



VARIANT

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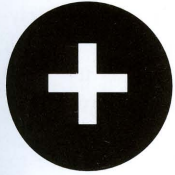
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MEDIA MOGULS





MENTAL POLLUTION

INTERVIEW: DOUG AUBREY

'Big Star in a Wee Picture' is a Glasgow based TV production company run by Stuart Cosgrove and Don Coutts - the former a TV presenter, ex-NME writer and cultural commentator, and the latter an ex-BBC Community Programme Unit Producer and film and TV Director with an active involvement in the Trade Union movement. Big Star are perhaps best known for their 'popular culture' programmes, ranging from documentaries such as the recent *Trainer Wars* to the cult-like and underrated series *Halfway To Paradise* and the freebie Pop TV spectacle *The Big Day*. They were interviewed by Doug Aubrey.

D.C: Don Coutts

S.C: Stuart Cosgrove

Q: You're probably the most successful of the 'New Wave' of production companies currently based in Scotland. Do you attribute that success to the fact that you are trying to do things differently, or perhaps that the people who are doing things are bereft of ideas?

D.C: I think one of the reasons that we have been mildly successful is that we both came back to Scotland with other careers: Stuart was a major cultural writer - one of Stuart's huge 'pluses' is that he crosses over boundaries in ways that lots of other people don't. I think that has helped the company immensely. He is a good broadcaster, very articulate and he writes very well, he is seen very much as someone who mediates well. I was really lucky in that I had had a successful career with the BBC, then gone on to form a company that did

a lot of Channel 4 stuff, so we came back up armed with contacts. In Scotland, people think differently about TV - they see it as a lesser animal. I actually like TV immensely, I think it is a brilliant medium, and I much prefer it to going along to the GFT, and sitting with four people and looking at a film. Having said that, I like film, it is not either/or, but we think differently about our product. We like cheap programming, we like series', we like glitz and things, we are lucky because the two people who run it are both practitioners. That means that we are both working as opposed to doing deals all the time, and I just think we have somehow worked out a system where while working on one series we are cranking out other ideas. We are interested in sport, in the media, in books, and we work with a lot of people: so we have got a huge kind of catchment. This has put us into a different position than, say, a small company who are only doing one-offs, which I think doesn't work on TV.

S.C : One of the things for me is that I grew up theoretically in terms of development intellectually - doing a lot of reading that was influenced by the theoretical project around SEFT (Society for Education in Film and Television) and *Screen* magazine, and all the arguments that were coming out of there about semiotics and structuralism: that's when my education was at its height. I was a post-graduate and lecturing in film studies. In a kind of sustained way that project was also a kind of war on auteurism, about a criticism of a particular way of seeing cinema and where ideology became as important as the auteurist vision, where structures and groups of feelings were considered as important as an individual mind. I guess what happened for me was that I began to become deeply aware that the ideas of the director as auteur were not things which I believed had a great deal of cultural, theoretical, or critical interest. So when you come back to a country - the country that I love almost to the extent of parodying patriotism - and the central argument that's still being offered, is a kind of dated 50's idea of auteurism unreconstructed, where the

director says 'it is my script and I say what goes, I have a vision, it is my project and I'm developing this': you hear all this and you say 'for fuck sake, it's the dark ages'. It wasn't that I thought the film industry in Scotland was crap, and that you had to enforce a sort of scorched earth policy, but just maybe in a way that it was time other voices should be in there questioning it, because the established ones come with such a powerful authority. If you listen to people, you still hear the myth about characters who haven't had a film on screen for three years, characters who were always perpetually developing these scripts that never seemed to appear. I wanted to say there are other ways of thinking about it, that I actually respect whole areas of Scottish culture that are not obsessed by that, whether that is in the area of pop music or literature, or the other areas where Scottish culture is so much more proactive, and so much more rich and aware of the community of Scotland than film is. I think film is probably the weakest achievement of post-war Scottish culture.

