

John Tusa: BBC arts coverage is bizarre

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/03/04/the-arts-show/

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Sir John Tusa gave a virtuoso performance in his [Polis](#) dialogue on the state of arts journalism. In conversation with Rosie Millard and an audience of media and culture folk at the [London College of Communication](#) he trumpeted various blasts at news coverage of the arts which struck a chord with many who also fear that cultural journalism is currently rather flat (that's enough musical metaphors – ed). This is a man that both journos and arty types should listen to. He was a founding presenter of Newsnight, boss of the BBC World Service and the chief of the Barbican centre, turning it in to one of Europe's leading arts venues. First, his critique of contemporary arts coverage in the news:

“Newsnight has decided that the arts is not part of the main news agenda. It is a bizarre and regrettable policy that does a disservice to its audience.”

“The Culture Show's connection with the serious arts is non-existent. They are terrified of doing something that might be seen as elitist”.

“There is news about rock and pop and celebrities but news editors regard mainstream arts and culture as peculiar. So for Oscars coverage we get starlets and frocks but what about the movies themselves?”

Tusa blames this on an inverted snobbery by which the editors who enjoy serious arts exclude it from their own programmes in pursuit of ratings. But he insists that there is a significant audience that is being under-served. He points out that Matthew Collings recent [Civilisation](#) series for Channel 4 got one million viewers at a time of intense multi-channel competition. The first edition of Kenneth Clarke's legendary [Civilisation](#) – which is regularly cited as the gold standard of TV arts – was broadcast in an age when there were very few alternatives to the BBC – but it also got only one million viewers. Tusa suggests (and I agree with him) that this shows there is a significant audience out there for bold arts journalism.

He also has an interesting way of describing how arts coverage could be more 'accessible'. He says that the media should simply make more serious arts available. So he laments the lack of Shakespeare or Mozart on the BBC. Never mind about having celeb presenters to translate difficult art to a wider public. Just put it on, he argues, and those who want it will find it if it is well-made.

Tusa believes that arts journalists should care more about their subject than, say, an education correspondent. “You must have some understanding of the experience”. And he says that we must not lose the vital role of the critic in a digital age where everyone can have – and publish – their opinion of an art-work:

“Good critics have years of experience, knowledge and comparison – and they should have a strong personality – blogs or comments on a website are just not interesting – you need a rounded view with a perspective. There is an essential critical dialogue around the arts which we need if we are to differentiate between the routine, the outstanding and the commercial”.

Interestingly, Tusa welcomed the shift in policy by the [Arts Council](#) which has seen many arts people up in arms about funding cuts for some cultural groups. He said that he was glad to see the Council accepting that 'excellence' should again be a measure for public funding but he accepted that their timing had been mistaken. He said that a

story about a revolution in arts policy had turned into yet another story about 'crisis' in the arts.

There was a lot of support for Sir John's views in the audience. But some journalists there felt that he ignored a lot of new, serious arts journalism such as [Sky Arts](#) or the Saturday [Guardian Review](#) while online journalists argued that they were creating a much more accessible interaction with the arts.

I think they are both right. Sir John is right to insist on a serious approach to serious arts coverage as a vital part of any news picture of our national life. We should stop being so patronising to our audiences. The evidence is that people are bored of routine coverage of events like the Oscars. But I suspect that a real diversity and depth of arts coverage will happen most effectively through new media platforms. It is the old media editorial managers who stand in the way of good arts coverage because their careers simply don't depend on it. BBC4 could have been so much more interesting on the arts, but instead has turned in to an unadventurous nursery for managers looking to get a 'proper' job on the main BBC channels. I would like to think that if Melvyn Bragg was starting the South Bank Show now or if Kenneth Clarke wanted to broadcast his essay on culture today, then they would be more likely to take to a digital channel or a blog. The danger is that the mainstream media is cutting its commitment before the new media capacity is there to take over.

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