

# The Guardian

## Adam Curtis and Vice director Adam McKay on how Dick Cheney masterminded a rightwing revolution

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Adam McKay's *Vice* is a screwball biopic of Dick Cheney, the man widely reckoned to be the most powerful vice-president in US history. It traces his rise from beer-brained dropout to an intern during the Nixon administration, then covers his tenure as secretary of defense during the Gulf war, and his time as George W Bush's official deputy from 2001-2009.

McKay, after establishing his career with comedies such as *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* and *Step Brothers*, moved into freewheeling, lightly fictionalised accounts of real-life events. His previous film was the financial-crash comedy The Big Short.

McKay's kaleidoscopic approach – the narrative chopped up, and peppered with asides and data breaks – recalls the larky yet hard-hitting style of the British journalist and film-maker Adam Curtis, the person behind films such as *The Power of Nightmares* and *Bitter Lake*.

The two men also share an interest in unpicking political narratives and in examining how the structure of society can be insidiously shifted by individuals – and, of course, they share a first name. So, we asked them to sit down together for a cup of tea with Paul MacInnes at the Soho hotel in London.

They began by discussing *Vice*'s key sequences, set in the late 1970s, when Cheney (Christian Bale) and Donald Rumsfeld (Steve Carell) orchestrated a rightwing stealth-revolution that ushered in a sustained era of Republican power and idealism.

Adam Curtis: It was a moment.

Adam McKay: I thought that moment was everything. The oligarchs and the corporations were mobilised through [conservative and libertarian thinktanks] the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute. This idea of Ronald Reagan saying: "If you lean towards government, you are weak ... true individuals don't need government. And, oh, by the way, tax breaks for billionaires." Really, we're still living in that change.

AC: The very interesting question is why the opposition let it happen. They bought into individualism. I think the left gave up on mass politics and power sometime in the early 70s, and went for a much more individualistic way of being radical, through art and self-expression. It became a nice way of being. But what you chart in Vice is a ruthless power grab. The really

interesting thing about our time is that no one talks about power. The left don't talk about it; the liberals don't talk about it.

AM: The entire reason I made the movie was because of what you just said. Nobody talks about power any more. Honest to God. There was the whole movement of taking power that we just ignored.

AC: We didn't see it.

AM: And the Democrats just rolled over. They betrayed the unions, and really started to believe in this idea of free trade, markets, banks and a load of gibberish.

AC: I think you're spot on. It's the fundamental problem of why the left and liberals can't find a way of challenging what's rising up now. They gave in, and have given up talking about power. I think that's because power is quite frightening.

AM: It's delicious.

AC: Suddenly, you realise that you can make the world the way you want it to be. I think what you show Cheney beginning to realise is: if I get this, I can do anything.

AM: Information warfare is where we're living now. More specifically, it's story warfare. There's this battle in the US where our oligarchs are claiming they are the Joseph Campbell heroes. That they're the ones who are going through the three-act structure of going into the unknown. Charles Koch is taking on the world. There's this weird thing going on where these traditional story structures really play bogus now.

AC: That's because they have been appropriated by those people who really do have power. But that's also because politicians have given up telling stories. They have nothing to say any longer.

AM: Nothing!

AC: They've become managers.

AM: I met with some of these Democratic leaders, and they talk about polling and market testing like they're bad network executives. I have to tell them: the second you do that, you're dead. That's why the Democratic party is not tackling global warming – because it polls terribly. And why wouldn't it? It's about the end of human life.

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AC: That's because they present it as a doom-laden dystopia, and not an opportunity to do something to change the world in an extraordinary way.

AM: The Green New Deal is exciting.

AC: Exactly. Because that allows you to combine it with attacking austerity and the badness of the present day, and saying we can produce a better world, for now and for the future. But global warming is not presented as an opportunity to change the planet in an extraordinary and better way, is it? It's a dark force that we're being sucked into, and can do nothing about. The

politicians and the thinktankers, say: “Oh my God! It’s all going to die.” My theory is that they’re late baby boomers projecting their own fear of mortality on to the planet. They’re trapping us in the depressed mind of a dying hippy. That’s my theory.

AM: So what’s in the movie you’re working on?

AC: Its working title is What Is It That Is Coming? At the moment, I’m on the seventh episode; I think there are going to be nine episodes.

AM: I can’t wait.

AC: I don’t know. Yesterday was not very good.

AM: I’ve been in those spots as well. A few times on this movie, we had that. I needed a “What the hell are you making?” friend. We had some screenings early on where audiences were aghast, and I was like: “Hey, we’re just starting off ... relax. It’s a process!”

