Anthony Burgess as Television Critic

By Andrew Biswell

I have to confess that my heart sank when it was announced on the BBC Midnight News (on 8 March 1999) that 'Stanley Kubrick, the creator of *2001* and *A Clockwork Orange*,' had died. Hearing this solemn announcement, I was reminded of the student interviewer from the *Transatlantic Review* who informed Anthony Burgess that he was the creation of Stanley Kubrick, in the sense that without Kubrick's intervention nobody would have heard of Burgess, or would have wanted to read him. Yet the fact that the Université d'Angers has set up a Centre to encourage the study of Burgess is in itself a powerful argument in favour of his work. (Perhaps it is worth adding that there is, as yet, no Stanley Kubrick Centre, either in France or, for that matter, anywhere else.)

My purpose here is to argue that Anthony Burgess's journalistic work as a television critic for *The Listener* may be seen as a sustained attempt to articulate a Modernist aesthetic. *The Listener* was, until it closed in 1991, an upmarket weekly magazine published by the British Broadcasting Corporation. The function of *The Listener* was threefold: firstly to publish edited transcripts of BBC television and radio programmes, particularly talks (at a time when broadcast talks, rather than panel discussions, were still commonplace on the radio); its second function was to provide a commentary on broadcasting in the form of reviews – though for some years after commercial television began in Britain, *The Listener* had nothing to say about it, confining its criticism to the output of the BBC. The third important role the magazine played was that of a cultural weekly, reviewing new films, plays and books, and it became famous for its literary pages in the 1930s, when it championed and published poetry by W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis and Stevie Smith, as well as work by other, forgotten poets whose work never made it into book form. In its early days, *The Listener*

established a reputation as a forward-looking cultural magazine which was prepared to get excited about the contemporary arts, including the developing art of television. As a magazine which gave to television and radio the same kind of detailed attention that it gave to books or the opera,
The Listener
occupies a unique place in British cultural history.
The Listener
had been running for more than 30 years before Anthony Burgess began contributing to it in 1961. In many ways it seems to have been the periodical that kick-started his journalistic career at a time when he was earning hardly anything from novel-writing. Burgess worked for the magazine occasionally as a feature writer, extensively as a book reviewer, and he was, until 1968, one of its regular television critics. Beyond this, The Listener published transcripts of Burgess's radio talks and of documentaries he made for television. And, of course, the magazine's books pages also carried reviews of Burgess's novels. When Burgess reviewed Stanley Kubrick's film version of A Clockwork Orange, he did it in the pages of The Listener. So it is a periodical which tells us a lot about this particular author, and also one which gave him space to say whatever he wanted when he was starting out as a professional writer and critic.

Burgess performed the role of television critic for *The Listener* on a regular basis from 1963. He was hired as a reviewer of BBC documentaries, with a particular remit to write about arts broadcasting, at a time when there was rather more cultural programming than BBC viewers would find today. I think there is a strong element of performance in Burgess's television criticism: he sustains a pose of amateurishness, and frequently writes about his inability to operate his television set. On one occasion he says that he stayed up late to watch
The Sky at Night
, presented by the astronomer Patrick Moore, but was so drunk that he started hallucinating and had to go to bed. He doesn't appear to have much time for the idea that it might be part of the critic's job to be both conscious and sober when the programmes he's reviewing are being broadcast. Nevertheless, Burgess demonstrates that he is no fool when he drops quotations from Joyce, Eliot and Hopkins into his reviews. So the reviewing voice is an odd mixture of things: there's a knowing literariness present as well as an oafish blokeishness, which is surely intended to reassure by saying something like: 'I may be a professional television critic, but I don't really understand the technology, and I can't even make the machinery go.' Frequently there is a hyperbolic rage directed against anything the critic finds culturally undesirable,

particularly pop music and youth culture. (It becomes harder to know what to make of Burgess's critique of youth culture if we remember that he had recently published
A Clockwork Orange
, that orgiastic celebration of teenage violence which was waiting, like a time-bomb, to explode onto the front pages when Kubrick filmed it in the 1970s.)

