Stuart Cosgrove, 02/07/12

Stuart Cosgrove was Controller of Arts and Entertainment at Channel 4, 1994-2002 and is currently Director of Creative Diversity.

Interviewers: Justin Smith, Ieuan Franklin, Rachael Keene

JS: Right, well, you probably know a little bit about us and what we're about, but just to kind of summarise, essentially you know the focus of our, of this research project that the HRC is funding is on Channel 4's contribution to British Film culture and that, I mean briefly the history of that is a project, I mean I'm a film historian, the project's on British Film, British Cinema in the 1970s and our sense of that history with well what changed, well what changed was Channel 4 came along and you know

SC: started to capitalise independent production and whatever

JS: absolutely right, so in a sense that's very, very much what we're about, but I think our, our sort of interest in your work is, which has ranged much more broadly, touches on a whole number of issues. The way we're organising this project, we've got two PhDs and Rachael is one of them, the other PhD, Laura, is looking at, essentially looking at the production of Film on Four. Rachael is much more interested in Channel 4's broadcast output of film in all its forms, so you know, short work, independent work, and so forth. So I think that's very much our reason for, for you being one of the main people we want to talk to in that sense. So beginning sort of from where we are now and kind of back-tracking, you've had a hugely sort of diverse career at Four and that has covered many sort of different briefs in a sense. You've always been in things that you've written and said in interview concerned with keeping up to the moment and change and, in a sense, the idea that Four's not resting on its laurels but continuing to be relevant

SC: and innovate and, do you know what I mean, I've got, I've actually got a thought just now that is kind of right at the core of what I think some of the issues are and that's to do also with the different mechanisms by which Channel 4/Film Four have played a role, an interventionist role, in both production and distribution. So in other words the two are kind of in correlation to each other. So one of the interesting things is we were of the view, a team, some of us just behind us here, we're of the view that whilst it was increasingly easier for, I'll not say young film makers, I call it emergent film makers to make content than might have been the case when Channel 4 started in the 70s and 80s, in the early 80s. One reason was the increasing miniaturisation of the means of production, that you could actually go on the High Street and buy a camera at kind of consumer prices that were of a very, very high spec compared with past decades, and so something HD, high quality kind of camera technologies for effectively Dixon's prices over the counter right, that certainly had a role in the ability for young people, whether they were going to college or whether they were just simply interested in film making, for them to go out and actually just do it, in a kind of Nike way, rather than need the intervention or the permission of a commissioning editor or a funder or even if the BFI and all of those institutions that had been set up in the 70s and 80s to help support film and we'd also, interestingly enough, noticed as well that the growth and rise and rise of web-based distribution mechanisms, whether that's kind of like a platform like Vimeo or whether it was a funding platform like Kickstart or whatever, had, the web had come in and also another answer to the

challenges of how films get made. Now at one level you would have thought that the existence of those two things would have cannibalised Channel 4's role, in other words that some of the things that we were best, good at were being eaten at from both sides. However, one of the things that we started to do, a bit like our working relationship with Vimeo and we brought back a brand that actually did exist in the 90s called The Shooting Gallery and we just brought it back, and one of the reasons that we brought it back is that there's still with emergent film makers the desire for their content to be distributed on television, late at night, in a curatorial context and next to other films at, you know, in much the same way that they would relish being at a festival, or relish, you know, being at a big regional film theatre as part of a night of content or whatever and that that curatorial role was something that was still quite important to Channel 4. But also we realised something else as well, that in the past, because there was this tight bottle neck of how do you get commissioned, well you win a commission by building up your kind of your show maybe and gaining access to the commissioning culture and knowing someone who knows someone and working with a production company and all of that, and a lot of emergent film makers have gone and made stuff and posted them on Vimeo, and we started to use Vimeo then as a talent development programme, as a place where we were seeing things that we wanted to either fund, complete, co-commission, just simply commission the next piece by that person whatever. So the next sort of six shows on The Shooting Gallery, many of the things we've ended up professionalising or completing actually began their life by being posted in their raw form on Vimeo. So we've actually turned it on Vimeo because we're now using it as a talent identification platform rather than the distribution platform which I think we thought they were, you know. So that, so those two things that kick-started the thought, the Vimeo thought, lead me to think that The Shooting Gallery is coming back for different reasons than it originally began.

JS: Do you think that, there's a sense in which that would work in another way too, which is Channel 4 developing its own online platform for those kind of, some straight to web stuff?

SC: Well to be really, really honest, I mean it sort of in a nascent way already exists because everything that we are producing in The Shooting Gallery and then say curate together into a single show stays on 4OD, our Vimeo and demand platform, for a year, right, so it's all there in a kind of, it's up there in a kind of curated way if you like, with the titles and the breaks and all the rest of it. But interestingly enough and staying with that thought and interestingly enough, it's also the case too, that in two weeks time Channel 4 launches its next portfolio which it 47, which is a channel which plays back out Channel 4's output from the week before, so we've got Channel 4 +1, which is the same schedule an hour later, and then we've got More 4 obviously, and then 47 is the entire seven days of the schedule replayed again right seven days later. And interestingly enough one of the things that's kind of also happening is that all of these various new channels, our portfolio channels, allows you to recycle content in new ways. So one thing that is actually disappearing now is a word, which was a word that people used almost to break you in the 80s was 'repeat', there's too many repeats on television, now what they are is actually just simply opportunities to view something as opposed to there being a stigma around showing something eight times, you know, because in actual fact, in the busy, always on digital world where you can borrow from the web or you can watch tele or you can time shift your tv, it's much more about the desire or the convenience of the viewer, often who are part of their own network of friends and contacts, who are recommending things to them on Facebook and, you know, we've got a show going out tonight from

education, which is about extreme sports, it's called Daredevils and that will go on … as well, but I know that there'll be a lot of people who'll only discover that because someone will say to them, did you see that show the other night, and I'll send you a link I think it was on 4OD and they'll send it to somebody's Facebook page and it will stay there for a couple of days and the person will be clicking it through it on the weekend and discover it and maybe take time to view the film. So that time shift in culture has meant that this kind of content, independent culturally challenging content or whatever, has more chance of being seen now than it would have done in a linear schedule you know, in a time restraint linear schedule you know.

JS: So do you think creative scheduling has been eclipsed by creative platforming?

