# Making Programmes the World Wants

(At the BBC's request, this speech was given at a dinner for the representatives of all the world's television services who had come to Brighton for the annual BBC Enterprises Showcase Week in March 1991. Since there was no way of dodging the problem posed by the multilingual audience, I tried to make a virtue out of embracing it. The cod-polyglot approach worked well enough for the message to register as an intentional change of pace, and I sat down congratulating myself on my global vision. The euphoria was dissipated later on when I was approached in the lobby by some delegates from the newly liberated East European countries who wanted to know what I had said. It turned out that they hadn't come to the dinner because they couldn't afford it. Nevertheless I was glad about the invitation. Fifteen years later, I can take the opportunity to thank Will Wyatt for having had the idea, and to make public my long-held private conviction that he was the senior executive who might have saved the BBC from managerial mania if he had been put in complete charge: but of course his capacity to have done so was the very reason that he wasn't.)

Let me first thank the BBC's Managing Director, Will Wyatt, for interrupting his busy schedule to give me such a generous introduction. I'm grateful for his support because this short speech will be one of the most challenging performances I have ever tackled in my life. On New Year's Eve I was once again lucky enough to anchor the BBC programme which was seen in Britain, Australia and New Zealand: The Review of the Year. The audience was numbered in many millions, but at least they all spoke the one language. Here tonight there are at least thirty different languages. So I have to begin by saying Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen. Welcome to Brighton. *Bienvenue en Bréton. Willkommen in Brichton. Bienvenuto in Brigitonia. Bienvenida en Brigatonades. Zdravtsvue, eto Brezhnevtograd. Vitam vas do Braitonu. Kore wa Buraitonu desu. Doo, ohairi nasai.*

The effects of deregulation on the global television environment are extremely complex and in the last analysis utterly unpredictable. *Les effets de dérégulation auf dem Umwelt televisivo globalmente considerato sind tellement taihen complicados und dans la ultima analisnost zenbu dépourvu de la possibilité de se prévoir, sumimasen.*

But obviously I can't go on like this, and I've left out those of you who speak Dutch, Danish, Finnish, Portuguese, Swahili, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, Farsi, Hebrew, Arabic, Mandarin, Cantonese and Australian with a Melbourne accent. You all speak more than enough English to understand me when you're here but although languages are my hobby I don't speak enough of them to understand you when you're at home. This fact drives me almost mad with frustration. I wish I could speak all those languages. I like the variety of the world's cultures. I'm sure even the many American delegates we have here tonight would be sorry if the English language came to dominate the world's airwaves as it dominates the world's airlines.

On the airlines there is a good case for having one lingua franca and one only, and English might as well be it. An airline pilot should have good eyesight, good digestion and good English. A few months ago I was flying into the very busy airport of Los Angeles after sunset and the captain invited me up to the flight-deck for the landing. I put on the head-set and I could hear the conversation between the control tower and all the planes waiting to land. It was dark, very dark. There was cloud. There were hundreds of planes and they couldn't see each other. I heard the man in the control tower saying, ‘Air Guatemala 737, go from 3,000 to 2,000, cut your speed to 300, line up with the left runway, not the right runway, imperative you use the left runway, the right runway is occupied, please acknowledge.' And I heard the Air Guatemala captain say, ‘*Que?*'

But in television we want variety, and of course we get it. As I've said, nearly all of you here speak excellent English but most of you when at home watch television in your own language, and why not? You're living in your own culture. And it's imperative that all those cultures be preserved in their full depth and richness. Every country has its resident experts who warn that imported television will destroy the national consciousness and replace it with *Dallas*, *The Waltons*, *Star Trek* and *Twin Peaks*. For more than forty years the world has been warned by wise and worried voices that American soap operas will destroy the planet. These wise and worried voices have recently changed their tune only to the extent of adding a further warning: that Australian soap operas are even more dangerous than American ones. Countries which survived the impact of J. R. Ewing in *Dallas* are told that Kylie Minogue in *Neighbours* will cretinise their children, unbalance their economy, wipe out the rain forest, and make a hole in the ozone layer. But really any country's culture can survive, and even benefit from, the impact of imported television, as long as the imports are chosen well and the national product is genuinely creative. And in a heartening number of cases that's exactly what it is.