My first example of Burgess as television critic is a review of a *Monitor* documentary from January 1965, in which Sir John Betjeman travelled to Hull to interview Philip Larkin in connection with the publication of Larkin's second collection of poems,
The Whitsun Weddings
. Betjeman, wrote Burgess

… was the best man to mediate between Larkin and ourselves. Talk about homogeneity: it was sometimes hard to tell where Betjeman's commentary ended and Larkin's verse began. The Betjeman eye inevitably hit on some of the stone funerary fantasies of Hull, where Larkin works as a librarian, but for the most part we got the younger poet unalloyed. His personality is a compelling one, despite his instinct to retreat rather than push and his whiff of healthy death-urge, and towards the end of the programme, I experienced one of those rare glimmerings of conviction: here is a poet who is going to be major. The grey tag about 'welfare state poetry' won't do. If Hull stands for the supermarket life which poets must nowadays take as their subject-matter, Hull has been given a voice by Larkin, and that voice is louder than the city's.

It seems to me that in this piece Burgess is taking his responsibilities as a cultural commentator seriously: the review is a good example of the critic acting as a kind of talent-spotter, drawing the attention of his readers to a relatively unknown poet. But elsewhere in Burgess's reviews we see him playing the part of cultural gatekeeper, attacking programmes he sees as vulgar, inadequate or not sufficiently critical of their subject matter. Writing about Elizabeth Taylor, Burgess demonstrates that he is capable of scorn and viciousness:

The limit of frothy insubstantiality was reached on Christmas Eve with that incredible 'Elizabeth Taylor in London' – a waste of public money, an impertinence and an insult, an invitation to a feast of nothing … The score was Hollywood-inspirational, overblown variations on Greensleeves, a brassy sepulchre. Elgar and Walton would have brought the sound of real London, and real London was not wanted … The eponymous goddess who conducted us around this unreal city was a jaw-dropping vision of totally meaningless allure – Yves St Laurent icing, delectability of fairy gold, the poor little box of tricks of Zuleika Dobson. The pretence of being interested in London's poets was disgusting ('I am an actress and my medium is words'),

the mockery of patrician English positively dirty. Miss Taylor's own idiolect belongs nowhere. Her general quality of rootlessness would be pathetic did she not claim roots in Hampstead … and somehow imply that she had soared above her place of origin. 'Elizabeth Taylor in London': she does us too much honour, she does really. The year is over. I can, with confidence, vote this the most deplorable programme of the year.

There's a surprising degree of anger behind this review, related, I think, to Burgess's conviction that the purpose of television ought to be to educate as well as to entertain. Part of the critic's function, as Burgess seems to see it, is to discourage bad programmes by sending flaming arrows of controlled rage in their direction. Yet it's worth considering the other side of the coin as well, and trying to establish what kind of television Burgess admires in his *Listener* columns. Most of the programmes he reviews favourably – aside from nature documentaries or political programmes about the Cold War – are popularising accounts of Modernist authors or documentaries about contemporary classical composers.

It was the policy at the *Listener* that the choice of programmes to be reviewed should be left to the critic – so, although Burgess was, in one sense, constrained because he could write only about documentaries and arts programmes, the selection of material nevertheless tells us a lot about what culture meant to him at this time. In 1964, for example, we find him expressing admiration for a production of Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* at Saddler's Wells. 'This could not have been better done,' he writes. 'It was an important television event, and it should have been on BBC-1. It still remains to be pointed out – and some television programme ought to be concerned with this sort of thing – that the excellence of *Peter Grimes* has a great deal to do with Montagu Slater's libretto, the only libretto I know that can be read in its own right as a dramatic poem.' It's worth noting in passing that, while Burgess applauds the production of the opera and the BBC's decision to broadcast it, he voices a characteristic writerly anxiety that Slater's words, which deserve as much attention as Britten's music, are in danger of getting lost.

Britten's music is a subject returned to frequently in Burgess's *Listener* reviews, and he followed the televised performances of the *War Requiem* with interest, though he found it hard to decide whether Britten's music, good as it was, matched the high standard of Wilfred Owen's words.