SC: Yes and I think now you take almost for granted the fact that the audience will find different ways to find content, whereas in the land when we first started, when Channel 4 first started, it was the fourth channel there was a land of kind of spectrum scarcity almost, that there was only four channels, now there are four hundred plus there's the web plus there's YouTube plus there's Vimeo and all of these other video platforms or whatever, mini cut platforms whatever, so people have got loads and loads of places to go for content. But the one thing that doesn't disappear is editorial curation, right in, and that has an equivalence in education if you think of it, whilst there's lots and lots of places people can go to learn or absorb or whatever, it's actually only in a structured educational environment when you know you're following a course, or there's a tutor or there's a seminar, or there's a programme, or there's a PhD to deliver, it's only in those structured environments that you actually convert, if you like, casual learning into a deliverable of one form or another. I think there's a lot of similarities there, you know I still think I'm engaged in lifelong learning every day of my life but it's only when someone says you have to attend that course or that post-graduate course that I start to turn that into value, if you like, in terms of educational output and I think that The Shooting Gallery is a bit like that. We now can find, we've put out on The Shooting Gallery, this is really quite interesting, we've put out on The Shooting Gallery at least six films of film makers we have never met right, whereas in the past it would only be film makers you already knew. And we've actually got, we're going to put The Shooting Gallery on in about eight weeks time, where a young guy called Eliot Rausch, and he won the Vimeo prize, film maker prize, and we'd asked him to show us his other stuff and four fantastic films. Now one of my team has met him once right, but I've never been in the same room as the guy and it will go out on air and we will purchase it. I mean we made some editorial tweaks to it and we've asked him to re-cut a couple of things, and money's gone in, we're buying effectively the UK transmission rights to his films as part of the deal, but he will be profiled in The Shooting Gallery and I've not ever been in the same room as the guy, do you know what I mean it's weird!

JS: In that sense you're almost, Channel 4 is almost going back to its roots in that way.

SC: Correct.

JS: Because in the mid 90s when you got, a bit earlier than that, when you joined 4 if you like, the first flourish of independent film and video that had arrived and so on had been and gone, there was a danger of the independent sector which had then become much more professional, much more

CS: disorientated and

JS: absolutely, of it kind of losing its raison d'être to some extent in relation to Channel 4.

CS: I think that's another interesting thing and I mean I think, it's one of the reasons we set up the so-called Alpha fund that I've got, is actually about creativity at the first stages of its evolution, grass roots creativity.

JS: Tell us about that?

CS: Basically it's a £2m fund called the Alpha fund which we can only spend in advance of the commissioning system, so in other words, basically it's

JS: development money

CS: yeah, but it's actually spent on fully commissioning as well as development, but development is a side, a part of it you're right. So for example, we define grass roots as being companies that are new start ups, talent that are just finding their feet, innovation at its earliest stage and we've got a rule, it's a hard one to write down this because, you know, it could be challenged, but we basically wouldn't work with companies that have more than two or three million pounds turnover, partly because we think it should be a corrective to the over-professionalisation of the Indie sector which has aggregated into sometimes quite big businesses, many of them actually bigger than Channel 4 you know! So you've got this sort of sense in which the Indie sector's journey up to this aggregated super-Indie, the Endemols, All 3Media and things like that, actually have, because their business model is predicated on rights and global sales and finding formats that are big enough to travel internationally, then another issue that comes into their world is sales, you know, will this be big enough to sell to broadcasters in Russia and blah blah blah, all of that kind of stuff. Well, you know, creativity is not just about sales it's also some things about the smallest pieces as well as the biggest pieces, you know. And so I was always keen to be more at that front end where new ideas emerge, where new talent emerges, and where you can harvest this world of kind of the just-do-it film maker or whatever. So the Alpha fund is about that, you know, we've got, I mean a number of different things, we've got a programme going out this week, it's quite controversial and it's called Survival of the Fastest. It's a show that's by a young black British company that's called Maroon Productions and Paul, who's the guy who runs Maroon Productions had come to us with an idea which we Alpha funded and he said I've got the most amazing statistic, he said nine of the ten gold medallists in the 100m in the Olympics over the last x number of years, in the last ten years or whatever, nine of the ten of them come from effectively, their roots are in slavery, they're coming from either Jamaica, as Usain Bolt is, North America or they're Canadian born Jamaicans or whatever and almost all of them can trace their roots back to West Africa and to slavery right. So I just thought that was a really compelling idea because it's challenging all sorts of different things. So there's an element of it that, Michael Johnson who presents it, the runner, traces his own roots back to Senegal and realises that he was actually the great grandson of slaves, although he himself had been born into an entirely kind of bourgeois black family in Texas and had gone to University or whatever and had never traced his roots beyond, you know, whereas it was much easier for him to think of people in his relay team that could well have been the grandsons or the great grandsons of slaves. But what it actually raises is

all the questions about whether it's to do with kind of the way in which slavery forced genetic self selection because of inter-breeding and la la la la la la la, or whether there's something about the narrative of slavery that led to people with strength and survival tendencies, to survive journies and all of this. So it's all of those things, so it's about genetics, it's about race, it's about, you know, it's a young black company from Brixton that are making the film, you know and if we didn't have the Alpha fund we might not have got that idea to be honest, because most big, most big bourgeois kind of production companies in, they're not fishing in that pool, you know. He came because he'd been reading about a Race Today collective magazine or something like that and also, I can't remember what it was he said, where he got it from but the origins of it were in the alternative culture not in making a big formatted television feature.

JS: Yeah, like Who Do You Think You Are?

SC: Correct yeah. It wasn't about that, it was about saying the journey here isn't the journey of someone famous, that has that element in it, but he's actually on a different journey and his journey isn't about finding his ancestors, the journey is to find the answer of is it just possible that the greatest runners in the world are of slaves and what does that say about our society and blah blah blah. So it's kind of interesting, so look out for that when it comes one. But that's something that's come out of the Alpha fund, so it needn't be short pieces, it can be big, big pieces but the origins have to be grass roots in their kind of aspiration and have some sense of relationship to creative diversity, which is the team I run, in this case black owned company, black film maker, wants to go on a big journey, a big think piece but the first time he's ever had to work with an A-list talent, we had to put in an Exec to help him negotiate a talent deal with Michael Johnson who's represented by the most rapacious sports broadcasters in the world! So there's also a sense there of kind of helping the company grow as well. So they are some of the things I'm really happy to talk, just the way you feel you want me to

JS: Well that's absolutely fascinating to, in sort of clearing the ground, but let's go back if we may to a little bit of personal history in terms of when you came to Channel 4 and to independent film and video and that kind of, that moment I characterised as the kind of transition from that first era under Alan Fountain and what it became. How did you sort of reinterpret the role of independent film and video because I think once upon a time you said something like, it's a kind of worst job in television and it's an anathema because it's this catch-all term that everybody thinks applies to their area.