Q. Is it still the case that to gain recognition and support it is necessary to 'go elsewhere'?

S.C: I remain convinced of the pretty sad fact that if you want to work as a Scot, in other words if representations of the Scottish condition, character and politics are part of what you want to do, you've got to be twice as good to get half of the attention. I worked at the heart of what I would consider to be conventional English cultural broadcasting, on *The Late Show*, and I know for a fact that its agenda places Scotland in a disproportionate position more than it even places architecture. So you know that the architecture of Bristol sometimes has more status than a whole nation, which is disenfranchised and which has its own extremely rich cultural history. If you take that as a kind of metaphor and spread it outwards to the way people work, it is undoubtedly the case that in order to even get a project off the ground at **Channel 4** that comes with the character of Scotland throughout it, you are immediately pigeonholed into either 'current affairs' or 'news story'. If it is culture and light entertainment it seems it doesn't quite fit, because it has got 'minority taste'. 'Would it sell in the South-East of England?' You get into all those things and I think it gets immensely difficult.

D.C: Having said all that, there are some people who we have worked with who haven't been away and they're stuck into making careers in what they do. It's such a small country, some people can thrive.

Q: There is still an almost 'Luddite' type of reluctance to embrace new technologies within the moving picture industry up here. Why do you think that is?

S.C: Yeah, I think this is a really complex issue, and it is probably one of the few issues that Don and I perpetually squabble about, and at the heart of the squabble is, how we use the word 'Luddite' now: because we use 'Luddite' in its purely perjorative sense as a kind of meaning of rejection of the future in favour of a kind of a more rarified past, and I think that's right, but it is also the case that **Ned Ludd's** leadership of the peasantry was also premised on the belief that he felt people's lives and livelihoods were at risk. Their sense of pride in their profession was at risk. So there are positive things to Ludditism that need to be kept in mind. I would like to think that increasingly we will use new technology, cheaper new technology - we do already use Hi-8 cameras, super-8 cameras and although it's hardly new technology, it falls into the technology of small forms. All

the time we are grabbing bits of things that are out there on whatever mechanism is available to us. But what we have here is the coming together of two different notions of socialism. Don believes in the preservation and articulation of solid principles of trade unionism that were very much a part of broadcasting in the 70's and 80's. I suppose what I argue, and which is much more enthused by the hip-hop argument, is that new technology changes the moment, changes the whole debate about the ownership of rights, the ownership of the means of production and all the rest of it. It is one thing I would like to sit and argue about, because it is ultimately about the protection of workers rights against ownership of the means of production. So it is centrally - for me - an argument within socialism. But for us it remains unresolved.

My argument again would be 'What is it'? It is creative to use new technology in ways that throw up new images and ideas, it is desirable that a new generation of 'technocists' or creators - whether out of artschool, college or community groups - find their way through the use of that apparatus into an industry.

Ludditism emerged at a moment of profound change in the way things were manufactured. Similarly, if the technical side of TV wasn't in profound jeopardy, in fear of its livelihood, if things weren't as precarious, if the freelance market wasn't so capricious, then I think you could bring in a system of youth - I say youth: 'young-of-mind' training - because in lots of ways the vast majority of people we work with actually really want to hand their skills on, but what they don't want to do is have their skills ripped off, to be put on the scrap heap at 47 years old because of something called 'youth'. There is that appalling kind of seduction that they are young so they have got great ideas, but actually when most young people come to you, they come to you with ideas like I think we should do a documentary on the rave scene: that is not an idea, that's a phenomenon which 2 million people have thought of.

D.C: I think one of the problems being where we are is you end up having to solve all the problems. It would be so much better if we were right wing! We wouldn't have the problems of guilt, no morality to juggle. We face a system we don't necessarily believe in, but either we interface with it and get on with it or we have no stake in the market place.

Q: You have a track record in everything from crafted social documentaries to pop promo's - is there a risk that rather than showing a commitment to a particular form, or concern for an issue, you could be accused of producing a kind of 'media porridge'? Isn't there a risk that the output just becomes the same?