AC: Were they aghast because they couldn’t understand the narrative or because they thought you were going too far?

AM: They were aghast because the narrative was tough, and a lot of it was upsetting. People get very nervous, you know.

AC: I don’t show my stuff publicly like that. I show it to my executives. I just think it’s incredibly risky to show stuff early on when you’re trying to combine, say, two or three different narratives together to make a bigger point. It’s so easy to get it wrong. Because you can see it in your brain, but they don’t know your brain.

AM: You’re naked. You’re really naked. It’s like you’re going out to dinner and, before your date has arrived, you’ve opened up the door of the bathroom, and you’re completely naked and still combing your hair. That’s really what you’re doing, and it’s almost always disastrous, but I find the pain very helpful. I can take the punch in the mouth. It just keeps us honest.

AC: What I find is that, increasingly, audiences are happy if you make big jumps. They don’t mind that at all, whereas five years ago, say, they would have been more wary. You did it in this film. You made this big jump in time and in subject area.

AM: They love it. It’s got an energy.

AC: I think it’s because they spend their time online nowadays, making jumps.

AM: I couldn’t agree more. On this movie, at a point early on, we go with Cheney to his mother-in-law’s funeral, and then we jump to him later as Dick Cheney in the modern era ordering the extraordinary rendition of a cleric. It was a 25-year time leap and the audience was, exactly like you were saying, thrilled by it. They loved the adjustment they had to make.

AC: Yes. And they also feel quite flattered that you’re saying to them: “OK, catch up.” Rather than: “I’m patronising you.” They work at it and they like it. Like being a collaborator with you.

AM: I’ve been trying to work on a utopian movie.

AC: That would be good.

AM: The idea is that nine people from our time are frozen in some accident and come back 200 years from now. And they've solved everything. You come out, and all the architecture has plants growing through it. There's moss on the walls because it insulates, and they're using light to remove trauma from people. People are just wonderful. They are playing stringed instruments, meditating and exploring space – and your plumber can paint like Picasso. And our souls are just opening up. But I want the whole movie to be done from a paranoid point of view. That the nine people are like ...

AC: "... there must be something wrong ..."

AM: "... don't you get what they're doing to us?"

AC: "There must be a conspiracy somewhere!" Have you noticed that everyone believes in conspiracy theories nowadays? I mean everyone. I wonder if it is not just a defence mechanism against actually doing something to change the world for the better.

AM: I think so. It's more fun to pretend, and people love to think that they have the answer that no one else does. I have a relative who, I just found out, believes that the Sandy Hook shooting in the US was made up. I'm like: "Oh my God. I don't know if I can be in a room with him." But then we started talking about why you would ever believe this. And I think the idea is: "*I know, I know.*"

AC: It's an empowerment thing, I think. It goes back to politicians not telling you stories any longer. If they don't tell you stories any longer, you're left in this dark world by yourself where all these frightening things come rushing in.

AM: We've been in a war of storytelling and mythology, and we have been slaughtered.

AC: I think there is a great capacity among those on the left to tell good stories, but that they're frightened of doing it. The reason is because, they say, the last time you told powerful stories you got Hitler and you got Stalin. The left has always been frightened by what they call populism.

AM: I love that point – that the left is afraid of the power of power. Of powerful stories, of mythologies.

AC: But you can see why it is, because this is what happened the last time you released the power of the mob, the really big crowd. There was a really interesting thing in the 1950s, after the second world war; the Americans did an exhibition called the Family of Man, which was a collection of photographic portraits of people from all over the world. It was a complete sensation. It was funded by the State Department, not as a great conspiracy, but because of this idea that what you have to show people now is that we're just a world of individuals. Because what Hitler and Stalin had done was show us as mass crowds – and that went badly out of control and led to horror.

I think that went very deep into the liberal psyche, that the mob is frightening. It's dangerous. And that's why, when we get to this point – where someone like Cheney and the anti-democratic

forces around him have taken power away. To challenge that, you're going to have to bring people together with a very powerful story. But that's frightening – potentially dangerous. So the left retreat into that mantra which you find everywhere online, that we are all self-contained individuals who all have our own little story. And we're all going to tell each other those personal stories on Instagram and Twitter, and it's going to be a nice, stable balance. Well, it's too late for that now. The have-nots are fed up with that system – and are turning to powerful nationalist stories coming from the far right. But unless the left comes up with its own dramatic narratives, which offer an equally powerful vision of a better future, the right are going to win. And in a much bigger way than they've won so far.