SC: Their area, yeah, everybody is an independent film maker! Well do you know one of the things I did was I kind of went instinctively with the things I knew and I loved and what kind of shaped me as a person and my own origin is I had been a fastidious and mad collector of independent soul music, right, I still to this day have got a huge collection, a rare collection of soul music. I'd come off the Northern soul scene and had ended up through fanzine writing and I ended up working for the NME as a journalist and they had set up an Indie company in Scotland where I was from. And in the process of doing all of that I'd come to understand through the kind of history of Motown and the Detroit independent scene and then through that, through the kind of Indie scene that was burgeoning in Britain at the time through the Manchester Indie scene and whatever, that actually independent creative culture was actually extremely exciting and that Britain had been rather good, whether it was in fashion, music, cinema or indeed almost every other branch of popular culture, had been a great kind of exponent of independent creative and

cultural production which it then invariably sold to the world. Now sometimes it sold it as a unitary piece that could be bought, a record, but sometimes they were selling a kind of anti-dream to the world of, you know the post-punk world of kind of independent, don't sign with the major labels, you know control your content the way you would, and that didn't matter whether that was the kind of, you know, the Smiths or the Happy Mondays or whatever, they were all part of that narrative. So I had taken that definition of Indie and maybe if it was a tension between me and the generation that preceded me, and I think there was actually a tension, was that many of them had come out of the workshop sector, where the workshop sector was about being grant aided and because, nothing to do with me, at the time Thatcherism had been doing all sorts of quite radical damage to Local Council funding and infrastructure and so some of the big workshops which had relied for most of their money on local funding, you know, whether they were in Newcastle or Glasgow or Brixton or whatever, they had become reliant on Channel 4 to fund them because Thatcherism had taken away the core part of their funding. And I was slightly nervous about that, partly because I only saw a situation where Channel 4 would be decreasingly able to do that and also it was the case that some of them, including two in Newcastle, had become very much about also buying the property within which the creativity was housed and all the rest of it. Whilst I didn't have any particular problem about that, I didn't actually think that Channel 4's job was to fund infrastructure, I thought our job was to fund content, you know, and I remain pretty convinced of that. Now that didn't mean the people who had infrastructure weren't also making great content because they did, they had the tools and the means of production in their workshops or whatever, but the workshop sector was in decline and it was in decline not because of Channel 4, it was in decline because of the politics of long term Thatcherism actually, you know and I came in at that moment and wanted to kind of reinvent almost the Indie label version of independent production, in other words, I want to speak to the production companies that have got a co-vision of what they want to do, that want to make kind of great content, that can work cheaply, that aren't relying, aren't even trying to make big mainstream television or whatever and that's sort of probably what I brought to independent film and video, but after about two years I was promoted into big tele, so you know I ended up kind of there and now I've come back to what I love. So I've kind of gone on a long journey, it's also to do with the fact that I do a lot of Channel 4's big projects and one of the reasons is the Paralympics which we're doing in September fits in creative diversity as well because we've got a tradition of disability programming and things like that. So that's another reason why I ended up back with this bigger group, because it's like I'm trusted to do some of the bigger projects.

JS: And in the context of that, a re-definition if you like of independence, that different take on the sector, that became, am I right in thinking that it became almost synonymous with Channel 4's regional remit.

SC: Yes, yeah I think that one of the things as well was that regionality in the sense of making content that was not within the M25 increasingly became important as the producers … London lobbied Ofcom or, yeah Ofcom as it became, into there being more targets, more quotas and whatever and because I was a Scot, I had, whilst I was actually a producer I had also been on the PACT Board representing new Indies and so I kind of knew that world and so I am quite convincingly in it, so I ended up getting that chucked at me. And that was true. Another thing was to some extent, how do I explain this, I also felt that Alan had created a department that was to some extent, what's the best way of putting this, that seemed to be unsure of its place within the Channel 4 schedule, in other

words, he often felt that he was unloved or was slightly at war with internal processes and I can completely understand why that would come about because it was an area where there was increased sort of scepticism around heavily subtitled programming from international things that didn't fit within the broadcast hour that were longer or were funny shapes or whatever. So actually the big trick of The Shooting Gallery is it's an hour's programme right, the films inside it aren't but by clever use of the graphics we make it fit the schedule. So there's one going out, is today Monday? Tonight, The Shooting Gallery goes out tonight on kind of extreme sports, I put that together because I knew we had a ten o'clock special, the Daredevils thing that I mentioned earlier, and so The Shooting Gallery that goes out tonight is an hour in length because I made it easy for the schedule whereas I think that Alan was probably still saying, no but the film maker thinks it's 62 minutes and aye well tell the film maker it's frigging 48 minutes right! I was a wee bit more ruthless maybe or maybe we, maybe I came from a generation that was beginning to understand or maybe having to face up to the realities of the fact that we were living in a command economy where the schedule mattered

JS: yeah that Michael Grade, that

SC: that became a dominant discourse within, the master schedule, yeah

JS: did you, you yourself became, I was laughing with the others earlier, the tsar or zoning

SC: the tsar or zoning yeah! And zoning was actually

JS: the great concept

SC: yeah the zone didn't exist in television, I mean we had to invent that, but if you look at the zone, the zone was precisely that, it was a way of putting ragged and otherwise disjointed pieces of content into something the schedule could recognise. So it would come on air at 11 and go through until 3 in the morning and you'd call it the red light zone, the blue light zone, … TV, sub-culture this and you know, Crime Central, they all these grand names, Secret Agent was another one yeah, we did one as well, we did one about gangs, you know and these things had real kind of value and you know, and great films as well, and some of them individually, some of them went on to win awards and whatever. But what I was effectively doing was scheduling, effectively creating a zone within which you could sell things. Now there were some people that thought I had taken it too far, compromised too much, they were also very loud so they shouted a lot, they were not hiding anyway, you know and that often meant that even within here, some films that were going out at 10 and whatever, the zones that were going on at 11 were getting bigger ratings, so the scheduler's thinking Christ almighty, Stuart's zones are doing better than the films we're putting in so we put them earlier and a lot of all this stuff so there's quite a lot of the politics of the schedule. Now actually in those days Alan and I would have had in our overlapping periods, we'd have had something like, I don't £5m or £6m worth of spend of budget and you'd go and commission and the schedule then had to make sense of what we'd commissioned and put it into various slots. Now it's very much that the schedule keeps the money and gives you the slot and I've, you've to fill the slot and the money is only unlocked if you work the slot. So the schedule's won, and in lots of ways they've moved to a model and staying with that kind of Marxist theory, they've moved to a model that's very like the kind of command economy of the Soviet collective,

