

Take this man off the telly

Alan Yentob is on a mission - to revolutionise arts on the BBC. Great, says Patrick Wright, but does it all have to revolve around him?

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The Guardian, Wednesday 2 July 2003 15.48 BST



'I'm sure Yentob is sincerely committed to the advancement of the arts in Britain. When he has finished making a personality of himself, he might usefully revert to his executive role.'

The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and Clarifications column, Thursday July 3 2003

Imagine is a BBC1 programme and not BBC2 as we incorrectly said in a note at the end of this article. In the main text we mistakenly said that Vanessa Engle's 1995 Tx film was about Rebecca Horn. It was actually about Sarah Lucas.

When I first heard Alan Yentob trailing his new BBC1 arts series Imagine on the Today programme, I found myself musing over the fate of the producers who have persisted in trying to make serious arts programmes over recent years. For far too many of them, life has become a relentless struggle to get work from ratings-driven controllers who seem more likely to commission a documentary about the human backside than anything nearer the brain. These scattered folk will surely have been pleased to hear Yentob announcing that the BBC is now "in earnest about raising its game with arts coverage on television". Some of them may also marvel at Yentob's nerve in appointing himself the star presenter of this renaissance.

In another age, Yentob produced some fine arts documentaries as editor of Arena. He also helped found the Late Show and convened conferences on the arts and television. Regrettably, his period as a senior BBC executive has coincided with a disintegration of mainstream arts programming. Though he may not have put the knife in himself, Yentob was certainly up there for the killing of Omnibus, the grassing over of nearly all available space on BBC2, the effective extinction of the single arts documentary. But now, spurred on by the prospect of charter renewal and by the persistent criticisms of Melvyn Bragg among others, he comes parachuting down from the corporation's heights in order to save the day. As he explains: "I've always been passionate about the arts, so this opportunity to present a major new strand on BBC1 was irresistible."

"Imagine" is a carefully chosen title. It may gesture vaguely towards high conceptions of culture, but it is really a funky old piece of rock'n'roll, liberated from the period idealism of John Lennon who naively went on to dream of "a world without possessions". The first programme, The Saatchi Phenomenon, certainly scotched that idea: it came across like a pilot for a watch-the-rich series.

As the presenter of a proudly announced "flagship" arts programme, Yentob should have approached Saatchi's world as the audience's critically informed representative: testing its assumptions, puncturing its vanity and illusions. But as he trailed around the

opening of the new Saatchi Gallery at County Hall, London, it rapidly became obvious that he was far too closely identified with his friend, Charles. He seemed content to stand, champagne glass in hand, rubbing shoulders with Nigella Lawson and boasting about how nobody before him had managed to get a camera so close to the great Mr Saatchi.

The film was alarmingly short of intellectual content. It offered no analysis of the relationship between art, advertising and publicity, and it failed to consider the implications of having contemporary art so powerfully defined by a collector who appears to thrive on the sheer inconsistency of his own judgment. It was weirdly typical of this programme that the sharpest remarks came from another advertising mogul, John Hegarty, who was at least prepared to question the morality of Saatchi's advertising career, and the untroubled way he had gone from producing health education posters to the famous Silk Cut campaign.

The Saatchi Phenomenon was a bad programme, but it would be far too easy to lay the blame at the door of the director. Vanessa Engle certainly has the right track record for the job. She produced a good film about Sarah Lucas for BBC2's Tx strand in 1995 and her recent three-part BBC4 series on Britart was informed, interested and critical. Even the most competent producer faces a problem, however, when a senior BBC executive decides to present a programme about one of his chums.

Perhaps the BBC has always been an organisation in which address books get smaller the higher up you go, but the Saatchi film seemed to emerge from a corporation that has lost its respect for the offscreen world. The BBC's best documentary-makers, including those with whom Yentob used to work as editor of Arena in the early 1980s, have been filled with curiosity. Far from confining themselves to a celebrity bubble, they have set off into the most unprepossessing backwaters, hunting up strange and fabulous stories as they went. They have found unexpected worlds out there and even encountered people whose knowledge exceeds their own.

The Saatchi Phenomenon revealed no such curiosity. Those who live outside the bubble are apparently now just people who haven't made it into the charmed circle. They are, in short, the television audience. And their habits are more appropriately mapped by focus groups and the ratings machine than by inquisitive film-makers. The BBC announced with palpable relief that the first Imagine got 2.3 million viewers. It has no way of establishing how many of them were glued to their screens in gleeful horror at the louche antics of this incestuous metropolitan circle.