S.C: I should say 'yes' to this one, in the sense that it gets to the heart of our programme making in a way. It boils down to two central choices and to me it hinges on this: you either develop projects using the baby metaphor - that you nurture it, and it's yours and you protect it and you don't let anyone else near it, or adulterate or harm it in any way. You have seen it into the world, you know the best schools for it. It is researched, the idea is weened and it is directed by the person who has researched it, and they worry about every bit of it. You either do that, or you are part of an industry that produces more things, so your relationship to the idea has to change, you have to push the baby away, you have to push the boat out: I suppose that is the other appalling analogy. We have to be that other one. It would be dead easy for Don and I to go up in my loft and develop

a project over three months, keep all the money Big Star has ever had coming through its books, and we'd do quite nicely for the next three years. We would become the sort of people who appear ghost-like every two or three months who tell you a project was 'in the can'.

Q: Do you believe that there is still room for resistance, dissent or radical thinking on our TV screens?

D.C: It is difficult, it is a matter of defining what is radical, and what is dissenting within. I haven't seen the *De-Classified Elements* tape about Drumchapel, for example, but I'm assuming that kind of thing is made to be looked at within the community centre, and it engenders a kind of community and anger and positivity within that community. I think if it was shown on TV it would have a much more dissipated role. I certainly know when I worked on the Community Programme Unit at the BBC I made much more radical programmes than when I moved to Channel 4. The people who are buying our ideas have a certain view of life which is probably not shared by me, or you, or Stuart. But either you accept that and go with it, or stay within the safety of your own radicalism and the people who are going to agree with it. I personally find that a lot of the 'Troops-Out' kind of films, for instance, are very technically boring and quite uninteresting and don't work on TV, but as a piece of political hectoring and as things to get people going they are great. You have to look at your product and look at where it is going to be shown, or read, or seen. I think it is possible to be radical, but *how* and *in what way*, is different from showing something in a prison or a community centre. I'm not certain how I feel about it, but certainly at Channel 4, if you go in and say you want to make something which is along the SWP political lines they would politely say fuck off. So there is a kind of political harness that you're not allowed to have on your book. It depends; I see things like *Ring My Bell* as being quite radical, I think it is an interesting idea which is clothed in a popular TV mode, I like it.

S.C: It is interesting you should say *Ring My Bell*. It reminds me of the access television model that was good in the 70's and latterly less so in the 80's. *Free for All* has kind of resurrected it just now, but it still bears for me the traces of something that has not quite worked. It is extremely difficult in a highly professionalised and commodified industry to all of a sudden bring somebody in and present their idea - within the same kind of commodity restrictions - and hope that they will come over as 'professional' and as 'articulate' as the people who are 'represented' on TV. It just does not work like that, but what is interesting about *Ring My Bell* is that the media has changed and that interactivity between viewer and source ought to be much more profound than it is just now. British TV has really lagged behind America, in particular, in that respect: America for all sorts of bizarre reasons not all to do with radical ideas. I would love Big Star to crack a programme that was interactive with an audience that is out there. It couldn't be on the model of *Halfway to Paradise*, but I certainly know there is an interactive programme to be made that could give a voice to all of those people that you know are out there in Scotland, Ireland or the North of England - or even London - with stories to tell and who have perspectives on life. TV even lags behind radio in that respect.

Q: How important and relevant are sub-cultures to your view of popular/populist culture and does 'art' have any place?

