some of the work I was doing in Teesside was related to young people and the kind of politics of youth cultures, so some of the work that was emerging out of the Centre to do with subcultures, Dick Hebdige's work, etc, was also on my radar and so that was another attractor as well.

Kieran Connell: So would you say that the Centre had a reputation before you arrived, or...?

Roger Shannon: Yeah, it certainly had an emerging reputation and it was probably filtered down to me by one or two of my tutors who were picking up on working papers. There was one in the English department who'd I think picked up on it and there were one or two in the Sociology department, and so... In fact, one of the things that I did in my final year at Teesside Poly is we began to do a number of seminars on issues to do with Sociology of Culture which the students were doing with the tutors and I think we had one of those sessions about some of the work that was coming out of the Centre. I'm sure that's how I came across the literature and society working papers issue.

Kieran Connell: So what was the atmosphere like then at the Centre when you arrived in '77, did it match your expectations?

Roger Shannon: Well I always remember getting interviewed by a group of about five or six, I think, umm –

Kieran Connell: Do you remember who was in the group?

Roger Shannon: Yeah, I mean, Stuart Daniels was on the interview panel and Richard Johnson, but other students alongside Stuart, I think Eve Brook. Those are the two I remember. And I was able on the panel to be able to, you know, raise with them because I could sense from their questioning and also I knew a bit about what they'd been researching, so I was able to kind of pick up on issues to do with community and politics, young people and politics, and maybe not necessarily a lot around kind of literary theory. But when I started... I mean, there were several kind of dissonances when I started, one of them was I was coming from a polytechnic that in the degree I got it was the first time that they'd won a Humanities degree so the Polytechnic had only recently developed degrees in that area so the kind of sense of debate and sense of kind of interesting people around who wanted to talk about those things was relatively limited, but at Birmingham obviously it was full-on, so I think I did experience something of, you know, I'd say a culture shock between what I'd been doing and life at the Centre. However, I had had a year off; I did my degree and then had a year off and in that year I worked as an adventure playground leader in Newcastle and while I was there I'd got involved with

the Workers Educational Association and ran a course on Marxist Theories of Culture in the local Socialist centre. So that kind of experience got me in some sense up to a certain level of understanding about certain key texts you had to sort of follow but also I got involved with people who were in a film workshop there, Amber Films and Trade Films, and that kind of gave me in some sense a background so that when I was at the Centre I could get on. But there was, I think, a big dissonance between students who were arriving there from either maybe an educational background, maybe they'd been teachers, or subject material not directly in the core territory of Cultural Studies, but then there were other students who had obviously in some sense were coming from, you know, hot spots of critical discussion – I'd say that's probably coming either from Cambridge or Sussex, etc – and I think there was a big divide between some of these kind of camps.

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Kieran Connell: So coming from the background that you came in, which obviously you were getting more into community politics, you went to a polytechnic, you were obviously getting more and more interested in, I guess, kind of culture and society and that kind of tradition, was the atmosphere at the Centre something that matched that baggage, if you like?

Roger Shannon: It matched it and obviously, you know, raised the bar in my understanding but it was also either beginning to be or, you know, was maybe the apex of it, the moment of, you know, theoreticism, so that the... you know, a lot of the subgroups were working at a very advanced discussion point about theory and although I was interested in that, you know, I have to say it was a very difficult moment to kind of grasp fully some of the discussions going on, and myself and others, you know, I think felt the same. So sometimes, you know, you would go for, you know, a whole number of seminars and, you know, you probably really wouldn't say a peep because, you know, the... you know, the terrain of discussion was just, you know, over your own horizon. I mean, that kind of calmed down after I'd been there a year or so because you sort of... you know, you kind of absorb the vernacular, you know, you move into certain, you know, stages of understanding and then you can kind of compete on your own terms. I mean, I think the level of theoretical discussion was also a way of, you know, showing lots of emerging academics competing for particular positions.

Kieran Connell: Was it quite competitive then from your -

Roger Shannon: I think so in terms of... I mean, collectives, you know, function in many different ways but often collectives function to allow, you know, the... you know, the sabre-rattling of different views. And I think... you know, I mean, very, very bright minds were there and very, very bright minds wanted to explore, you know, their own intellect, and everybody else, you know, got on with that discussion. So, you know, it wasn't a sort of wilful, you know, cauldron of discussion, it was a very positive one, it's just that if your background immediately wasn't within, you know, the finer points of Althusserianism then very quickly you had to get on that escalator to follow it and understand it.

