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### **BAFTA Annual Television Lecture**

Oh ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much. I don't know what source John uses. It was a temporary blip. I have 370,000 more followers than Sarah Brown as of this morning but I wish her well. My lords, ladies, honoured guests, dears and darlings, it's an extraordinary honour to be asked to deliver this BAFTA lecture. Honours of course are responsibilities. They can be poisoned chalices, they can be vulnerable hostages to a malicious fortune. After all, there is really no greater honour on earth than being asked to keep goal for England.

There is as far as I know no profession in this country that likes to talk about itself more than broadcasting. Over the past few years I've been asked if I might consider contributing to talks, lectures, speeches, panels and other debates, disquisitions, discourses, diatribes and discussions all over the country. There is the Dimpleby lecture of course, the MacTaggart in Edinburgh, the RTS, the Royal Television Society, the BAFTA. There are lectures in colleges as part of conferences, in-house and out of house. Themes I've had put to me include programming in the digital age, the future of public service broadcasting, the commercial sector and its challenges, indies and their enemies, comedy in the world of compliance, TV and social networking. The list goes on and on. The film industry doesn't do anything like this on such a scale. Nor does the music industry or the publishing industry so far as I'm aware. Maybe it's because talking is what people in television do best. Maybe it's because television is uniquely in a state of crisis, transition, change and revolution, or perhaps it's something to do with the desperate sense that broadcasters have that they need to justify and explain themselves all the time. Your guess is probably much better than mine as to the reason.

I am fully and furiously and timorously aware that over the course of the next forty minutes or so I might say a thousand harmless, possibly even true, things and yet make one hasty or ill-considered remark and it will dog me for weeks to come for I am to talk about television, and if there is one thing that the newspapers of this country like to pounce upon, it is any breath of criticism directed from an insider at broadcasting networks and their executives. It's one of the media's favourite indoor sports. Imagine for example that I were to heap praise on the hierarchy of the BBC for forty minutes but devote just one quarter of one minute to questioning – oh I don't know – Junior Apprentice for example, a programme I have never incidentally seen so don't expect me actually to remark on it. It's like Krygyzstan. I know it

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exists but the chances of me ever spending any time there are very remote. For all I know however, Junior Apprentice sets new standards in intelligent superbly conceived and brilliantly executed public service broadcasting. The point is that were I to give just one sideways swipe at it, my earlier forty minutes of praise would be ignored. “In a withering attack on the BBC and its management, Stephen Fry unleashed a devastating criticism of reality programming”, or “At BAFTA last night Fry launched a personal attack on director general Mark Thompson that had an amazed audience of industry insiders reeling in their designer seats”, etc etc. You get the picture. No matter how circumspect I intend to be, that will happen. I suppose I could deliver a lecture so bland, so complimentary, so suffused with love, admiration and optimism that even a cultural journalist would be unable to read licence fee scepticism or compliance doubt into it but I haven’t been asked here to be bland and I would be failing in what I suppose I might pompously call my duty if I were not at least to attempt to address the issues of today in relation to television as I see them but first I have some interests to declare.

You will have to judge how much I am either a sycophantic supplicant, toadying to the executives who put bread in my mouth, or how much I am a suicidal idiot dumb enough to bite the hands that feed me. Much of my life is spent working for broadcasting companies, for networks as Americans call them. I am lucky enough to be employed by the BBC and by ITV as a freelance actor, presenter, documentary maker and other such figures. Some programmes I’m involved with are directly commissioned and made by the broadcasters in-house. Others are pitched and produced by independent companies and on that head I must declare another interest. I am in the independent production business myself. With my partner Gina Carter I founded some years ago a small company called Sprout Pictures and a little while later 25% of it was bought by BBC Worldwide with whom we therefore have a kind of loose affiliation including a First Look distribution deal. All this is public domain and very boring for anyone but some might be interested, and you must take whatever comments I have to make in the light of that information. I think it only right for me to background it before I begin. On top of that I have interests in various start-ups, digital on-line start-ups, that might be considered in direct competition to the existing broadcasting structures and – how I hate the phrase – business models. So you might think I have reason on the one hand to placate and sweeten the executives in the traditional television companies, and reason on the other to undermine and weaken their very foundations. But I have to declare an even greater interest, one that I hope you believe will override any petty business or professional interests I might be said to have as an actor or a writer or a producer or minor entrepreneur. I have to declare that I love television. I love Britain. I’m a patriot, not a