In recent years I've flown at least three times a year to make programmes in the world's capital cities. We call these programmes Postcards and the idea is that I fly in not knowing very much and record my first impressions in the most truthful but attention-getting way possible. In Miami I fall off the water-skis, in Los Angeles I get fitted with a hairpiece, in Rome I spend all day trying to park my car, and in Tokyo I go to a Love Hotel and can't find the button to switch off the vibrating bed. In other words I play the innocent. In fact, of course, I have to prepare, and when I'm there I try to deepen the preparation by watching as much local television as I can.

And almost always I am drawn in, fascinated. Filming during the day I learn a lot, but alone at night in the hotel room eating a late room-service club sandwich by the light of the TV set, I learn more. When I filmed my *Postcard from Paris* I had to spend a whole day being driven around the Left Bank by that amazing woman, the novelist Françoise Sagan. Françoise Sagan is a writer of great intelligence but she has never learned how to make a car go slowly. Here in Britain they used to have a woman called Boadicea who drove like Françoise Sagan. Boadicea drove a chariot with swords sticking out of the hub caps. Her effect on pedestrians was less devastating than that of Françoise Sagan. Eventually Boadicea got her licence cancelled. This has never happened to Françoise Sagan. Instead, President Mitterrand keeps giving her medals.

After my day of dicing with death in Françoise Sagan's company I recovered at night by watching television. I was hugely impressed by the way the writers and intellectuals talked on programmes like Bernard Pivot's*Apostrophe*. On French television, six intellectuals can all talk at once and you can still follow what they're saying. I like the general impression that they've all just come in from the café round the corner and that after the programme they'll go back to the café and continue the discussion. Back in Britain, I've been trying to get some of that same quality on my talk-shows for BBC 2. But it is very hard to beat the French at their own game. They have whole brasseries full of articulate high-brows who somehow know the secret of interrupting each other without getting angry. British intellectuals are fewer in number and on television tend to oscillate between being too polite to say anything or else suing each other for libel. But I think we're getting somewhere, and I think the French have shown us how.

I've also learnt a lot from talk-shows in German. The best place to watch them is in a Swiss ski resort where you can tune into transmissions from Germany, Austria, and of course from Switzerland itself. Hearing half a dozen German-speaking historians discussing the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich was not only good for my rudimentary prowess in the German language, it also did wonders for my grasp of modern history. One of the many great things about Marcel Reich-Ranicki's panel show *Literarischen Quartett* is that it brings literature and history together on the assumption that they are never really apart. But the real revelation on German television was a show starring Willi the Hamster. It was a game show in which several couples competed for large prizes. The outcome was crucially influenced by whether Willi decided to jump down the hole, eat the cheese or just sit there breaking wind on a small scale. Pardon, devo tradurre. Em hamster, che s'apelle Willi-san, dalla suo estomaco il vento poco poco pfft pfft kowashita imasu ne. Capito? Verstehen Sie? Intiende? Ponymaesh? Wakarimashita ka?

We brought Willi the Hamster's performance home on video tape and incorporated it very successfully into another show of ours called *Saturday Night Clive*, which is a kind of round-up of all the world's craziest television. This show transmits here and in Australia and New Zealand, as well as through the BBC direct-feed to the Low Countries, and to my great pleasure bootleg tapes of it were passed around at student video parties in Prague during the Velvet Revolution, but I have to admit that it has often been condemned by our critics here as frivolous. When I was a television critic myself, which I was for ten years, I would have said that frivolity is important. You can find out a lot about a country from what it considers frivolous. You can find out a lot about affluent West German society by watching Willi the Hamster in action. East German society, which was the reverse of affluent, broke down the Berlin Wall just to get at Willi. You find out that the Germans are nearly as crazy about animals as the British. Also you find out that the people of the Bundesrepublik have very sensibly decided that a 7 series BMW may be perfect, but it isn't everything. You can win one or lose one according to whether Willi the Hamster goes down the hole, eats the cheese, or breaks wind, and that's just how it should be.