Kieran Connell: I mean, what was the actual... In terms of like the actual, you know, the working week at the Centre, if you like, I mean, what subgroups were you involved in and how did they interact with (overspeaking) the general seminars and annual...

Roger Shannon: Well I was doing the MA taught course so I think there were one or two particular points in a week I had to go to. Stuart Hall ran one of those modules - well I suppose we call them modules now, courses then – and that was about cultural theory and it was just mind-blowingly fantastic to have Stuart every week on, you know, either, you know, a theoretical current or a particular thinker or a particular, you know, issue to kind of talk about, and they were just fantastic. And in a way, you know, that was the way that you kind of caught up with certain key discussions. So I was in that and I made, you know, voluminous notes about everything he talked about. And he was fantastic as an educator because he could just spin a metaphor to explain an issue, a concept, and make it palatable and communicative. That was a brilliant skill that he had because he understood it so well he was able to put it into a, you know, an educative context.

Kieran Connell: Would they be more like lectures then, in a sense, would they be (overspeaking)?

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Roger Shannon: Yeah, there were lectures with him at the front. You know, in those days no PowerPoints, no visual aids, just, you know, verbal digression. You know, I'd say often he'd have, you know, loads of notes in front of him, you know, it was an exhilarating experience. I got involved in a number of subgroups that were, you know, coming... you know, that were part of the kind of interests I had so that was... There was an emerging group called English Studies which Michael Green was involved with and Rebecca O'Rourke, Janet Batsleer, and I also was involved with, I think, the Media Studies group. There was a group on sexual ideologies and one or two others. I mean, I think you had to go to two or three if you were part-time. I think if you were there full-time you probably went to a big span of them. So, you know, I found my bolthole in English Studies and we developed quite an interesting take on the issue of, you know, literature and commitment, literature and politics, and we looked at the '30s and developed a... Well the '30s was known as, you know, the moment of commitment for writers but we looked at it in a slightly different way and we started to look into the way that citizenship had been constructed. This led me to look into some of the oppositional cultural activities in the '30s and that took me into looking into the work of the Workers Film and Photo League and the alternative filmmaking that was going on in Manchester or Liverpool, Birmingham, London associated with the Workers Film and Photo League, as well as looking into what the documentary movement was doing with Grierson, Empire Marketing Board and General Post Office, and I did some papers on that which I was pleased about, the group liked, and they were all about the '30s. We then gave a number of papers at some conferences, including Essex, a big Essex Sociology and Literature conference, and ultimately that work ended up in a book called *Capital Letters* – I think, I can't remember – *Capital Letters* maybe. But, interestingly, we began to develop in that group a look into popular fiction more closely, particularly romantic fiction such as Mills & Boon and kind of, you know, that type of writing. But we also then incorporated a look into what we call 'male romances', began to look into spy fiction, the Bond, the John Buchan books, and that was picked up a lot by an American colleague at the Centre at the time, Mike Denning, who then went back to the States and did publish around some of those ideas about popular fiction. But one interesting development from that group and its interest in popular fiction was that we began to look into contemporary manifestations of, for want of a better word, working class fiction, which I think was related to the interest the group had shown concerning the '30s with the Workers Film and Photo League. So we began to look into the work of the Workers Writing League at the time and there was a sort of growth of working class writing, Black writing, often autobiographical but about experiences that working people had and about their area and history, and one or two colleagues, Janet Batsleer and Rebecca O'Rourke, got very much interested in those developments. And for me this was an interesting development because we were... you know, we were researching it in the University into culture and society and we were finding links and alliances with manifestations of cultural practice outside of the University. So we were doing that and I know colleagues went off and got more involved with some of those working class writing agencies. So that to me was perhaps part of the move out of theoreticism by finding aspects of cultural production, either in the city or beyond, and then building some momentum with them.

Kieran Connell: So would you say was the relationship between the academic work that was being done at the Centre and you say like got obviously very theoretical and kind of... not highbrow but a focus on being rigorous, how did all that kind of intellectual practice relate to the wider city of Birmingham in your experience?