If documentaries about opera, ballet contemporary poetry and literary fiction represent the kind of television Burgess reviewed warmly in his *Listener* columns, there were limits to his cultural enthusiasms. One of the documentaries he disliked was about the Royal Academy School of Art:

One often talks about being driven to drink. I have to record that the second programme in the 'All Sorts to Make a World' series sent me pubwards shivering with rage. This [documentary], 'Art for Whose Sake?', was as wretched a gallimaufrey of phoney aesthetics and scruffy-underdog whining as ever steamed up from the dog-end littered floor of a Soho-wine-club. [You'll notice that Burgess's insults are often much too literary to be really offensive.] We went to the Royal Academy School of Art to meet students who cultivated a deliberate lack of personal allure … Young Mr Dimbleby was their voice when he said that if photography had been invented earlier, perhaps patrons of art would not still be so obsessed with the representational. What it is now a moral duty to buy is the abstract canvas, apparently, and we do foul wrong to ask for something as reasonable as an imaginative composition of shapes that have their origin in the real world. Anyway, said these students, in the last analysis we only paint to please ourselves. Gurt topfloor ararkis wertle dick-dock. That is written to please me, and to hell with communication. I may add that these young painters (not the sculptors; the sculptors were different) spoke as graceless an English as I have heard in a long time.

There is more than a suggestion here of what Umberto Eco has called 'apocalyptic' cultural criticism, which steadfastly refuses to see any virtue in such things as experimental, abstract or non-representational art. Such criticism is terribly nostalgic for a period when painters wished to please their public with recognisable images – yet it's surprising to find Burgess articulating such a position in the same magazine column where he regularly celebrates the difficult, 'elitist' art of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot or Benjamin Britten.

I want to illustrate this problem more clearly with reference to the Engineering Building at Leicester University, designed by the architect Sir James Stirling, completed in 1965 and discussed by Burgess in his *Listener* column in the same year. There were four other documentaries under review in the same week: two about ballet (examining the careers of Rudolf Nureyev and Morgot Fonteyn), one about a playwright from Bolton called Henry Livings, and one about the conductor Sir John Barbirolli. The Leicester Engineering Building had been discussed in a *Monitor* documentary which also contained a feature on the architecture of South African townships. Describing James Stirling's Leicester building, Burgess deplores what he calls its functionalism, though he concedes that, in a broadcast interview, Stirling 'exhibited the proper artist's passion.' The review continues:

I suppose laymen like myself worry about contemporary architecture because the necessary excitement of the concept is so rarely conveyed in the finished product – different from the other arts. What can we do about the Leicester achievement except admire without being moved? And it's nothing to do with engineers who, moving others, are themselves as stone. Are we (if there are any such) moved by new theological colleges?

This strikes me as a maddening response to Stirling's majestic structure, which surely ranks alongside Coventry Cathedral as one of the most impressive post-1945 buildings in England. (Stirling, incidentally, an architect of international reputation, also had a hand in the slightly later New State Gallery in Stuttgart.) I think it's at moments like this that Burgess defines his position as a critic who was willing to embrace Modernism in writing and in music, but was much more sceptical of it in the visual arts. This position is similar in many respects to that of John Betjeman, the poet and broadcaster who was appointed Poet Laureate in 1972. Betjeman was, like Burgess, a writer deeply involved in journalism and television, and both men shared the conviction that Modernism was acceptable in literature but a corrosive or alienating force in painting and architecture. Betjeman was well known as the champion of Victorian Neo-Gothic church architecture, and he had argued the case against Modernist buildings both on the BBC and in the pages of the *Architectural Review*, where he worked as an editor. Writing of the houses in the average English town, Betjeman said: 'They bear no relation to the landscape in either material, colour or proportion. They aren't even well built. Electric light poles march with telegraph poles down either side of each road.' Burgess seems to approach architecture with a broadly similar aesthetic in mind when he complains that Stirling's Engineering building fails to move him as, presumably, a Gothic cathedral or the Free Trade Hall in Manchester would have done.

Yet it would be foolish to argue that, simply because you are in favour of certain aspects of the Modernist project, you are therefore obliged to subscribe to all its other manifestations. I think there is a potentially fruitful tension between the Modernist music and writing of which Burgess approves and the painting and architecture which he regards as alienating, inhuman or needlessly solipsistic. One of the basic qualifications for being a television critic (or any other sort of critic) is that it is necessary to have strong opinions, together with a willingness to expose your prejudices. And it is helpful, given the pressures of meeting a weekly deadline, to have a

theory of what you are criticising, even if you don't necessarily state it in any single article. What Burgess's television reviewing tells us is that his reading of Modernism is not at all straightforward. Although he is sympathetic to experimentation and the ditching of the old fixities in some of the arts, his overall response to Modernism comes across as cautious, critical, and sceptical. Taken together, these *Listener* reviews seem to argue that Burgess is determined to preserve his status as a rogue, independent cultural commentator, unwilling to be talked into orthodoxies or ideologies.