you know, we need you to produce 400 bags of potatoes and that's your field, sort of thing you know and it's much more of a command economy. Whereas in the past the Commissioning Editor almost had absolute autonomy, now there's a relative amount of autonomy, the Alpha fund I can spend as I see fit but they give me that money because they know I'll come back with something that will fit the schedule, you know, so there's a kind of moot quid pro quo. So if I was to say what were the things I got rid of from Alan's era that I now look back at, I certainly know the zoning worked, I certainly know that extracting myself from the trouble or the politics around the workshop sector was something that Alan was trying to do and maybe because I was new I was able to get away with a bit more. I didn't have the same levels of contacts that he had within it, or they hadn't been able to kind of, for me to be, they weren't as reliant on me as they'd been on Alan. Things that I regret, I sort of regret that I turned it to a more Anglo-American world, we've got a lot of stuff *[talking over]* from America yeah

JS: very good though

SC: and good buy ins as well but the thing about it is, I didn't do as much international as Alan had done and that was partly in response to the whole kind of anxiety that the schedule had around subtitles and things like that.

JS: Robin did some stuff

SC: Robin did some really good stuff, he even things like, for example The Dying Rooms was an international film about Secret Asia, did really well you know, so yeah we did do things, but I think that would probably be a criticism. Another criticism would be as well that often you became so fixated with what you were making that you didn't have enough time because in those days there wasn't a Vimeo, there wasn't, the only way you could see new stuff was to either meet the film maker, look at their paper treatment and trust them to go and make it or to see some rushes and hope you could make a film out of it and that meant that often what happened is you spent less time on the speculative and more on that which you were already doing, you know, so it became a kind of costs thing, a time control thing and probably that meant that I was maybe too, it had a kind of creative dogmatism about it, that this is what we're going to do and we'll do this and we'll do that. I want to tidy the shelf, I want to get rid of a lot of stuff that hadn't been shown and it was easier to abandon some things rather than even spend time trying to make sense of something, as in tidying up the yard and there'll be over-tidying and overcorrect you know, but I think it was being done for the right reasons. But now with the Vimeo stuff, because you can draw on Vimeo, if somebody said to me it's the most amazing, you know, Malayan documentary ever, I can sit and look at it from my desktop and it doesn't bother me, and actually I can e-mail the guy or the woman and they come back to you within a few hours, so the fact that they're in Malaysia is now irrespective of it, you know.

JS: The other part of that history is thinking about audiences because, I mean, and again I've kind of caricatured this to some extent, but what we were talking about, just in terms of Rachael was doing some work on film magazine programmes, she was look at John Ellis's Vision and then she was looking at these later series like Charlie Higson's Kiss Kiss Bang Bang, yeah. You know I get this kind of, it's a fairly crude observation but the sense that the kind of audience that the Marxist dilettantes gave way to the metrosexuals in some way.

SC: I think there's some, I think there's some truth in that if you go back to John and that era, it's very, very easy to forget now how powerful theory was, how powerful it was you know, I mean Screen magazine and the kind of ideological content and discourses there are, he mentioned debates that came out of it, were hugely important. I had already just started writing for the NME when Screen Reader 1 came out, right, and here's a good memory! I remember actually having a, I was lecturing in Film Studies down at, was it Reading University, it was called Bulmershe at the time, it's a campus at Reading University and I remember out of nowhere having really, really sharp shooting pains in my back and I thought I'd sprained my back or whatever, it was a kidney stone right, and I actually collapsed in front of my class and had to be taken to hospital to get the kidney stone passed through. But interestingly enough, I remember lying in the classroom and my co-colleague that shared the room with me was Laura Mulvey, the film theorist and film maker, and Laura said his neck, make sure his back's okay, get a copy of Screen Reader and put it under his neck! So I had this big thick grey copy of Screen Reader, I think it was called Ideology and Practice or something!

JS: that's the most use it's ever been!!

SC: Yeah exactly, and put it under my neck and then I was taken off to hospital. But you know at that time, and this is not a word of a lie, Laura Mulvey was as near as it gets as a God to me, right, John Ellis and people like that, and you know Bruce Stern(?), all these people, these were big names in British intellectual thought and, of course, they were kind of suffusing and debating all the kind of cinema stuff from France in the 50s, so you had that whole legacy coming in from Godard and all of that and it was a very, very powerful strain in British, in intellectual public life. And so in lots of ways during that period of time you know somebody like John commanded huge sort of respect in that world, but was broadly unknown to audiences, you know. He would have been known to academia but not to audiences.

JS: And in film makers association as well

SC: well, that's right, but he was one of the few of them that was also a practitioner, Laura was and John was, many of them were just simply, not simply theoreticians but they were not practitioners as well. And by the time you come along to Higson curiously enough he comes out of the Indie music scene, he was of the Higsons, Norwich University, he then became a writer, wrote The Young Bond stuff and that, so he felt like he was from more my generation of people that were coming out of the Indie scene and in lots of ways that was also, you can tell from the title that it's trying to be more populist, it's recognising that pop culture and genre cinema have a role

JS: in a sub-cultural way

SC: in a sub-cultural way, whereas I think John was much more interested in the academic arguments around narrative and …-narrative, you know and do you know what, I adore them both because they both matter but you would not be wrong there, that I think that that was a kind of schism that probably led to the disappearance of some of the kind of screen academics off of television in that period. It's a kind of weird one. I also felt as well that, I've just got to check my diary just to make sure I know I've got a Paralympics meeting coming up and I just want to

JS: are you all right for a bit

SC: yeah I'm fine for now yeah, let me just check, 5-5.30, let me just check this, let me just go check with the team

General conversation re coverage of points with JS Rachael and Ieuan.