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nationalist but a patriot. I think Clemenceau was asked when he accused someone of being not a patriot but a nationalist, what the difference was. He said a patriot loves a country, a nationalist hates everyone else's. I am certainly not a blind my country right or wrong type of person. Because I love Britain, like most Britons I get desperately upset at her failings: when it goes wrong, when it gets it totally totally wrong, when it's shoddy, when it's inefficient, incompetent, rude, vulgar, embarrassing, when it slips into national torpor or boils into bouts of embarrassing national fever. I can moan about health and safety gone mad and leaves on the line, rail networks and crap service and crap weather and crap sporting achievements and crap politicians and crap newspapers and crap attitude. I can do all that. In fact it's the defining signature quality of my Britishness to talk like that, to complain and to self-castigate but does it mean that I don't love this damned country? Does it mean that I don't get weepy when I think of its history, its people, its countryside, its richness, its plurality, the cultural and artistic energy, the good humour, tolerance, the ability to evolve for good, achingly slow as that ability might be? Does it mean that I don't as it were stand to attention when I think of the sacrifice of our military, the selfless good of so many working in hospitals and schools and rescue services and the million acts of unremembered kindness, decency and good fellowship practised every day by unsung heroes and heroines in every walk of life? Of course it doesn't mean that I don't love and respect that. One carps and one criticises because one loves.

So we have first and foremost to grow up and recognise that to be human and to be adult means constantly to be in the grip of opposing emotions, to have daily to reconcile apparently conflicting tensions. I want this, but need that. I cherish this, but I adore its opposite too. I'm maddened by this institution yet I prize it above all others. I hope it's abundantly clear to all of us that only a mad man would question the patriotism of someone who criticises their own country, often in the most damning terms. So let it be with television. I love television in this country. I love the range and richness of the programming. I love its ambition, its scope, its innovation. I love the tradition, the technological innovation, the gossip, the corporate drama on the inside, the reach and influence on the outside. I admire the talent and the commitment of so many working in the field. I love everything about what television has been, what it still is and what it might yet be. If I criticise anything about it, I hope you will be able to see that I do so as with nationhood, from the point of view of love not enmity.

I grew up in what seems now to me and to most cultural and broadcast historians to have been a golden age in television. Hugh Carleton-Green and Lord Hill ruled the BBC in what

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appeared to be a long Edwardian summer of prosperity, innovation, experiment and success. ITV also produced a golden age of those ITC adventure dramas from the Avengers to the Professionals by way of the Champions, the Persuaders, the Protectors, the Prisoner, the Baron, the Adventurer, the Man in a Suitcase, a dozen others. When I was seven, Dr Who started. In the next ten years the great classics of serious and groundbreaking contemporary drama poured forth from Ken Loach, David Mercer, Mike Leigh, Dennis Potter and all those pioneering Wednesday play and play for today Alans, Alan Pryor, Alan Clarke, Alan Plater, Alan Bennett. More mainstream drama like Coronation Street, Upstairs Downstairs, Z Cars, Colditz streamed out to us too. The great classics of comedy and entertainment from Monty Python, Dad's Army, Rising Damp, Benny Hill, Morecambe and Wise, Tommy Cooper, the Two Ronnies, Reggie Perrin, the Stanley Baxter Picture Show, the Generation Game, It's a Knockout, Top of the Pops, Parkinson, Cilla, Lulu, Val Doonican. Those genre-defining documentaries, Civilisation, the Ascent of Man, Ways of Seeing, the Shock of the New, Alistair Cooke's America and the continuing innovative rise of the Bristol Natural History Unit and the work of David Attenborough, and that Anglia Aubrey Buxton's Survival team. And the golden age of children's TV from Anna Home and others, Blue Peter, Multi-Coloured Swap Shop, The Clangers, Bagpuss, Mr Benn, Playschool, Rent-a-Ghost, the Magic Roundabout, Jackanory, Magpie, Catweazel, How. In politic and current affairs and arts there was Monitor, Panorama, World in Action, Omnibus, the South Bank Show.

It's fun to list all these programmes but is it perhaps pointless? This was then. But this is now. Those programmes meant everything to me because of the age I was perhaps, and because television was inventing itself in front of my very eyes. The twenty-three and twenty-four million plus who tuned into Eric and Ernie's Christmas shows can never be assembled together to watch a television programme again. Maybe if England makes it to the finals of the World Cup, something close can be achieved but television as the nation's fireplace, the hearth and the heart of the country, the focus of our communal cultural identity, that television is surely dead. It seems unlikely ever to return. Instead of being the nation's fireplace, TV is closer to being the nation's central heating. It's conveniently on in every room, it's less discernible, less of a focus, more of an ambient atmosphere.