S.C: My feelings are that sub-cultures are important to us, but I think British post-war cultural theory and the kind of tradition that **Jon Savage** has come through, has tended to see sub-culture as being youth sub-cultures, they have over-dominated: it is what Don would call the kind of 'fascism of youth' that they have almost over determined their rights to things to do with consumption. The media is obsessed with the machinations of youth, because it seems buzzy and sexy, different and dangerous and all the rest of it. But there is no doubt about it *Halfway to Paradise* was in lots of ways Scotland's tribute to the sub-cultures, it was saying that a bowling club is a sub-culture, a guy who dresses up as a cowboy and lives in Bridgeton is part of a sub-culture: these are sub-cultures of the dominant culture which either suppresses them or marginalises them, but certainly sees them as not quite fitting in. *Halfway to Paradise* was much more interested in 'old' culture, it was actually much more an interrogation of nostalgia, the past, the sixties: a culture that was not youth. We actually had an editorial policy of not putting on too much youth.



Stuart Cosgrove of Big Star in a Wee Picture

Q: Stuart - as an occasional presenter on the 'Late Show', do you think that the cult of the TV personality risks becoming over influential, or even worse, more important than the subjects or ideas presented and discussed?

S.C: I have nightmares about all of that because I think there is a difficult situation where the presenter becomes associated with a set of ideas or a product or whatever. Take Channel 4 here, it's the same sort of publisher/broadcaster. Channel 4 are very obsessed with the idea of how will it be presented, who will present it and what will the presentation say? I can understand that because it is part of what their job is, but one of the difficult things about that is that in order to get a project off the ground you look for the mysterious and new presenter who they have not discovered, and whom ultimately they can uncover as a star. They are not interested in me saying we have got this idea about pool and snooker and it will be presented by Don's Mum, a 72 year old woman who has taken it up in the last quarter of her life. That doesn't



fit into their notion of presentation - she might be precisely the right person to present such a programme but they wouldn't be interested. But they're very interested in us discovering Flavia McDougall, who may be slightly sexy and give off excitement. There is always the idea of the next generation, the next **Jonathan Ross**, which is bizarre in a way; and so I feel kind of culpable, but I don't think I have ever really fitted into that. I have never had a mainstream programme and although it may seem otherwise, I'm not on the TV in the way Jonathan Ross or *Muriel Gray* or people like that are. In lots of ways I'm on TV as a 'bit of rough' or kind of

wild-card or something like that.

Q: How important is it for you both to be at 'home' doing the things you think are important?

D.C: I remember we both had this fantasy about coming back to this land of milk and honey, when actually it's a land which is riddled with homophobia, racism and snobberies. Having been back here now for four years I'm much more realistic about my fellow Scots, which is why I feel quite edgy about

nationalism, because I would like to think that we were a country of liberal, free thinking, caring people. But I'm not entirely convinced.

S.C: One of the things that really dispirits me about Scotland - despite all the nationalist and devolutionary impulses within the country that we are engaged in - is that smug consensus and a consensus of a country that has not done what other countries have done before it. It is obvious to point out places like Latvia, Estonia and places like that. But they are small countries and they have had a tremendously difficult time establishing their independence and in lots of ways we've set things up at much more a kind of coffee table level of independence. I'm slightly fearful of the kind of smug consensus that there is around of 'Isn't everything exciting?'. There is way that we need to find intellectual plurality in Scotland, and I want to live in that consensus where we all have a left Liberal view on the agenda. The absence of that is what I most hate about Scotland.

Q: It was a good comment Dick Gaughin made once about the need for Scotland to become independent, for people to become more Scottish and less anti-English.

S.C: Well certainly, whatever 'more Scottish' might mean. I would rather rephrase it to say I would like to see more versions of Scottishness. I can rest my case on that, because I think we still haven't found the Scottish answer to **Shere Hite** or **Andrea Dworkin**, **Candida Royale**, the Scottish answer to **Madonna** - just to take at random four very different women working in the media. We still have a very restricted idea of what an articulate Scottish woman is.

D.C: My worry about nationalism and independence is what's going to happen to the upper classes, because they're all here anyway. My thing is 'Beware the Barbour Jacket'. I know as a child the Scottish Nationalists, to me, were the Tartan Tories and I think the power and money still resides in Volvo's and Barbour Jackets today. Somehow we as Scottish people have got to see where that is, stop voting that in, start rejecting it and start having something that is good and powerful and will fill the vacuum left by England. That's my problem, but having said that I'm happy to be a tartan lemming and go rushing over the side of the cliff, because it is more interesting than what is being given to us now.