I think the same applies to the talent shows on Italian cable television. Filming in Rome, I watched them every night. One man's talent consisted entirely of imitating farmyard animals very badly. The studio audience demanded that he should stop doing it. Shows like that inspire Italian intellectuals to predict the imminent collapse of civilisation, but what impresses me is how everyone involved keeps his dignity, and above all speaks so beautifully, even the pretty girl who is dressed in not much more than feathers and keeps the score. British feminists would say, no doubt correctly, that she is being exploited, but all the British feminists put together can't speak English as well as that girl speaks Italian. She seems to be her own person and having fun. In his wonderful film about Fred and Ginger, Fellini satirised a show like that, but you could tell he enjoyed it. A screen full of ordinary people who don't say ‘urn' and ‘ah' — how do the Italians work the trick of staging an on-screen party you'd like to be at? If programmes like that are a cultural disaster, all I can say is that the Italians have a culture big enough, old enough and rich enough to afford a few disasters.

The same might be said of Japan. Through my own fault, I labour under a reputation in this country for being unkind about the sort of Japanese television game shows in which terrible things happen to the contestants. My scholarly interest in the subject started about seven years ago when I first saw a show called *Gaman*, which here we call *Endurance*. And certainly the contestants had a lot to endure. They hung upside down over a slow fire while their underwear was filled with cockroaches. They were zipped into sleeping-bags with live lobsters. The British audience rocked with delighted revulsion when they witnessed these things. My critics called me a racist.

But I had noticed that the contestants were all smiling. Clearly they felt less squeamish about cockroaches than the average British viewer. It was a different attitude to living things, and probably a healthier one. The show was crazy, but to say so wasn't necessarily to be disparaging of the Japanese. There are 125 million Japanese and quite a lot of them are perfectly capable of realising that the producer of a show like *Endurance*is out of his head, or, as they would say, *baka des', ne*. Meanwhile everyone concerned seemed to be having a wonderful time. Fascinated, I went to Japan and actually took part in one of those TV game shows, called*Takeshi's Castle*. It wasn't until I was in my tracksuit and crash helmet that I found out I was the only contestant older than twelve. I lost a paint-gun fight with a pack of children — I still think they cheated — and I ended up upside down in a pool of mud, but I had a ball. I learned a word: *Gambarimassho!* It means ‘Hang in there'.

And in the hotel at night I watched television. I watched some of NHK's marvellous cultural programmes. I saw a programme on calligraphy that affected my entire outlook. Even though I couldn't understand what was said, I was riveted by the economical beauty of what was done. That's how I began, four years ago this week, to learn the Japanese language, of which, although I am a long way from mastery or even elementary competence, I have now acquired enough to say to our Japanese visitors that watching television in Japan was the beginning of one of the most thrilling aesthetic adventures of my life.

So when Britain, like America, sells programmes to other countries, it isn't selling just anything to just anybody. The idea that the rest of the world is virgin territory is one which I absolutely do not hold. Other countries are not virgins, and that's why they're worth knowing. Like love, the exchange of television programmes is something that best happens between consenting adults. The spread of the technology to new places, and the growth of deregulation in some of the old places, has made television global only in the sense that the total demand has swollen to exceed the possible supply. But that doesn't mean that there is a world market for junk. I once heard a British ex-foreign secretary, who had been invited on to the board of a video business, announce that he couldn't see how the business could fail, because there were so many people who wanted something that they were ready to pay for almost nothing. I wondered why Mrs Thatcher had ever accepted his resignation, because he thought exactly the way she did. They had both missed the point of British television. Its best programmes can be sold at a profit only because they are made with dedication.