Roger Shannon: Well it didn't happen in an extensive way, it happened in pockets of activity that friends and colleagues were getting involved with. I mean, obviously there were, you know, students there who were involved in the more conventional form of politics, either because they were in different political parties and then had a role and then were active in that, and also they may have been active in, you know, the life of the politics on campus. But there were, you know, several people that started to be involved in what was going on in the city in different ways and the most prominent of those, I think, would be Martin Culverwell who came to the Centre at the same time as me, we became great friends. And he was involved in music and began to be involved in *Rock Against Racism* and... whether he was still fully enrolled at the Centre when he was doing all this, I'm not sure, perhaps he was, but he began to look into, you know, music as a form of registering a political protest, and of course that kind of... you know, that period of the late '70s punk emerging, he got involved in managing and creating bands in Birmingham. And the interesting film that I developed in a way came once I'd done my MA and certain jobs were advertised which I went for, but I had started in the latter time at the Centre of getting involved with what West Midlands Arts were doing in the region in

terms of film seasons or film initiatives. And then around music, you know, it kind of overlapped into the areas of looking into girls cultures, which Angela McRobbie was doing. Some of it, the interest was obviously fed by the kind of interpretation of youth culture that Dick Hebdige was doing, and I think, you know, the... Paul Gilroy was beginning to write about Black music and relationships on society. So there was a kind of... there were linkages being developed. Michael Green was very much interested and involved in the kind of politics of the Arts Council or the Regional Arts Council. But, I mean, these were, I would say, almost like personal involvements rather than the Centre having, you know, a kind of stated strategy of intervention, which I don't think it did have, but it was being manifested, and I think the impact came later once, you know, individuals had finished and moved into, you know, the spaces that they could, you know, occupy themselves with.

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Kieran Connell: You mentioned... like you touched on politics, I mean, what are your reflections on the kind of significance of politics within the Centre and particular in terms of obviously when feminism came along and then later racism and anti-racism became the issue? What are your reflections of that?

Roger Shannon: Well I think when I got there in '77 it was a moment when a lot of the women academics had started to confront some of the, I suppose, you know, reproduced masculine ways of dealing with work, and even though you had a collective structure, you know, collective structures are... you know, often function for, you know, for whoever can shout the loudest or function in the most, you know, hustling way. The feminist argument was beginning to eat away at what was probably a conventional way of dealing with politics, so I think some of the ways that academic debate was conducted and also, you know, a kind of fascination with, you know, the minutiae of theoreticism was a sort of... you know, you could say is a kind of, you know, masculine territory, and the impact of the work that Angela McRobbie used in Dorothy Hobson and Charlotte around girls' radio and film... I mean, you know, Dorothy was doing great work in understanding, you know, working class women, middle class women as well, on their own in the home and what their cultural life was about and what they listened to on the radio. I mean, that was as far removed from the minutiae of over determination as you could get but very important, you know, cultural studies that Dorothy was doing and I think the work that Charlotte brought in on film, Janice Winship on girls' magazines and... you know, it kind of brought a sharper edge to the issues of cultural life that you also had to pay political attention to.

Kieran Connell: Was there any hostility, did you find, in the rest of the Centre's interactions with that group?

Roger Shannon: I mean, there may... I don't... you know, my memory's probably not as sharp as it could be. I mean, you know, there were always issues at the Centre between, you know, the way that, you know, the politics of academic life were conducted. I don't recollect any, you know, over the top harshness about these things but it did develop into... some new subgroups developed around sexuality, sexual ideologies, and there was beginning to be work conducted on theories of gay cultures which Frank Mort was involved with and also his work on the Wolfenden Report. And so new subgroups were formed which were recognising the significance of the feminist challenge to society and also, you know, more greater attention to a wider understanding of sexuality. And I think, you know, probably in the early to mid '70s before I was there, I think there may well have been a sense that it was conducting, you know, Cultural Studies but within perhaps a continuing masculine stereotype and then the challenge came in and the Centre became a better place within their interest. And I think it may well have also have been the time when other groups were looking into, you know, like cultural life is going on there beyond the towers of the University and if you're looking in Contemporary Cultural Studies and you're not actually finding a working... you know, being culturally productive yourself, then, you know, you're just a critic rather than somebody having a more kind of interrogative relationships with what's going on. And I think that helped to move, you know, certain colleagues into, you know, a kind of, you know, bilingualism where you are connecting up your academic concerns with cultural concerns. And some people I think would've at the time drawn on Gramsci's description of being an organic intellectual as that kind of practice. I think –

Kieran Connell: (Overspeaking)?

[00:25:52]

Roger Shannon: I think I did, yeah, and I think others did as well and it was a very fruitful, you know, momentum to follow.

