

REDIFFUSING BRITAIN

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With communications policies likely to become an election issue, perhaps the relationship between political practices and the structures and forms of communication will at last begin to be discussed. Particularly urgent is the need to relate such discussion to the debates about the fragmentation of the Great British identity, for questions of identity and communication are closely inter-linked. The present political problems of Scotland, for example, cannot be separated from questions of cultural identity, which in turn cannot be separated from the patterning of images and stories on television which set up, circulate and maintain the terms in which Scottish culture can be discussed.

Work presented at the Edinburgh Film Festival Event, *Scotch Reels*, in 1982 showed that Scotland has been constructed on the large and small screen within three main systems of representation. First there is Scotland as the Celtic dream-kingdom of tartan and white heather into which Scottish identity retreated after the defeat of Culloden, and which still provides a land-escape for the fantasies of industrialised Europe and America. It is this tartan dreamland that the Scottish Nationalist Party so successfully pursued in the late 1960s.

Secondly there is the everyday story of quaint Scottish folk who, lacking power and living apparently backward and insular lives, nevertheless outwit their enemies, who are

often powerful foreigners, by Scottish guile and canniness. This is the Scotland portrayed in the Ealing comedies of the 1950s, in television series such as *Dr Finlay's Casebook*, and, by all accounts in Bill Forsyth's latest film *Local Hero*, starring Burt Lancaster as the foreigner. These quaint stories of the cabbage-patch support a view that Scotland is outside of, or above, the politics of over-developed cultures such as England and America and therefore need not engage with them.

Thirdly, there is what could be described as 'Clydesidism' — the significance given to the Scottish male worker of the industrial belt, particularly in ship-building, steel, heavy engineering and mining. The images in films such as *Seawards the Great Ships* and *The Brave Don't Cry* are of men battling with gigantic plates of steel or with dangerous natural forces. Today the dominant representations of working class politics are still in terms of toughness, mass action and confrontation — including rivalries between crafts — though the settings are now smoke-filled rooms or mass rallies and demonstrations. This not only marginalises some of the more sophisticated politics of shipyard militancy but entirely excludes from 'politics' other forms of action taken by, for example, crofters, Asian workers and women.

The film and television programmes which have constructed Scotland in these ways have mainly come from production

centres abroad or were made in Scotland with American or English capital. The present television broadcasting institutions are structured in such a way as to perpetuate this vision-from-a-distance. BBC Scotland is controlled from London; Scottish Television is concerned mainly with making a profit, which means selling its product to a market outside the region it serves; Channel Four is London-based so that its brave ventures into Scotland must put considerable strain on the time and energy of its personnel, and Breakfast Television will soon be exporting to Scotland its London version of porridge. In Wales, the battle for the provision of the Welsh-language channel S4C has demonstrated a recognition of the importance of television for cultural identity, and though the institutions and their particular political effects will vary in regions north, east and west of Watford, the problem of being defined from somewhere else is one of the main cultural features that the regions and sub-nations genuinely share. What is absent but clearly needed is a structure for starting discussion on the relation of communication and cultural forms to issues of national or regional identities, and for generating the production of images and stories which speak from the position of those in a

peripheral relationship to the core culture. Such discussion and production would address the enervating sense of inferiority which other regions have in relation to London and the South-East, aiming to replace it with a notion of cultural variety in which each variety has equal status. Only in such a climate would any kind of self-determining federalism survive.

Although there is no feeling in the Hunt Report that providing for an articulation of local identity was the main objective in recommending the introduction of cable television — indeed it is difficult to find in the report any reference to cultural implications — there is 'the presumption' that the cable operator should accept responsibility for ensuring and financially assisting some community participation in cable programmes and 'the hope' that cable systems' relationship with and contribution to their local communities might become a source of mutual pride. Cynics will not be surprised to find that even a cursory glance at the structures within which it is proposed that cable should operate make such presumptions and hopes seem unreasonable.

Cable franchisees will only be asked to *encourage* local involvement, and since finances will be shaky they are unlikely to

provide more than minimal resources for local production, on a ghetto channel. Once a local access cable channel has been provided there will be no incentive for the major channels to cover local issues at all. So on the channels that most people are watching most of the time there will be even less regional variety than there is now. The logic of this would be eventually to drop regional production centres, such as BBC Scotland, altogether.

There is to be no quota system for cable limiting the amount of material produced outside Britain, or requiring even a minimal amount of programming to have been originated in Britain, let alone in different regions of Britain. Under that kind of pressure the BBC and ITV companies are going to lobby hard to be released from their quota restrictions. So cable, heralded as a local service, may actually be the first step in a take-over of British communications by American production.

But it is almost as easy and conventional to sketch in a scenario for pessimism such as the above as to expect that cable will of its nature promote a sense of regional identity. The challenge is to produce strategies of optimism, and, while recognising the limiting structures within which cable will have


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to operate, to identify and use the spaces that it will nevertheless open up. This election year provides us with an opportunity which should not be missed to campaign not just for communications policies that will do the least damage to British industry, but for a structure that could provide for integrated production, exhibition and education on a local basis.

Envisage a brave new network of regional film and video workshops co-funded by the local cable station, by a levy on the national television companies, and by regional arts and/or community development/local government finance. This would be a space in which production skills could be learned and supported, where productions from the region and other regions could be exhibited and discussed and where a number of formal and informal educational activities could take place. It would also provide a focus for looking at the local commercial communications provision and bringing pressure to bear not only on their output but also on their recruitment and employment policies. It would be a site for the meeting of different local groups: feminists and industrial workers could even begin to develop the terms in which they could discuss the politics of representation. The products of such a workshop would not, could not, present the local community as some cosy unity or caricature it for for the entertainment of audiences in London or America. The product of such a workshop would not have to be confined to the ghetto channel, but could expect to have outlets into the channels most people watch most of the time.

This vision is not just a Utopia devoutly to be wished: elements of it already exist. There are shops throughout Britain (though not in Scotland) which are funded variously by the British Film Institute, Regional Arts Associations, the Greater London Council and Channel Four. The broadcasting union, ACTT, supports such a cultural policy through its Workshops Agreement which make it possible to broadcast some material produced in this way. The whole structure, which is at least as feasible economically as the government's pye-in-the-sky proposals for the development of satellite and cable, could very quickly become a reality if enough pressure were brought to bear through parliament, local government, the unions, lobbies of the relevant institutions and a press campaign. The pressures for such a structure have come from educational workers, community workers, arts workers and film makers — but not so far from socialists.



Local Hero directed by Bill Forsyth