JS: yeah I get that sense, from the point of view of not just programme makers but the point of view of audiences, that the kind of, suddenly, there's the kind of the rise of the cult audience and that zoning very much played into

SC: if you actually think about that era, that cult zoning stuff had other, I mean I was kind of bored with that or rather aware of that, if you thought of things like, for example, one of the other big influences at that time was the independent cinema scene Scala, The Scala Cinema in Kings Cross, literally zoned its content, it would have thriller nights, horror nights, whatever, and it was very much doing the zoning that I was doing at Channel 4 but it was also receiving money from the BFI and from the public funding world, but they were also having increasingly to commercialise itself and you know, so you'd have club nights where you'd be shown kind of horror movies in the cinema and there would be a funk all-nighter in the bar and all of that and that era, cult, I mean you saw actually even in some of the kind of, you started to see the sort of schlock horror books getting published, the rise and rise of kind of pulp cinema, all of those things were being kind of written about, all about, if you bought things like Time Out City Limits, the big kind of listings magazine at the time, it always had big, big chunks of stuff that would be on cult, some form of cult or whatever you know. So yeah I think those were very relevant cultural influences at that time.

JS: Yeah, yeah, that's interesting.

SC: So I've got a 5 o'clock so we've only get about 10 or 15 minutes, but what I'm going to do is, if you guys are a bit freer, it's only a short meeting and you can maybe kind of stay here and I can come back, is that okay?

JS: That would be fabulous, we've got, you know, we've got

SC: a few more things to ask, yeah, yeah,

JS: to talk to you about

SC: let me just check this

IF: with the zones and things like that, was it a different model of commissioning than had gone on before, because you were effectively, weren't you effectively saying to production companies, have you got anything on this, rather than sitting and waiting for them to pitch things?

SC: Yeah, I mean one of the things, firstly if you put out calls for something like, for example, Secret Asia or whatever, you are actually framing a tender document, a page and a half, two pages, and you would put it out there to the independent sector and they would bring ideas that would kind of focus on the territory. And so the outcome of it really

was that, you know, we ended up kind of suggesting areas of work to people, so there was more of that. I think that happens quite commonly now where Indie's come in and commissioners will say well we really need to think about something that has a kind of real, something that takes, I don't know, ideas around what we're going to do after shows like The Apprentice, where will the whole world of entrepreneurship go next and la la la. So you have those kinds of conversation but I would be probably more explicit. Now probably if you were to look at Alan's methodology, it was kind of let a thousand flowers bloom in the sense that he would harvest the flowers that were out there, whereas I was much more about I need a field of tulips, there was much more in a sense of me apeing how the schedule was going and putting out, I was trying very hard to be, kind of get things noticed, they were late night so you had your own trails, they could be brasher, they could be a wee bit more off the, you know a bit more off the wall and whatever. But the other interesting thing that, the other difference say there is that I was also commissioning the artwork around all of the films, the graphics in and out of them, the design that would come, the trails that would tell you what was coming next and the inter- … between them. So I would go out to design companies and graphics companies, Indie companies as well you know, often quite new emergent ones, saying like I want something that feels very kind of, so you would say like a typical example of, find clichés that I probably would have said at the time, I love Radschenko, why don't we do something with that! They would go off and kind of do you a sort of like futurist and kind of constructivist artwork and that would bind the schedule together. And if you look actually at the, if you look at The Shooting Gallery, the new Shooting Gallery, it's well dressed around the films, so even if some of the films are quite low-fi, they're in a really nice environment, you know they're, the way you're seeing them and things like that. So that was something else that was a difference, because Alan was really just making films and then hoping they'd get scheduled, whereas I was putting concepts forward, getting all the films and getting the decoration around it and taking them over to …

JS: That's really interesting. Rachael?

RK: Well that was essentially what I was going to ask because I was interested in how things were packaged and marketed and how far you had control over it. But it sounds like in doing that it sort of controls the way in which it appears in the schedule to a certain extent.

SC: Yeah but there might be another thought there that I have not put a lot of thought into myself, but it kind of maybe makes sense. At that time if you imagine that Screen was the kind of ideological theoretical substantial journal of film, culture and history in Britain, the NME where I'd come from, where I'd been an editor, remained probably the most visible musical independent voice in Britain as a cultural thing and when I left the NME I went to join The Face which doesn't exist now, but The Face was the magazine of the 80s and 90s and was driven around the concept of style, right, visual look and all of that. And I think in lots of ways that notion of how things are stylised and dressed was much, much more prevalent then as a new phenomenon like, you know, whereas for Alan, he was maybe coming out of a post-60s kind of, more of a kind of alternative style of things are good, you don't need to dress them up in kind of sugar coated ways and whatever. Whereas I was coming from everything has to look good because that's the nature of design and style and fashion and all of those things. So I think it was taking some of the kind of Indie pop culture and Indie attitude of the NME, some of the maybe kind of theoretical underpinnings of Screen in a sense that they were often about subjects

like, for example, the sex industries as sub-cultures. They were about subjects that were analytical you know, or had the potential to be analysed and the films were often in dialogue with each other, you know, the films weren't intended to be, to give over a single message you know, so it was one of the things that actually most wound up critics of the zones where they're saying you know, you'd get people saying things like, well you've got a film there about prostitution and the next film is a diatribe against prostitution, I don't know what you're trying to say. I say, well that's what I'm trying to say! That we're engaged here in a fundamental popular dialogue about the nature and I think the sex industries is one of those things that actually profoundly divides opinion because it's used so often in pop culture and pop videos and music and movies. It something that's kind of, you even see it where it divides feminism, where there are women that for example that say oh no no, I'm quite happy, I'm in control here, I want to actually work in this kind of pole dancing thing and I'm paying for my own University and blah blah blah, and then on the next page you are seeing women, you're betraying women, you're objectifying your body and whatever and I think those debates are what the red light zone and the blue light zone and Secret Asia were about, they were trying to have those debates on air rather than saying here is the film that tells you what it is, do you know what I mean.

JS: That's really interesting. I remember reading an interview with you where somebody said you know the accusation of this was populism you know, blah blah blah and you retorted with what I think was a really interesting idea about, you know you're actually interrogating the notion of the popular.