Kieran Connell: And you talked about the Centre as a collective but I was also going to ask a bit more about like the role of the staff. You talked about Stuart and these seminars being incredible to be part of, what's the role... I mean, when you were there it would've been Richard and Michael and Stuart, what was their role in relation to the subgroups and the intellectual kind of direction of the Centre?

Roger Shannon: Well I think more really when Neil came in towards the latter end of that period, but they... I mean, they functioned in a... I suppose they functioned in a way which was different than I'd recognised on my first degree, which was that the notion that you had a collective research group, the principles of that were that it was the body of knowledge that was being taken further forward rather than, you know, the individual, you know, working at the coalface, so the ideas and the concepts and the theoretical advancement were more significant and a collective endeavour would produce those. Now, the role of, say, Michael or Stuart or Richard seemed to me to be that they were attempting to reinvent the role of the lecturer or the tutor in that context because they were also part of that collective but although, you know, they were kind of on a contract with the University and the relationship between them and the student was still there, but they kind of worked in a way to, you know, nurture and nourish a collective interest. So they would take responsibility to... you know, if like a discussion came up and, "Oh, shall we find out about that?" they would do a quick kind of tour de horizon of that particular concept and then provide some material for the group, the collective, to then look at. So they weren't looked upon as, you know, the font of all knowledge but they were active in looking ahead and bringing material back, and not everyone has got the time or, you know, is paid to do that. And so they were not necessarily themselves breaking new ground but they always found some way of having a two-way street; so they were involved with the collective but would go... almost like go on foraging, you know, endeavours to pick up on on what were... you know, like what, say, Eagleton or Macherey was writing about to do with genre or romance and point us in the direction of that and then get involved, you know, and then also get involved with papers that we might be doing together. So it wasn't a classic lecturer/student relationship, it was very different and, you know, I much appreciated the way that worked. It also meant that with Michael, for example, Michael Green, he could pay a lot of attention to, you know, individuals' needs in terms of, you know... you know, like, "You know what, I don't understand this fucking notion so how can I get my head round it?" and he would be able to provide either materials or do a bit of, you know, thinking for you but without it being... You know, some sense they're up there and I'm trying to get up to their level, it was very much, you know, on a kind of egalitarian principle.

Kieran Connell: I mean, a lot of your peers and people who came up after you and before you went on to kind of have, you know, prominent careers in academia, was that ever like an openly acknowledged kind of careerist thing at the Centre, people were doing this so they could become academics, or was it some other kind of...thing (overspeaking)?

Roger Shannon: Yeah, I think there was as definite interest in taking the knowledge from the Centre out to other equivalent sites of knowledge development but, I mean, that's not necessarily just, I suppose, a careerist imperative, I think it was also at the time... You know, I mean, the late '70s, it's ten years after '68 and then also, you know, ten years after a sense that, you know, you could establish red camps in universities, which was a definite kind of political strategy after 1968 to do with, you know, Left intellectuals in universities. And so, you know, if you were getting your PhD at the Centre then, you know, there may well be the opportunity to develop that in other universities. And, you know, a research centre working with mostly postgraduates, it's probably going to function like that anyway. And, you know, I may myself have thought that might happen as well but when I turned down an opportunity to have a PhD and a grant –

Kieran Connell: At the Centre. or...?

Roger Shannon: At the Centre. You know, it was greeted with shock and awe because, you know, to get a grant to do a PhD was, you know, the thing that everybody was after because it would keep them, you know, working and keep them at the Centre, but I decided that my time was up and I wanted to

move into different kinds of work. But, yeah, I mean, an academic centre breeds academics and at that time it was like that. I mean, if it had continued in the same vein for another... if it continued and allowed, you know, postgraduates to be involved in ways that, you know, might have had, I don't know, like a kind of a creative lab or a creative engagement with what was going on in the city, then, you know, you may have found different career routes out of it. But, I mean, you know, fortunately I was moving into some interesting work and, you know, the local arts agencies and others were also moving into that kind of work and the work that I began in late 1979, you know, was wholly down to the fact that I'd done an MA in Cultural Studies because, you know, with other people that were being interviewed for the job to set up a film workshop, other people were, in a sense, you know, young practising filmmakers who'd come out of the Royal College of Art or an equivalent place and armed with an MA in Filmmaking but the people at the Arts Council in Birmingham didn't want a filmmaker, they wanted, you know, a strategist, a cultural thinker, they wanted somebody to lay out a certain cultural policy. Well that's what I kind of got from the Centre and I got the language for that and, you know, so it was a quite straightforward fit in that sense. But, you know, I don't know how many will have gone down that same route.