The present government's assault on the British broadcasting system having by now been, at least for the moment, staved off — principally because some of the younger ministers saw sense — it is perhaps safe to point out the paradox which underlay that unholy crusade. British television was being told to be more profit-conscious by people economically too illiterate to realise what a profit-centre British television already was. Why are you all here? You're here because you know this is where the programmes are. Television is something Britain does so well that it's got something left over for everybody. Weight for weight, per capita, or by however these things are measured, Britain must be the world's most fruitful television culture.

The title could have belonged to America, of course. It would have done, if the American television system had been set up in the first place so as to favour Public Service Broadcasting. But it wasn't, and so the main American networks were artificially restricted to an audience of people who could bear to watch programmes interrupted by commercials every two minutes. On behalf of the smaller but self-selectingly more intelligent audience who want something better, the American PBS and cable companies — who probably wouldn't even exist if things had been more humanely organised in the first place — feel obliged to come here. They are very welcome, but let's be in no doubt why they, and all of you, come here to this market. It's because it's not just a market.

Television programmes are things of the spirit, items of expression. They are creations. Nobody knows how to make one out of purely commercial considerations. Somewhere along the line, people have to be hired who are working for more than just money. They are working out of belief. Great inventions like the David Attenborough nature series *The Trials of Life* are made by whole battalions of people who work out of belief, commitment, personal sacrifice and love. The idea that you can make television only in response to market forces is an idea that not even Rupert Murdoch can render plausible. In fact he can't really afford to hold it: not for long. Sky Television is up there, but there is almost nothing on it, and the sort of people who watch nothing don't buy anything, so the enterprise doesn't even make sense in commercial terms. (Note in 2006: I was, of course, terrifically wrong on that last point, as I had been wrong about the government's assault on the broadcasting system's having been even momentarily thwarted. I can forgive myself for failing to predict that the immense volume of exported television from the USA would eventually become remarkable for its quality, also: HBO was as yet in its infancy, and nobody could have guessed that a network like NBC would give a green light to The West Wing.)

The British television system makes programmes you want because the programmes are made by people who want to make programmes. It's a tradition of pride in craft, of living for what you do, and not just for what you can get. The BBC is better because of the competition from ITV, but there can be no doubt that ITV would not take such a civilised form — the commercials so far apart, the companies so intent on turning out programmes better than they need to be — if ITV had not been obliged to parallel the BBC. Not yet, and I hope never, weakened by too many additional channels, the duopoly is at the heart of British television's success.

And at the heart of the duopoly is the BBC. Long ago, when television was still just an idea, the people charged with setting up broadcasting in Britain were a stuffy bunch who could have been taken for men of the Church if they had worn different collars. But they believed in serving the people, and so a decision was taken about broadcasting which has affected the lives of generations, and largely for the better. And I think it's not a coincidence, but a natural consequence, that creative people who feel that they are as one with the people as a whole — who don't look down on the viewer, but look at the world through the viewer's eyes — should make programmes that the world wants.

I am too aware of the magnificent achievements of British television as it has been, and as I hope it will go on being, to class myself as anything except a very low-ranking contributor to that total effort, but I would like to end by saying two things. First, under the BBC's exalted auspices, I have been honoured to give this speech and gratified by your attention. You have done me too much honour. *Un rêve assouvi. Sono commosso. Wirklich fabelhaft. Do, itashimashita.*

And the second and last thing: I see from these print-outs that my Postcard programmes and talk-shows have been sold in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Portugal, Germany, Finland, Spain, Belgium, Holland, the USA, Romania, Hong Kong, Norway, Yugoslavia, Japan, Bahrain and Quatar.

And what I want to know is: what happened to Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, Mexico, Korea, Pakistan, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, and the USSR?

Where are you? *Où êtes-vous? Dove siate...*