In the 1980s as I achieved adulthood, the nation achieved Thatcherism and deregulation. The whole business of analysing television's entrails and reporting on them began. The Annan report was succeeded by the Peacock report and dozens of others. Charter renewal for the BBC became a regular game. Channel 4 arrived, and then 5. ITV's local networks

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were refranchised and the old stations from Thames to Tyne Tees, from Harlech to Southern, from ATV to Anglia, from Westward to Grampian, all began to disappear or gobble each other up. The independent production company was born, Zenith, Hat Trick, Mentorn, Talkback and the rest. Aside from these enforced changes in structure and corporate governance, Thatcherism had seen the first concerted political opposition, ideological opposition to the way the BBC in particular was seen to run itself and to behave. The administration was perhaps getting its revenge on the BBC for its perceived participation in, and promulgation of, the poisonous ethos of the 1960s. Liberalism, permissive media encroachments on decency, disrespectful satire, outright socialistic dramas and documentaries were all cited as proof of the BBC's undemocratic doctrinaire partiality. The trick was conceived in which the BBC could be blamed for being at one and the same time old-fashioned, stuck in the mud, reactionary, elitist, hidebound, de haut en bas, patriarchal, top/down, patronising and simultaneously left-wing, trendy, bien pensant and unpatriotic, because radical now meant right-wing. Modern and progressive meant consumer-led and market-oriented. The Tebbits and the Thatchers of this world were not about to allow intellectuals, artists, liberals and Oxbridge nomenclatura of decadent self-appointed cultural apparatchiks to decide what was good for the public. The nanny state was bad enough in their eyes but the schoolmaster state, the don state was even worse.

And aside from this ideological antipathy and perhaps driving it, a commercial opposition to the existing order of things appeared too. Sky TV and BSB started fitting satellite dishes and squarials to our roofs and for the first time the BBC had not just a political enemy but a business one. That major business enemy also controlled a large newspaper empire and, perhaps not so surprisingly, those newspapers began issuing regular and unrelenting attacks on the BBC. Other press empires bought interests in broadcast media too and full but undeclared war commenced. Well, it was a one-way enmity for the print media were allowed to hate and taunt and revile the BBC but not the other way round. The licence fee and the charter and the way they were managed to give advantages to the BBC that supposedly guaranteed freedom, independence and duties of impartiality but now those very qualities became sticks with which to beat them. Everyone pays a licence fee, the press said, therefore the BBC is ours and everything it does belongs to us. We own it, we have a right to make the executives travel coach class, to quibble every cup of coffee, every penny spent, all in the name of public probity, all in the cause of transparency, openness, good governance and clean citizenship. They are public servants, so we will treat them rather as Flashman treats servants, with disdain, contempt, snobbery and a mean rudeness bordering on the pathologically cruel, and every time we flog them and kick them, they will grin and

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they will say thank you sir, may I have another? Well, perhaps I exaggerate for effect. The BBC has itself for the last fifteen years gone out of its way to ingratiate itself to the public with endless and unbelievably wearisome and embarrassing It's Your BBC Road Shows and discussions, forcing successive directors-general to sit and debate with mad vexatious unhappy people who want to criticise Fiona Bruce's use of blusher or express their indignation at some incidence of the use of the word tits, or even the sight of that said material. The BBC opens up endless Have a Say sections on its websites, and solicits opinion and feedback at every turn. Whether they think listening to the kind of people who actually write in or leave messages to Points of View constitutes good practise, or whether it's a sop that they privately laugh up their sleeves at, I cannot tell. I wouldn't presume personally to advise the army how to run their brigades or to order their equipment. I don't tell policemen how to run a murder inquiry or how to patrol a football match, nor would I interfere in the running and equipping of a national health service surgical theatre. I may pay for the army, the police and the health service or contribute towards it but while accountability, openness and public debates in strategy and outcome are all obviously reasonable and indeed requisite parts of democracy, the rest – the interference, the claimed ownership – is just an intolerable intrusion into the jobs of professionals. Sixty percent of people who phoned in about this programme disliked it. Yes, but 100% of people who have nothing better to do than telephone a TV station at night are by definition desperately in need of help. 564 people, I read this just as I was about to come on stage, 564 people rang the BBC to complain about vuvuzelas. What did they think they were doing! Did they imagine the BBC could go into the stadium and wrench them from the lips of the audience? Did they imagine there was some technical way they could stop the sound being heard? Unbe-arsing-lievable! And these are the people about whom executives have to sweat.

