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# Opinion: Bazalgette is welcome at the Arts Council

The man who debased British TV now holds the public arts purse - a crazy choice? Not necessarily

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Wednesday, 5 September 2012

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Ashleigh Hughes in the 2012 Big Brother chair: its creator will face sterner questions

So the chairman of *Big Brother* TV becomes chairman of the Arts Council. Is it good or bad that Sir Peter Bazalgette will now hold the purse-strings for our publicly supported arts, the most debated, the most fragile, the most ephemeral elements of our national cultural consciousness, the most opposite of the time-wasting that is reality TV?

Bazalgette is descended from the Victorian Bazalgette who built London's sewers, and he has attracted verbal ordure for years for his development at Endemol TV of the reality shows about the petty minutiae of life (cooking, gardening, eating - heavens - even sleeping) whose rowdy proliferation has ruined the larger play of imagination through the nation's largest art form (hah!). How can we have faith that such a person is fit to handle the shredding fabric of our state-supported arts?

Well, did the government care that much? I reckon Bazalgette got the job on the word "big". This government loves "big" (or as PR queen Siobhan of the BBC satire-on-reality-TV *Twenty Twelve* has it: "Biggedy-biggedy-big.") Who better to sort The Big Society's big culture issues than the big daddy of *Big Brother*?

In fact, I find myself thinking that this

“Who better to sort *The Big Society's* big culture issues than the big daddy of *Big Brother*?”

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“ This appointment is heartstopping, but not all in a bad way ”

appointment is heartstopping, but not all in a bad way. I come from the more rarefied classical lyric arts, music and dance, areas that more than most need careful, attentive nurturing and quiet, detailed understanding.

However, in the past few years there have been seismic changes that it would be even more dangerous to ignore - that aren't simply about economic cuts, but about a very rapid shift of general approach to arts in the public, a very urgent matter.

Last year's cuts in public arts support exposed a wide incomprehension about the value of arts, at large and among their own leaders. People scabbled for economic justifications as a final attempt to speak a common language. It was telling that they'd lost the ability to communicate with the public.

A time-shift has happened. In generations born before 1960, much was taken for granted in a general cultural level. Arts that catered for them were founded on a recognition of the **Brontës** and **Beethoven**, cowboy Westerns and weekly library visits, or the BBC as an essentially educational and free broadcaster. Film industries, dance, theatre and music stagings, the burgeoning TV, leapfrogged on classic books, the institutions built on time-honoured values dating back to the 19th century.

However, now it's post-Sixties generations who are taking up the country's leading roles - people brought up in a new era when the technological explosion dominated attention, "now" vigorously shouldered aside "then" and a ton of new questions rattled educational traditions. No sooner had pop music and TV remaindered their parents' and grandparents' cultural references than the internet shattered the chunks into a million differences, formed an entirely new concept of rights of access to pictures, words, sounds, ideas, activities, values. The arts bureaucracy that grew up around it retreated into baffling jargonese, more and more alienating the consumer and the artist.

It's time to stand well back from this pixillated picture of infinite differences and rights so that a broader vision can be assembled. This calls for a definite adjustment in public valuation of culture, and where "arts" sit in it, *vis-à-vis* media and sport. (The DCMS's title bypasses the problem word. "Culture" is its evasive name, reflecting the unsureness we all feel now about "arts".)

Into this uncertainty steps a man who if he knows anything it is that TV and the internet are irresistible forces for good and bad in the spread of information, knowledge, ideas, indiscretion, corruption. Below, he explains his approach to "entertaining" the public and how he almost turned down *Big Brother*.

But he also knows, from his experience as chairman of **English National Opera**, that there is no similarity between watching a TV concert and being at the event live - that they are two separate forms of artistic experience, each with their own logistics and publics, each with as much right as the other.

It's the activities that can only be fulfilled by elite appreciation and strange academic disciplines that are the ones who tremble today as they hold out their cap for Arts Council subsidy. Classical training in instruments, singing or dance are the conceptual opposite of the Pandora's gogglebox of universal participation that Bazalgette's **reality TV** products have let loose. Dance, to many people nowadays, is "relevant" if it involves tens of thousands of unfit people shaking their tush in unison at a nationwide street-party on one afternoon and watching it on the news that night; it's less relevant, up for questioning, if it involves accepting that it takes more than an afternoon, more even than eight or 10 years, to be able to do a *ronde jambe* more poetically than athletically, and your darling daughter isn't likely to make it even after years of public grants for her training.

“ The real danger is when cultural leaders feel that their being incomprehending is less their problem than the art form's problem ”

Likewise, the TV definitions of popularity encourage the valuing of "good" content if it's about mass participation and familiarity - the instant gratification of **The X Factor**, the rehashing of worn-out pop tunes by crossover "operatic" singers - but "bad" if it's real opera, which can only be performed by a tiny

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specialist side of mightily self-disciplined, nerdy performers.

The commentators trained to bark can be ignored. The real danger is when cultural leaders feel that their incomprehension of something is less their problem than the art form's problem. If it's too difficult, cut it out. That is truly the worst threat culture and arts could face today under Bazalgette, because arts are about taking difficulty to the most exquisite ends.

But there is genuinely a problem here, which can't be swept under the carpet by those who've held the culture ring for so long. We are all different now, even the most entrenched fundamentalists - because TV and the internet have changed the world of perception for almost everyone, worldwide. Where the high classical arts were by their nature born and raised before a limited group of viewers or audience - a pianist in a salon, a painting in a chapel, a play on a stage - electronic broadcasting has brought the absolute benefit of removing exclusivity.

The popularity of the Paralympics has resoundingly shown that the Brits are now unafraid of diversity, even to the most specialised differences. Processing their subsidy cuts, the classical live-arts worlds must seize the chance to brandish their specialised differences, and demand their conditions to operate - but in the world we live in now, not one of 50 years ago. They must make their judgments about how to satisfy novice accessibility side-by-side with the most fastidious artistry.

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*“ The popularity of the Paralympics has shown that the Brits are now unafraid of diversity, even to the most specialised differences ”*

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But they must demand access to the world via the plenitude of broadcasting means. And having a chairman demanding that they make their case persuasively will give them new blood and fire.

I'm certain that the gift of TV and internet to the public's imaginative life, to touch them and to infect them with experiences of art, is still vastly under-appreciated. The world is an audience waiting for arts to power into their lives - [electronically networked libraries](#) to show them galleries to visit, [3D dance](#) films to make the theatre itself alluring, translations between languages and media of works of art, that entice imaginative reaction. Perhaps they will never reach a box office in person, but they will still want to reach the art.

Who better than a TV man identified with mass audiences to take responsibility for the chalice of public funds for refined arts? Who better to listen to the passionate, specialist arguments, and to steer a new discourse where the two ends of the arts are reconciled? Who better to evangelise for the fantastic technological potential to fill the airwaves with arts of the past and arts of the future? Who better to persuade the world we live in now that we should not be afraid of embracing the shock of the old, the special electricity of great live performance, the smell of rosin from the orchestra bows, the unexpected noise of dancers' pointe-shoes, the attentive faces around you, the feeling of being at one in shared experience whose only afterlife will be in your imagination?

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