SC: Exactly! It's about, do you know what, it's cultural studies, do you know what I mean, if you take pop cultural studies, I always put it on the tele, because at that time I mean here's another kind of thing, I'd also been very influenced by what's now disappeared now but was then called the Birmingham Centre of Cultural Studies. As a young student I'd written, you know, what do you call them, kind of think pieces and that and the people kind of influencing me there were Dick Head, Richard …, sub-culture meaning of style you know and I obsessed about that world, so that sense that you could find in academia a popular manifestation of something and put it on the tele was actually quite exhilarating because it wasn't about keeping it in academia or keeping it within the kind of, you know, the confines of the cloisters, it was kind of the campus, but actually putting it out there, you know and I think that Robin was very much of that view as well, that you know and Caroline who was and did Dyke TV and that was about bringing the idea that New York and American radical feminists and lesbian feminists were actually reclaiming the word 'dyke', and when we called Dyke TV Dyke TV there was fucking near meltdown in here! In actual fact it was talking to the fact that American cable TV was grabbing those terms and bringing them back in again and actually being quite strident and that being a lesbian was not something that was actually to be closeted it was to be quite shouty actually, you know. And so there was a lot of that going on as well you know.

JS: Yeah. How did the, how did you organise the team, the three of you, I mean how did

SC: we had our own passions really and it kind of went from there. Robin was very, very interested in how the, Secret Asia began, and it sounds quite naïve now, because it began when the term the Tiger economy had first actually been used as a term and this was when we were saying, would it just be possible maybe in 10, 15, 20 years time that China might become the most important economic! It was at the very early, Christ it's

happened, but it was at the very early days of that and he wanted to make a series about China and we talked a lot about it and whatever and then that's where Secret Asia came from. It wasn't just about China, it was about Korea, it was about Singapore and wherever and we took loads of good films about it. But it was about something that he wanted to intellectually explore with Caroline, she was utterly fascinated by it, she was fascinated about a range of things but very fascinated by lesbianism and the history of it and the, but also quite fascinated by sexuality in the law, you know. So she had a cluster of stuff, I did and Robin did.

JS: Okay.

SC: And we tended to do it off our own bat.

JS: Yeah. And tell us a bit about the sort of demise of independent film and video, because Robin went off to film Lab when Film Four hived off, what happened with that?

SC: Well what happened was there structural change and Robin, I had moved so I was by now Controller of Arts & Entertainment which included sporting acquisitions and all the rest of it, and that was the time when we were doing a lot of the king of big high quality acquisitions. So I had been in the team that had led us when we bought Friends and Frasier and all those things, so I was very lucky, so that kind of kept me, that paid for my pension! In the process of doing that, I had moved over to this new department, I was managing that and getting on with that and in a way I had just simply moved on and I, and maybe, maybe I should have said to Robin, let's protect this baby rather than both go off and leave it in a pram, do you know what I mean, you know and there's a little bit of that about it, which was not done by anyone deliberately, but when the two strongest voices in the channel had both gone off to kind of explore other things like, remember at this time Robin was starting to pursue his real genuine love of independent feature films, right, and the Lab was a way of carrying the values of independent film and video into the Film Four world and I was off doing kind of tele career stint, right, and I think we left the baby unprotected a little bit and in 1 or 2, I can't remember the year it happened, in one of the rounds of reorganisation, it was absorbed into documentary. Now the mistake there, or I would argue now the mistake there, it was never perceived as being only a factual department, it was always a mix across drama, music, you know, pop videos, it could do, it was genre free, you know. Once it became factual it then became late night documentaries, once it became late night documentaries then people would say, well we've already got a lot of late night documentaries and then in a really tough budget round suddenly £2m comes out of the budget line and you know that, it was the consequence of that. So in lots of ways the Alpha fund is the reinvention of some of its roots via another world you know. So I've kind of come back, but the reason I've come back is that the independent production sector has consolidated and Ofcom keeps saying we want you to make sure that Channel 4 still encourages the diversity of supply, which is the real diversity of creative diversity, my job is to work with the smaller companies, the younger companies, the emerging companies, the new talent, the start ups, all of that stuff you know.

Let me just take this meeting, but we will go on okay.

JS: Stuart we're very grateful to you

SC: So where to next?

RK: Right, I was doing, said I'm looking at a lot of kind of experimenting and low budget film strands things like Midnight Underground for instance, and I've noticed that in those strands there's very often funding partners involved, so you've got the BFI or the Arts Councils and I was just wondering maybe you could speak a bit about the relationship between Channel 4 and those you know funding partners in that context.

SC: Okay, now that itself is a world that's changed quite a bit as well, because it's changed also the nature of how you, Britain's structure about public funding the arts is structured, whatever. But in those days when you go back to the era you're talking about we had a number of key partners. So for example the Arts Council of England had a strand of work where they were very interested in formal experiment, in other words visual experiment rather than subject matter or whatever and this was often, this was often people who went on later in their life to have a role in making kind of BFI features and whatever, this is the beginning of their journey as it were. So you know, Andrew Kotting's Gallivant is a really good example, and so those types of people often bringing short film projects funded in the first instance through the Arts Council and often quite, I suppose the term that would have been used then would have been avant garde would have been the term right, but what that actually meant was formal experimental and we would often partner then, co-fund it, where half the money would come from Channel 4 and half the money would come from the Arts Council of England, or we would acquire them because the Arts Council had already made them as part of a grant aided approach to film making. Interestingly enough in the early Shooting Gallery or in the early strand it could have been the Underground actually, I can't remember which it was, we had in one series the first of a short film by Shane Meadows who's gone on to make This is England, we had Andrew Kotting who'd gone on to make Gallivant and other stuff, we had Simon Beaufoy who went on to do, well he's gone on to do all sorts of things including Slumdog Millionaire and whatever, and another really talented woman called Annie Griffin who went on to do the Book Group and whatever, fantastic, yeah and Annie now lives, she's a, she's now the director for Fresh Meat on Channel 4 whatever and they were all one series, you know. So the idea that there isn't talent there, you know, that's, so it took Channel 4 in that sense probably 14 years to harvest the full value of that talent investment. If you were looking for a return on an investment as it were! So we were at Edinburgh when This is England, the last This is England came out, the movie and David Abraham, the Chief Exec was interviewing Shane Meadows and at the end of it we were all hovering around and he turned round to David and he said, ahh forget all the drama and Film Four, this is the first guy that ever commissioned me and he was meaning that, well 7 minute shot or something like that and he was then working for a workshop, effectively a workshop, he's from Mansfield and he was working for a publicly funded workshop called Intermedia which Peter Carlton was the co-ordinator of, who then joined us at Film Four and is now a feature film producer. So you know that, there were those things, now the other area of funding, as it emerged, was the regional screen agencies, both in the regions and the nations, so Scottish Screen, Screen Northern Ireland and all of these various different places and each of those, each of those had slightly different *[interruption of beeper – oh dear, somebody chasing me again]*
they had different criteria and that was all depending on what their own foundations required of them. So in the sense of the BFI it was about film culture, in the sense of the Arts Council of England it was about the creative arts, in the case of Scottish Screen it was about film making where a significant part of the production had to be in Scotland, in