However, back to the BBC's struggles with government and indeed its own public image. Management, staffing, programming were starting in the 80s radically re-organised in the teeth of this criticism, or the fear of potential criticism. And the enforced rule of course came in that 25% of the corporation's programming be sourced from the independent sector. Birtian ways with Muse and Producer's Choice, outsourcing and downsizing and regionalising and rejigging continued apace. Charter renewal campaigns and the public image of the BBC were not helped during this period right up to the present day for the next twenty years, as the corporation lurched from crisis to crisis. There was the Iraq-gate Kelly scandal, Queensgate, the Ross Brand scandal, expenses, perceived excesses, lapses and errors. At ITV and Channel 4 things were hardly better. Crazy management buy-outs, the one billion pound failure of ITV Digital, funding crises, revenue stream dry-ups, the death of

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any serious arts or documentary programming, phone line scandals and all kinds of other misfortunes have befallen them. The picture elsewhere has been undeniably rosier. BSkyB seems to go from strength to strength. Those who criticised Sky TV for being merely a buyer-in of American programmes are beginning to have to recognise that the network is now a major producer in its own right. Sky Arts has two channels, both also available in HD. They have wrenched, yes, plenty of sporting occasions from the free to air terrestrials but no one can deny that they have along the way revolutionised the quality of sporting commentary, technical representation, analysis and depth of coverage. They continue to drive innovation with the current move to 3D. The analog switch-off and the continued switch to Freeview, Virgin or BSkyB will only bring more and more people to alternative channels. The Natural History Unit in Bristol, so long a pioneer and uniquely classy outfit in its field, is finding that Discovery and National Geographic are slowly learning how to make proper natural history television, and that these channels know much more about how to sell worldwide and into the digital systems that are proliferating in every other territory in the world. All of which means less and less advertising money all round, less and less reach, less and less prestige which was the one quality that British television prided itself on, authority, kudos, class, quality, excellence, gravitas, prestige and whither have they fled? Add to this the growing emergency of Hulu, and Boxee, YouTube, Vimeo, not as sources of funny clips but both Youtube and Vimeo are major providers of serious funded channels, channels that produce content. Add to that the encroachment of Google and others into demand internet TV services and it can be seen that the very notion of a national broadcasting ecosystem seems very difficult to maintain, justify or believe in.

Is television as we know it, in its old business model, in terminal decline? Well the big news I have for you is that I have absolutely no idea. It's possible to argue that there is no future for the BBC or ITV or Channel 4 or 5 or any broadcasting network that tries to make television at the national parochial level. Hamstrung by remits to cater to domestic interest, what chance is there that the BBC or ITV or Channel 4 can ever compete internationally? Sport, American drama, movies and comedy will proliferate with occasional internationally-owned reality franchises continuing to slot into prime time. There is every reason to believe in companies that distribute, sell and broadcast television using subscription and the new advertising models but there is scant reason to believe in old-fashioned broadcasters, for the fact is I am not a writer nor a director nor an actor nor a producer nor a presenter, nor any of the things that John introduced me as. These names no longer have meaning. I am a content-provider. It is now many years since we were told in roaring accents from the masthead of every trade magazine that content was king. We were assured that pipelines,

conduits, channels, gateways and portals were all very well but that they were meaningless without content to funnel and distribute. Hard to argue with that. The BBC and ITV are still commissioners of, and producers of, a simply gigantic torrent of content. Hundreds and thousands and hundreds of thousands of hours of television are required every year and still will be, whatever outlets and means of distribution are dreamt up by technologists and cunning corporate clever-clogses.

Now to achieve such a volume of production with any quality, variety, originality and confidence does not require good business executives. It does not require entrepreneurs. It does not require people who can say business model seventeen times in one meeting without blushing. It does not require people who can call writers and producers content-providers without wanting to shoot themselves in writing embarrassment. It does not require people who have gone on courses or people who can tick compliance boxes and fill in risk assessment forms. It doesn't require people with degrees in media studies or people who know how to multi-task or attend conferences or give lectures. It does not require people who either give a toss about what's gone before or people who are ignorant of what's gone before. It does not require people who are afraid. It requires a confident producer class, and that calls for people of real creative talent, intelligence, courage, resource and imagination, for my fear is that almost everyone I have encountered in production in the making of programmes is afraid. They have much to be afraid of, and much to cage, confine, cripple and constrain them. Fear is everywhere in the television business in this country. When you are afraid, it is a great deal easier to say no than to say yes. I ought to add, I must add that personally I have met with nothing but courtesy, kindness, consideration and enthusiasm in the corridors of all the major broadcasting companies. I'm not suggesting that I have cause to moan, far from it. I'm extremely lucky, very pleased and proud to have been able to make television programmes with the support and guidance of superb professionals but I do have an idea that may help free the creative talent of producers, writers, directors and others.