The second programme, Barbara Hepworth: Shapes Out of Feelings, was much better, even though it too was involved in the project of establishing Yentob as the BBC's friendly and omniscient answer to Bragg. It opened with Yentob walking into Hepworth's sculpture garden in St Ives and announcing: "I've always loved this garden." Fortunately, once Yentob had folded up his parachute, he seemed to realise that he had landed in a real arts programme this time. He got on with reading the script, standing back so that the pre-recorded interviews could roll by and, commendably, not trying to dominate the proceedings in the familiar jackass style. The result was an informative documentary, rich in its use of historical archive and intelligently filmed.

The programme was made by Jamie Muir, another Late Show veteran who has since produced the Travels with Pevsner series and worked on Simon Schama's History of Britain. If it seemed a little old-fashioned, this was partly because it represented a kind of arts documentary that seems to have been systematically rooted out of BBC2 in recent years. I found myself imagining what might have happened had Muir been hauled before representatives of the prevailing mindset that Yentob now promises to dethrone: "OK, so you had to go to Hepworth's sculpture garden, but you could at least have called in the Ground Force team to sort out those statues and really bring the place to life. It was great that you managed to find an old Teacher's whisky bottle in Hepworth's studio, but why didn't you bring in an actress to swig at it? And what about that geezer Sir Alan Bowness? He may well be the official biographer and Hepworth's son-in-law, but he is well over 30. Yes, yes, we're aware that wrinklies are on the increase in the off-screen world, but you should pay more attention to Greg's focus groups. Then you'd know that old people are just like the rest of us - they prefer to watch young people going through

the motions, too ..." A parody indeed, but it's not nearly as detached from reality as it should be.

Sadly, the third in the series, *The Hip-Hop Generation*, did not sustain the recovery. The producer, Mike Connolly (another accomplished director whose previous work includes a memorable portrait of Shane MacGowan), faced the same question as his predecessors: what exactly is the point of Alan Yentob as the presenter of this programme? He tried valiantly to establish Yentob's command of the American periphery. It was easy enough to get him to drive around Detroit, but further steps had to be taken if the presenter was not to look like a man who had taken the wrong turning on the way to the opera. So some extracts were included from a documentary Yentob had made in the early days of rap - a time of comparative innocence, as he rightly claimed. More dangerously, it was decided that Yentob would undertake his "journey into the heart of black America" with his own children, plus some suitably diverse and multicultural friends. So we saw Yentob at home, driving around wondering about the music his kids played on their personal stereos and, for the climax, taking them to see Eminem's rainswept concert, where he eventually managed to extract some autographs from the puzzled star.

The younger Yentobs should be credited for looking coolly disengaged throughout, but in general this obtrusive "personal" approach made the programme seem all frame and no picture. It certainly squandered many of its best opportunities. Yentob is a busy man, but he really should have made the trip to southern California, where the Watts Prophets and younger artists were left to talk among themselves. The African-American writer Stanley Crouch had some highly trenchant things to say about the white appropriation of hip-hop as a "freak show". But he was filmed from a ridiculously low angle that made him look like one more menacing hulk in the street. Yentob stayed away from him, too, and his remarks were not followed up.

It is to be hoped that things will get better as *Imagine* proceeds, but nobody should be fooled that this agonising series marks a serious change of heart on the part of the BBC. I'm sure Yentob is sincerely committed to the advancement of the arts in Britain. When he has finished making a personality of himself, he might usefully revert to his executive role and try to persuade his senior colleagues to get on with the more serious project of raising the profile of BBC4. His *Imagine* press release speaks of "intelligence" and "flair". The truth is that the corporation's policy of ghettoising exactly these qualities has produced an extraordinary bestiary of endangered species. It's called BBC4, a cross between a corporate oubliette and a digital channel that still hardly registers on the ratings machine. Find your way there, and you will discover arts programmes that are worth watching, including some presented by non-celebrities (ie informed people) and others that are all the better for not being presented at all. It's true that a lot of these creatures are seriously undernourished, but at least they are alive and quite capable of escaping back into the mainstream should the BBC become genuinely committed to delivering on its responsibilities.

The story of *Imagine* so far also suggests that it is time for a serious rethink on the priority the BBC now gives to audience ratings and focus groups. Both may be legitimate ways of informing programming decisions. But they should never have been allowed to become ruling principles, as they did in the wake of the Thatcher era. Given free reign, they become techniques of majoritarian tyranny, concentrating everything on what people think they want and discouraging the unexpected, the challenging and the unformatted. Until these methods are returned to their place in a wider, more ambitious, more truly democratic framework, the BBC will continue to put presenters before programmes, and the case for the renewal of its charter will remain a lot weaker than it should be.

• *Imagine* continues on BBC1 tonight. Patrick Wright's profile of Zaha Hadid is on BBC4 on July 9.