the case of Screen Northern Ireland the production and the post had to be in Northern Ireland, so they all had different kind of things and I became a bit of a master at working out all those relationships because it's hugely valuable and we've actually just struck a deal today with Screen Northern Ireland who we've remained close to around a comedy series and even more over the years to being about creating inward investment in production. So they're looking to see a big series, they did a big deal with BO and some of the dramas, Game of Thrones they've got. So all of those changed over the years but we've always maintained pretty good relationships because what we've got that they didn't have was a way of being transmitted in a network across the UK which is always attractive you know.

RK: Yeah I get a sense that with something like Midnight Underground that it evolved, in that, you know that the first, I think first of all it was a series that was commissioned and it was very much a kind of history of avant garde cinema

SC: correct yeah

RK: and then it kind of becomes a platform for showcasing new talent but it's not necessarily avant garde or formally experimental that maybe full of, it's new, it's fresh, maybe looking at sexuality and kind of things that are

SC: yeah and you often, often going back to the kind of zoning thing, it was a way of, it was a way of us having a vehicle within which we could put content that we were co-commissioning with the Arts Council whatever, and sometimes if the film wasn't brilliant you went with it as the last film rather than disappoint the film maker and refuse to show it and all that you know, and a lot of those things pre the kind of era we're talking about Vimeo, you know often they were working on film in quite kind of controlled actually largely professionalised post production, where you were often asking for favours around time, you know the editor doing it as a favour and so there was a limit to which, what you could demand in post production. You know, if the person's working for free because they're doing a favour to a young film maker, you can hardly say well I'm not sure I like the edit, I want you to stay until four in the morning! So you kind of had to make it work, so whichever which way you know.

JS: Going back to that regional issue and film, I don't want to quote you out of context at all, but I read a comment that you made, correct me if I do, on, I read a comment that you made at one time around, and let me get this right, film, you're kind of lamenting the desire of regional creative talent to be drawn towards film and the danger, I think particularly in terms of Scotland is the kind of, this representation of poverty and deprivation

SC: correct yeah, I mean that came about, it was kind of controversial when I said that but I think that was because it was quoted slightly out of context but the truth of the matter is the point I was making was that Scotland had got itself into a position, I mean this would be slightly true of Northern Ireland as well during the Troubles, where the range of its representations felt narrow and it felt like, for example and I mean there's a whole sort of national debate about this in Scotland because many of the films are made in Glasgow where there is clearly a very creative community but Glasgow is a post-industrial city, it bears no economic relationship to Edinburgh let alone Aberdeen or any of these other places and my point was, if you take a city like St Andrews which is probably if you like by

head of the population one of the most intelligent cities in the world, it's also actually the most English city in Scotland, you know the one where the highest GDP is through higher education this, and it's beautiful because it looks on to the sea and all the rest of it, it's a city where it's barely ever, ever represented in drama or seen in Scottish domestic production. Now since the Prince and Kate met there, suddenly it's gone up a bit in news coverage and whatever but up until I made those remarks, Inverness is Scotland's fastest growing city, most people wouldn't begin to tell you what it looked like, they couldn't tell you that there's a phenomenally beautiful looking river runs right through the middle of it, that there's a left bank, a right bank like Paris, people couldn't tell you that. Now one of the reasons is it's never in fiction because all the films that come out of Scotland are cast in post-industrial Glasgow which itself is a very partial representation of the city of Glasgow as well, so that was what my rant was a wee bit about and one of the other reasons was that I'd had a spat with, I think, I had a wee bit of a spat I think maybe with Ken Loach at something I was doing and it was like, you know, Ken had done six really really bleak films in Glasgow and I made some joke about it and it all got taken out of context. But the thing about it really was that, it was like you know very kind of you end up with this thing about Scotland also needs to find other genres, other tones, other textures, you know and for me it was just simply casting too narrow a pool of stories, it was always about deprivation, there was always brutality within the family, there was always either heroin or drink abuse, there was often sexual bullying or battering or implied violence within the family, I'm thinking fucking hell, that's not what life's like at all, I mean … so I think there's a bit of that and I'm wanting to say, you know, we have to be you know, I was, look, there was times that, there was a generation of us coming through, Andrea Calderwood who did work with me, a lot of those people, we were getting a bit hacked off with the way in which certain visions of Scotland were being represented and you feel like saying, you know where's our Pedro Almodovar, where's our you know, and when you start to say where's the kind of, where's John Waters' Hairspray, where's the funny Scotland that we live, you know it's not on the screen so that was my argument.

JS: Yeah and I guess to some extent that, if you like the Trainspotting moment challenged that because you had a new way visually with the theme

SC: it did yeah, to represent the deprivation and it was also quite caustic about it, witty, fast, pulsating and whatever you know, but yeah, no, that was exactly it you know.

JS: But there seemed to be, I don't know whether I'm wrong here, but there seemed to be that argument, that coin seemed to be related to a broader argument you made about film and about the place of film and Channel 4, that's the problem that film would have been given as a

SC: well the issue there was the fact to do with, I was now doing a different job, right

JS: this was when you were in Arts & Entertainment was it?

SC: Yeah and then actually I also had regions, and then had the regions, once the targets came in, the first set of remit targets that Ofcom set were 35% of our output, you know outside of London and so I then ended up managing that. When it became a numbers game, how many hours or how much value of content has been commissioned, the biggest problem I had in Scotland was people were still making single units and they were still making, there were quite a lot of nice features, in fact actually Channel 4/Film

Four remains the most consistent commercial funder of the entire Scottish film industry and historically more films have been produced by Film Four/Channel 4 than any other studio if you like but that didn't help me get to

JS: programme and content

SC: correct, I was saying things like, you know, and some of the stuff that we've now got in features things like, you know, all the Phil & Kirsty stuff, Location, Location, they're all made in Glasgow because I had to get to sale and replicability, so singles don't quite do that. So that was the moan!