It may not be an original idea. For all I know it has been floated and shot down in the past. I do know that some of my colleagues in the independent sector may think I am mad and suicidal to suggest it. I speak for no one here but myself as I raise this balloon. In order to explain the suggestion, I ought perhaps to go over what can only be called the business models currently pertaining in the market place, in television today, vis a vis independents. Let us suppose you are an independent production company and you have an idea for a new drama series. You take it to a broadcaster, BBC or ITV say, according to how much

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heft you might have with that company a senior or middling executive commissioner, head of a department. If they like your idea they pay you what is confusingly called a licence fee for which they get the right to broadcast your series on their channel a set number of times. This fee barely covers the costs of production but as an independent, you can make more money because you keep all the worldwide rights. In other words you can sell your series around the globe and the original domestic broadcaster, the BBC or the ITV, doesn't get a penny from those international sales. That is the standard independent model and has been for many years, and I'm sure many in this room are all too familiar with it.

Well I cannot be the first I suspect to notice an inbuilt problem with that. The BBC, and to some extent also ITV and Channel 4, will only commission content which is domestically skewed, that speaks to remits of nationhood, British interest, British cultural and often extremely regional social concerns. That's fine with many programmes. Why would Germany or Peru want to buy *Watchdog* for example, or the almost certainly excellent *Junior Apprentice*, when they can buy or more likely steal the format for themselves and make their own version? But this current model means that the broadcasters, the BBC and the ITV, have no stake in making films, dramas, documentaries or features of international appeal while at the same time the independents who depend upon them have a stake in little else. The result is dramas and documentaries that have one foot planted in resolutely British soil with the other wobbling and hopping and pointing its toes hopefully in the direction of the world. The result is indies that are just one commission away from insolvency. The result is a feeding frenzy for format over content. We've all seen or read about the financial rewards that successful reality and talent shows can offer so independents are chasing each other's tails madly in a desire to come up with these formats, these empty shells, in the hope ideally that some larger independent company will buy them for millions and they can then be saved from the difficult delicate and unrewarding business of actual production and making of original programming.

Surely all this talent on the production and technical side, all this talent in acting and writing, all this talent in other words for content provision isn't to be set aside, put to grass, ignored because content it turns out isn't king after all but rather format is. So my suggestion – and it may be that my independent production friends will want to burn me at the stake for even hinting that such a thing might be desirable – is that broadcasters, the networks, take a share in foreign sales. In return for that, they offer larger licence fees and naturally accept stories, ideas and – yes if it must be – formats that have wider appeal, greater scope, range, ambition and heft. Many independents are hanging on by their fingernails and have to take

nugatory licence fees just to pay for office rental and the intern's Oyster card. Surely we can do better than that. Surely we can incentivise both the broadcaster and the independent to think bigger, better, richer, and more internationally. Surely the commercial sector in particular can only benefit from another source aside from advertising being added to their revenue stream. It would take negotiation between PACT for the producers, and representatives of the independents and of the networks and of government who may need to relax remits in order to allow this. It may be that this new model will only be allowed for ITV, Sky, UK TV and Channels 4 and 5 etc, and that the BBC will be forced to stick to domestic emphasis and be excluded from such a new model. It may be that the super indies, the big raptors that are a part of other companies that are themselves a part of other companies that are owned by the biggest media conglomerates in the world, will try and swoop in and take over the negotiations, drowning out the plaintive chirrups from the true little indie nests. It may be of course that I am talking nonsense, that I don't understand business or broadcasting or anything else. It seems to make sense to me and I cannot believe I'm the first person to have thought of it. I suspect it would help ITV more than it would help the BBC, for anything that potentially adds another source of revenue must seem desirable to that strapped institution. But what I fear is that without such a restructuring, British television will lose greatly, that any hope there is for real programming, for originality and greatness beyond the domestic sphere will dwindle and die, and any hope we have that greatness can exist only in the domestic sphere is hopeless when a large drama audience is considered to be three million. That is just not possible.

Well my proposal is a modest one and perhaps a forlorn and a foolish one. I don't pretend to be a businessman. Spreadsheets and Powerpoint presentations make me want to scream, gouge out my eyes and stab my ears. I have never been able to read a profit and loss account or a balance sheet, and I go swimmy and feel sick if I have to read a legal document because on the whole I'd rather watch television. Thank you!