S.C: I'm motivated very much by the cultural realities of the politics you're voting for and all the rest of it. Politics in the kind of committee sense really doesn't interest me. How is it Alex Salmond (of the Scottish Nationalist Party) and Donald Dewar (of the Labour Party) can't sit in the same room as each other? So one of them believes in the notion of the Union and socialism through democratic process, the other believes in the breaking up of the Union but both of them are so engaged in a circus of party politics. I think a lot of what is going on just now around the Constitutional Convention, around the Independence in Europe ticket that the SNP are promoting, around Ravenscraig and all that - it's being held back by quite narrow Party thinking.

Q: Why do you think that Scottish youth culture - and pop music in particular - is so obsessed with a kind of de-politicised Americana?

S.C: I think Scottish bands trying to sell themselves through an English and American medium have found themselves in all sorts of different guises. A lot of bands have rushed headlong into a sometimes quite sterile image of America, and it is

America refracted through Levi's Adverts, refracted through books they bought down the Barras, images of James Dean: it is all those sorts of things that are culled together. In fact it is probably one of the most sterile notions of America there is, because it actually stopped breathing in the fifties so you actually see Cadillacs, Ed's Diner and it's all those kind of images that are for me frozen, attractive, but utterly consumer based.

D.C: Here we are talking about the 80's/90's, which is very different from the 50's and the 60's, when I grew up. There was nothing then about Scottish youngness that allowed you to feel proud of it. So if you were looking at, as I was, Sidney Devine, Calum Kennedy, Jimmy Shand, they weren't bits of my culture that I felt good about, so I immediately went to another culture, which was more palatable and seemed to be more international.

S.C: **Deacon Blue**, **Hue and Cry**, and **Wet Wet Wet** are three of the groups who have most absorbed Americanism, although two of them, **Hue and Cry** and **Deacon Blue** have infused it with Scottish meaning, with words, with images, with narratives that refer back to Scotland. Unfortunately neither of those groups have impacted on pop culture significantly enough for those meanings to translate above the American imagery. Neither of them have become **U2**, who do exactly the same thing. Look at *The Joshua Tree* and *Harlem*: two key images of America, one urban, one rural that have been infused in their music and they are supposed to be an Irish band! But, the thing about it is that they have become so big as a band, they've articulated themselves and mediated themselves on the cover of everything, so if you ask people 'Where are U2 from and what do U2 represent?', the answer is Dublin and Ireland, it isn't misconstrued Americana.

Q: As people who established themselves during the Thatcherite eighties 'style culture', how conscious are you of what that period destroyed and how aware are you of its legacies?

S.C: I think that happily, *Halfway to Paradise* for me was a kind of diary of what Thatcherism tried to destroy but didn't, because it mistook those values in society as socialist values without recognising that they are also human values and that socialism is a humanism. You can destroy socialism in a certain kind of political sense, in breaking up the GLC. But the back of socialism is founded on the human principles of friendship, of trust, not the exchange of commodities, and they aren't going to destroy that just simply because they find it unfashionable.

D.C: The legacy of companies like us is that you end up being a perfect model of Thatcherism, which means you then spend the rest of your life talking about why and worrying about it.

Q: In concluding, do you think that John Grierson's much mentioned dictum, about the Scottish psyche not being suited to film making, still applies?

S.C: No, of course not. Grierson was tapping into the dominance of intellectual tradition in Scotland, which is social realist and progressive, and what he wasn't tapping into was all the other things that were around. Norman MacLaren was a product of Grierson's own tutelage, but what he produced in animation was very different from the socialist realist documentaries. I want more MacLaren's and less Grierson's in Scotland, to be honest.