JS: It's a bit like the film quota in the 1930s isn't it, you set a quota then all of a sudden you've got to meet your target.

SC: Yeah and the targets that I had were targets of both sale, spend and …, so you were looking to hit big returning daytime shows that were on everyday and people were still coming to me with low budget feature scripts and you're like, you know and to be fair, the features infrastructure in Scotland were slightly, sorry the television infrastructure was slightly underdeveloped and I had to spend a lot of time developing it and they're in a better place now, there's still some way to go but you know, we've got probably about ten companies now in Scotland that can produce for the network for Channel 4 whereas probably at that time there was two and I'd … one of them down to come here, you know so it was quite difficult and almost everybody was coming with single docs ideas or low budget features.

IF: As for there being commercialisation though, I mean you know the fact that you don't really have the room in the schedules any more for kind of single documentary or

SC: Yeah I think they exist but they exist really in, they've changed significantly as well and they often do very well, they're amongst Channel 4's most successful commercial shows, I mean things like my Big Fat Gypsy Wedding would be the example, that began as a documentary like that and we've got a lot of films that do well in that space and quite a lot of the selling up of documentary, I mean probably our most successful show just now is 24 Hours in A&E and that began as a single observational documentary and it was very successful and what we did is we just grew it and grew it, and what happened is that the big innovation there really is the rigged environment, so because cameras can be rigged and you can watch, what happens actually we launched a thing in Sheffield this year where we were trying to kind of explain actually that the drama of the documentary was changing because you can rig cameras, a bit like CCTV cameras, you can rig them anywhere and because they're all controlled into a feed you can actually look, in much the same way as a security camera would look at all the entrances to a mall, you can look at all the feeds of the camera and begin to edit live and then take that finished extra long film and then start to apply the criteria of more fine cut editing, you know, you've almost mixed it as a live set of events and you will sometimes see, for example, that a nurse might run along the corridor in 24 Hours in A&E and you can see it's cut to another camera of her coming round the corner and that actually is literally being mixed live. So what we were doing there is changing the visual rhetoric of the documentary whilst still maintaining sale and being about to do six A&Es rather than one A&E you know, so the single documentary has just got bigger and fatter.

IF: There's still innovation as well!

SC: Yeah there's still innovation within it and I think sometimes the avant garde partly because you feel culturally at war with television actually don't like the debate that television can innovate because it's easier to say, oh it's all celebrity and formats and I'm thinking, well actually almost every format in television is slightly different or markedly different from other ones, you know and celebrity has different means you know. They can be redemptive, they can be enthusiastic, they all have their different appeals and it's quite interesting, on Channel 4 now with our bigger celebrities, I can't think of a single, I can only think of probably Davina McCall is probably the only presenter that Channel 4 has, the rest of them are experts at what they do you know. So Gordon Ramsay is a Michelin starred chef, Jamie Oliver does run chains of restaurants you know, Mary Portas is a leader in consumerism, you know so all of them have. Phil & Kirsty run estate agencies, that's their key job. So we've actually moved away from the TV presenter towards the informed expert that can front television up you know, and that's an innovation as well. But you know there are some people who simply don't like popular culture and they'll always tell you, it's a wee bit like you know John Cage probably hates Motown do you know what I mean, because it's just got too much of a beat you know, and so there's a bit of people like that in cinema you know!

IF: I know you started with this idea that you know you like to kind of focus on what's new and everything, but you were saying about the kind of presenter role and it just made me think of the Film Four extreme season you had recently and you had Mark Kermode watching it and it's interesting that there was this idea of you know, that this extreme, the idea of extreme film has always been part of the Film Four brand, like looking back, re-assessing

SC: yes I think that's one of the other narratives, I would say extreme cinema and we were talking earlier about cult and shlok cinema, where that sort of sense of almost as well, Susan Sontag had that thing about the role of kitsch within our society whatever, and I think there's a wee bit of that within Film Four which is cinema extreme of whether it's the kind of, you know the kind of pop end of art house or whatever, where we all look to kind of pool things together and it could be Mark Kermode but equally it could be Mark Cousins or someone like that as well. So he did his sort of film 15 hours, it was and he funded that, so that's been a good you know.

JS: I mean taking that as an example, do you think, I mean we spoke to John Ellis about Visions and I remember that, Rachael and I saying to John perhaps naively you know, impossible to think of a series like Visions a serious programme about film being made on television now and he said, well you know Mark Cousins has just made it and in a sense, the multi channel environment perhaps do you think is presenting certain opportunities for those kind of ambitious and slightly you know left field but with the big overviews the historical, of the kind of thing that Kevin Brownlow did with the Napoleon stuff way back, you know the fattening

SC: I think what's probably disappeared is the intellectual kind of magazine show where a kind of boffiny type film person introduces this week's film releases that will be on at the kind of Electric or whatever. I think that's gone, but I think when you get big passion pieces so like Mark Cousins, Mark Cousins is about the history of non-Hollywood, it's

about saying here's the great cinema of the world which is hugely popular often in its own culture whether that's Pakistan or Iran or wherever and it's a real, it's referred to really as *[interruption of bleeper, okay I'd better go now I'm getting pestered here by someone that I'm meant to be going to my next appointment with]*
and that, Mark described it as a love letter to the cinema and I kind of thought that it's got vision and the big thing that he brings to it and which I think is one of the things that goes back to your question about the Film Four and these people that we put in, is Channel 4 is still really committed to authorship, to the idea of the individual person who either as a film maker or as a critic can offer something and present something. So if you look this week at, it's Grayson Perry on taste, it's him offering an essay on taste you know, and I think when Channel 4 it does that well it can really do it and that's very different from having a tradition you know, movie magazine show like a kind of Film '82 or something like that.

JS: The Barry Norman thing. And also arguably goes back to the very publisher modern cast model that Channel 4 innovated.

SC: So here's what you, I've got to rush off but if you get back to the ranch and you look through things and you're unlocking it either for your own thesis or your overall project, feel free to come back again and we'll regroup.

JS: Fantastic, and what we'll do is transcribe that and send you a copy and

SC: there was nobody I was rude to so I don't think I've got any problems!!

JS: That's fantastic thank you so much.

SC: Lovely meeting you, cheers, see you, nice to see you.

JS: We're having a conference in November at VFI Southbank, we'd love you to come along, we'll get an invitation off to you.