Yet Burgess's scepticism extended in the early 1960s to the medium of television itself. In his novel *One Hand Clapping*, published under the pseudonym Joseph Kell in 1961, he describes a working class couple from the north of England, Howard and Janet Shirley, whose leisure time is spent eating food out of tins and watching game shows on television. The point seems to be that such lives are artificial and detached from 'real' life, 'real' food, and traditional forms of culture. Janet's conditioned response to television advertising is, I think, intended to remind us of a Pavlovian dog:

Sometimes in the evening when we sat looking at the TV … the feeling would come over me that it would be nice to have a little child upstairs calling down, 'Mummy.' This was especially during the commercials, showing mother and daughter both protected by the same soap, or the mother loving her children so much that she washed all their clothes in Blink or whatever it was (they're all the same, really).

Consider this novel alongside Burgess's final television review, and it is possible to see how far his opinions had shifted in the intervening seven years:

Now I give up reviewing but not, I hope, viewing. Television was invented for people like me, a man who can't bear to switch off for fear of missing something. Wherever I go to live now, it will be the same … Of the importance of the medium I have never had any doubt, and I sincerely

despise those who talk of the idiot's lantern.

There is room (though not here) for a more detailed study of the connections between Burgess's fiction and his journalism. The critic Malcolm Bradbury sums up Burgess's achievement well and accurately when he writes: 'If his work sometimes resembled an unstoppable monologue, it was also intellectually, morally and artistically complex. It bounced with ideas, was laden with freight.' The one thing I'd disagree with in Professor Bradbury's summary is his use of the word 'monologue'. Burgess's fiction and his journalism both seem to me to exhibit what Mikhail Bakhtin terms the dialogic imagination, a desire to dramatise intellectual problems and to engage with a variety of sometimes conflicting points of view. Bakhtin writes of Dostoyevsky's 'passion for journalism and his love of the newspaper, his deep and subtle understanding of contemporary society in the cross-section of a single day, where the most diverse and contradictory material is laid out, extensively, side by side and one side against the other.' Perhaps this idea of the newspaper as the site where ideas and ideologies fight it out helps us to understand why Burgess was so drawn to journalism as a literary form. Dialogue takes place most conspicuously in the columns of newspapers. And it is one of the fascinations of Burgess's journalism that we can see ideas evolving, taking shape, shifting around, being discarded, sometimes contradicting each other, but never standing still, always pushing restlessly onwards.

In terms of the considerable light they throw on his other writing, Burgess's articles for the *Listen er*
have outlived many (if not quite all) of the books and television programmes he reviewed there. I would argue that these pieces of journalism are worth having in their own right, both as a record of their time and because they display so many of the qualities which we value in Burgess's novels, qualities such as word-play and unreliable narration – but also reflections on the creative process, and moments of autobiography. Burgess was invariably a careful and performative writer, and the journalism I've been discussing frequently connects in unexpected ways with the concerns of his novels. Having said that, I want to add that the pieces Burgess wrote for the *Listener*
represent more than an interesting series of footnotes which might help us to make a reading of his fiction. Although they are also worth having for that reason, they are part of a much larger body of journalistic writing which merits closer attention than it has received so far.

Everyone who values Burgess's writing will have welcomed Ben Forkner's recent edition of hitherto uncollected essays, *One Man's Chorus* (1998), which has brought back into circulation many items of literary and biographical interest. One of the fascinations of this book is that it has been edited from typescripts, so it restores the pieces to their original state, prior to any editorial cuts.

The hard job of collecting everything still remains to be done, and I can think of no better institution than the Anthony Burgess Centre to house a complete archive of Burgess's journalistic writing. For the future, what is needed is a complete and properly annotated edition of Burgess's journalism – similar to Peter Davison's recent collected edition of the works of George Orwell. If it is to be done thoroughly, then it seems to me that this task is an urgent one. Although many of the publishers and editors who commissioned Burgess are still alive, some of them are advancing in years. Others, such as Maurice Ashley and Terence Kilmartin, are already dead. Those who survive will be able to provide important contextual information about the process of editing Burgess's work, and their memories of the institutions which published him will be crucial to the complete, annotated edition which I am proposing.

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