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Kieran Connell: So like when you turned down the funded PhD from the Centre was that because you'd become a bit... you know, you'd gone as far as you wanted to go at that point with that kind of theoretical academic work and wanted to get more into the practical arts in the region?

Roger Shannon: Well I was mindful of my age. (Laughing) In 1979 I was 27 and, you know, I thought, "If I do a PhD..." I was keen to do a PhD and then made the application. It was going to be on theories of reception, you know, how people receive, say... I mean, mostly to do with literature at the time... how people receive, you know, the text, etc, and then I wanted to shift it into understanding the way that popular fiction was being received. But I turned turkey on it because I just... I began to think, "I'm 27 or I'm going to be 28 soon, if I do a PhD that's...", you know, and nobody was finishing PhDs at the Centre, "So the likelihood is that I might get a grant for three years and then when would I finish it? Would I finish it in five or six years?" Who knew? You know. And I do recall, you know, prevaricating over finishing my dissertation for my MA and the fact that I basically got through that, because, you know, a friend came round, Rebecca O'Rourke came round and basically sat in my little office and made sure I wrote the thing up in time and I thank her to this day for doing that. But I would probably never have finished a PhD until five or six years, and in which case I didn't want to be, you know, an academic waiting to get a job, I just thought... you know, I wanted to get on and do some work, get on and do something. You know, and I think, you know, pompously thinking around some of these things like organic intellectual, you know, would've prompted me in that direction. And also other friends were kind of moving in... you know, and Martin Culverwell was very active in Birmingham with music and, you know, I just... you know, an opportunity came up for me to do something in film so, you know, I grabbed it and, you know, said goodbye to an academic career.

Kieran Connell: And just finally because I know you're pushed for time, but how would you assess your time at the Centre, the influence of that on your subsequent work in, you know, the film workshop and then beyond?

Roger Shannon: Well, I mean, I think fundamentally what I got from Cultural Studies was, you know, the conceptual and political tools to be able to operate in that area of work and in a way to kind of make progress, so, you know, I felt completely that it was, you know, the momentum behind that. I can see that. You know, I may not have seen it so clearly at the time but I can see that in terms of, you know, the way that, you know, understanding cultural processes, understanding... or having arguments about the need for wider democratisation of culture and an understanding of the relationship between, you know, cultural production and a given society, and I began to do that in Birmingham in lots of different ways. And then, you know, you can look at Birmingham Film and Video Workshop's main themes, you know, working with young people, that has... you know, we got Angela involved in certain things and we got Mark Culverwell doing sound recording on films and we got Cath Hall interviewed in one of the films, Dick Hebdige was an influence on some of the stuff for young people. We did a strand on Art and Politics to do with the media and society, Rob Birkett was involved in those at the workshop. Rob had been a colleague at the Centre with an MA from the Centre. Alan Lovell was involved in those. Alan Lovell is from the new Left generation that Stuart

Hall was imparted to and Alan knew all those debates about film and film theory. And we had a strand on looking into women and society and we made a number of films that, you know, were in that kind of area. And, you know, people like Charlotte Brunsdon was on the steering group of the film workshop, as was Dick Hebdige and Maggie Ellis, and they both were teaching Cultural Studies at West Midlands College. So very much it was a manifestation in practice of some of the main theoretical concerns at the Centre. Later on in the film festival we used to have an annual Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture in association with CCCS, umm –

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Kieran Connell: And are there any names of people who would give those lectures that you can remember off the top of your head, or...?

Roger Shannon: Yeah, I mean, we had John McGrath who was running Seven Eight Theatre and, you know, political cultural activists from Scotland, John McGrath was. We had Simon Frith one year talking about cities and cultural developments and we had... I think Phil Redmond one year talking about the setting-up of Brookside, Channel 4, and it's challenge to soaps. I can't remember any more. We were going to publish some of them but we sort of didn't get round to it. I'll have to remember some of the names. And then the work I later did in Liverpool and then the BFI, I mean, it's always... the impetus came from the Centre for some of the issues all the way along. So for me it was... you know, it was a great cauldron, you know, and... you know. And I made the right decision because if I'd have stayed and done a PhD I'd probably still be there now.

Kieran Connell: (Laughs) Roger, thanks a lot.

Roger Shannon: I don't know whether you wanted to cover any more but I think –

Kieran Connell: No, that's great.

[End of transcript]