

## THE ARTS CHANNEL



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30th September, 1988.

The Right Honourable Mrs Margaret Thatcher, PC, FRS, MP,  
House of Commons,  
London, SW1.

An open letter to the Prime Minister.

Dear Prime Minister,

It seems appropriate on the third anniversary of the start of The Arts Channel's daily transmissions to write an open letter to you in support of the liberalisation of broadcasting and as a counter to those you have recently received begging you to preserve the status quo. The attacks upon your 'supposals' - no one, after all, yet knows exactly what the government's proposals are - are based upon a number of myths and fallacies about British and European broadcasting. These have been re-paraded to defend vested interests ranging from the beneficiaries of commercial monopoly to the Spanish practitioners whose microcosmic greed is one of the major obstacles to the quality programmes they claim to cherish.

Myth number one is, of course, that the current structure has created some kind of television utopia of quality broadcasting that is now under threat. The fact is that since the days of only one BBC television service to those of the present quadrivium the proportion of serious programming has declined from 40% to 20% of the total. The Italians, so mocked by the recent advertisement of the commercial TV companies, in fact transmit far more opera and serious music, for example, than those self same mockers.

Myth number two is that quality television depends on the expenditure of vast sums of money and can, therefore, only be produced by the large, established broadcasters. That is probably still fairly true for some programmes; operas, ballets, the great costume dramas which Britain's major companies do wonderfully from time to time. Long may they continue to do so, for we are happy to show these glories (unions permitting) after they have been broadcast and would otherwise only be gathering dust in the tape library. But the vast majority of cultural programming at least is not dependent on massive financing. The Arts Channel makes documentaries, music - solo, chamber, orchestral, jazz and now even our first opera, Purcell's The Fairy Queen - and small scale drama



of high quality at between a quarter and a fifth of the cost incurred by traditional broadcasters for the same product. We presume they are of high quality since British and European broadcasters themselves buy many of them for showing to their own audiences. We achieve this through modern technology and modern working practices implemented by a skilled, hard-working, flexible and enthusiastic work force.

Fallacy number one is that the liberation of the satellite area will mean a fall in broadcasting standards. It is just not true. Of course there is plenty of junk in celestial television as in terrestrial but there is also a great deal of good programming. Three hours a day - shortly to increase to between four and six hours a day - of first class cultural programming from The Arts Channel; a dozen hours a day of responsible programming from Children's Channel; ITN and CNN news; a business channel and soon channels for racial minorities and a green channel belie the charge.

You cannot legislate for quality but by offering a multiplicity of choices you can increase the demand for it. Fallacy number two, propagated by conventional broadcasters as an excuse for the endless soaps and quiz shows, is that they are giving people what they want but a glance any day at their programme schedules show how seldom any real choice is offered. Yet when these same broadcasters do put on quality programmes they not only get high viewing figures but a high level of appreciation. What is lacking is the courage and imagination to offer better programming. Lack of imagination seems to be a particularly contemporary curse in the television world. Just as lack of imagination, rather than moral turpitude, probably accounts for much of the gratuitous violence rightly condemned by His Royal Highness Prince Charles (I am sure he used the word 'gratuitous' most advisedly. We have just screened 'Macbeth', no shortage of violence but none gratuitous.) so it accounts for the inability of broadcast schedulers to recognise the general public's latent capacity for enjoying and benefitting from serious programming more than mindless pap. Quality programmes must not be confused with dull or pompous ones for they should move to laughter as well as tears, appeal to feelings and senses as well as to the intellect. Because via satellite - or any other broadening of genuine choice you may introduce - such programming will be available as an alternative at virtually all times the number of those enjoying good television will steadily rise.

In a free society you cannot dictate what audiovisual signals people may receive - or in a closed one for that matter, as the following for BBC's World Service even in the darkest tyrannies amply demonstrates. You would not, I imagine, wish to fine or imprison anyone who watched something of which you personally disapproved. Let it be enough to limit what may be disseminated by the laws of libel and obscenity and by such modest restraints on the promotion of alcohol, tobacco, medicines, etc. as now prevail and leave the rest to most people's good sense and good taste. The




Italian stripper with whom the TV advertisers seem to be so enamoured did not survive long in Italy and would not here not only because the programmes were offensive to good taste but because they were boring and bad television. All perhaps that a government needs to look to beyond the existing limits is that the ownership of United Kingdom based sources of television dissemination, be they celestial or terrestrial, is in responsible hands sensitive to national and European interests and committed to quality as the road to both profit and approval.

Fallacy number three is that the junk will drive out the quality programmes for it alone can make profits. After only three years we are already on the brink of financial break-even at The Arts Channel and will soon be profitable. We already earn considerable sums of foreign currency for Britain. Our future is based on the firm belief that by asking people to pay a modest sum for the programming they actually want we are benefitting both ourselves and the television viewing public at large.

We hope, therefore, that you will continue to press for the liberalising of European broadcasting in all its forms with the minimum of restriction from national or European bureaucracies. Given that climate of freedom The Arts Channel for one will guarantee a successful service of responsible quality television.

Yours sincerely,



John Griffiths  
Chairman and Managing Director