whole project increasingly vulnerable.

The shuttle, the workhorse of NASA's short-term strategy, is itself considered doubtful. The Pentagon and commercial satellite owners have returned to using low-tech disposable launchers, and NASA is having to consider an unmanned, cargo-carrying version to cut down launch costs.

One of the legends of the American space programme is that the planning for the successful 1975 link-up between Apollo 18 and Soyuz 19 was partly inspired by a film called Marooned, about the rescue of a stranded astronaut by a cosmonaut. Marooned was by no means the only (and certainly not the best) film to be associated with the American space effort. Destination Moon and, to a lesser extent, Rocketship XM both released in 1950 and both about manned moon missions (which, in the case of Rocketship XM, accidentally ended up on Mars), primed the popular imagination, and in turn the federal funding pump, with the idea that such missions were technically feasible and ideologically desirable.

In the late Sixties, when NASA was flying at its highest, Star Trek ran its three-year run. Calling the prototype shuttle Enterprise a tribute to the show's contribution to the agency's cultural status. Star Wars had an even more direct influence over the American space effort, even if it was the black space effort. Without it, without the accompanying vision of beam weapons, SDI would never have appeared feasible, let alone desirable.

Outer space is a fictional as much as a physical realm, and NASA shares along with writers and film-makers the task of exploring it. This, is perhaps, the agency's most important collaboration.

Shots of Jupiter's polychromatic atmosphere used in 2010, the 1985 follow-up to 2001: A Space Odyssey, were computer-enhanced images gathered by the Voyager probe. Similarly, NASA used 2001: A Space Odyssey, calling the command module for Apollo 13, which was launched two years after the film's release, Odyssey.

Such cultural exchanges are individually insignificant but collectively essential to making the exploration of space-fictional and actual—viable. They enable anyone to become an Earth-bound astronaut, to participate in space research. All that NASA has to do to exploit this exchange is accept the value of vicariousness. It should concentrate on developing and launching unmanned probes capable of collecting the data—the images, the rock sample data, the seismographic and atmospheric readings—needed to build up a detailed model, a convincing simulation of the solar system than can be explored on Earth.

In The Right Stuff, Tom Wolfe wrote: "This thing was such an unbelievably good deal, it was as if "astronaut" were an honorific, like "champion" or "superstar". Unfortunately for NASA, it costs a good deal, a good deal more than it is ever likely to be able to afford."

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CHANGING

CHANNELS

ANTHONY SMITH, retiring Director of the British Film Institute, in the third of a special series, interviews MICHAEL GRADE, who has recently taken over the role of Chief Executive at Channel 4, vacated by Jeremy Isaacs, who was interviewed last week.

ANTHONY SMITH: Michael Grade, before he joined Channel 4, was in charge of the programming of both the BBC's channels and had a hand in the whole evolution of BBC policy as the Corporation began to confront the implications of the new technical and political environment. He was there during most of the convulsions provided by the 'Real Lives' programme, the 'Zircon' affair, the sacking of the Director-General, the whole fiasco over the satellite investment and other upheavals, until a substantially new régime was established at the senior levels of the Corporation.

MICHAEL GRADE: Well, it depends what
you mean by independent, of course. They are a very independent body of people who believe fiercely and passionately and most sincerely in the independence of the BBC as an institution. They believe in the constitutional distance that the BBC needs to have from government, and so on. Where the other parts perhaps, in their political persuasion, I don't mean necessarily along party lines, but generally in their background, in the way they see the world. They're not representative, if you like, of the electorate. They are very much like-minded, so if a problem arises, you don't get the full rigour of an honest debate, seen from different angles. I remember my experience when I was there, they tended all to have the same view on any one issue, which was of some concern, I think.

A lot of the new appointments have been given that now, perhaps, rather over-worked label ' Thatcherite'. People who use it assume that they support one faction of one political party. Perhaps it's just a mood of this moment in British history. Does that in fact feed its way into programme judgments?

Well, let me say straightforwardly I do not believe for one single moment that the Board of Governors of the BBC as I knew them, or even as they're constituted today, would take an instruction from government, under any circumstances whatsoever. Whatever their beliefs, I do believe genuinely that they would stand by the independence of the BBC at all times, irrespective of any other considerations. Nevertheless, when you get to politically contentious programmes—for example, Tumbledown—it can be very difficult. If you remember, the Tumbledown play got caught up in the row over the fact that we decided not to proceed with the Ian Curteis faction play about the conduct of the political background in the UK to, the Falklands War. And there was something of a row about the fact that we had decided not to go ahead with that, lumped in with Charles Wood's play about the life of young Captain Lawrence, which was immediately dubbed by the Daily Mail 'a left-wing play', whatever that is. It was very difficult to persuade the Governors that the two things were separate issues, that indeed we were making professional judgments based on quality of the scripts. It was terribly difficult to extricate ourselves from the political background and the agenda that had been set by the right-wing newspapers, which suggests that they were in sympathy with the sorts of thing the Daily Mail was saying at the time.

But isn't that what the Governors are supposed to do—create that separation between what the politicians are saying and what the programme-makers are doing?

That's their constitutional role, of course. I think they are there to represent the public interest, and I don't find it in my view, is best served on a Board of BBC Governors which is constituted of people who represent all kinds of different points of view. You want a decent body of opinion that reflects the nature of the audience.

As a senior executive, are you constantly second-guessing the possible judgments, programme by programme, of a Board which has been known to have been chosen by the present Prime Minister?

No, I don't think so. In my experience, it made you think harder; it's a step along the way to self-censorship. I think it made us think, prepare our cases harder, do our homework much harder, in checking the legal aspects of the programme, or making sure that the journalistic conduct during the investigation of a programme was immaculate before you took the other case. I think that's a good thing in the end.

Certainly the Governors are working in a world of newly defined constraints in respect of secrecy, violence, obscenity.

I do think, if I was going to be critical of the BBC Governors, I wouldn't criticise them for political bias, I would criticise them for not taking a lead on the issues that you hit on. They have been far too involved in the day-to-day management of the BBC, which is a relic of a past era of breakdown of trust between the Board of Governors and the Board of Management. That is gradually being restored. They've been desperately reactive and therefore terribly defensive, and I think that's been very damaging for the industry.

In the case of the Obscene Publications Bill, two or three years ago, there were two Private Members' Bills to bring broadcasting under the 1969 Obscene Publications Act with a new test of obscenity, both of which were drafted, rather cobbled together, and were deeply destructive to the industry. When the Prime Minister went through the lobby in the House of Commons on the Second Reading of Winston Churchill's Bill the Governors still hadn't discussed it.

Are the Governors failing, nowadays, to identify with the business of broadcasting? Are they trying to be Governors over broadcasting rather than within it?

The business of running the BBC, now a billion-pound corporation, is an enormously onerous task. The amount of business that the Governors have to get through, the amount of detail, is far too much for lay people to begin to understand. I'm sure that Mike Breckland and Duke Hussey will work towards the day where real trust exists between the Executive and the Governors so that much more of the decision-making process can be delegated, so that the Governors themselves can actually get their heads up and look at the horizon a bit more. The future of public service broadcasting is in their hands, and the future of public service broadcasting is not just today's row.

The most nonsensical row at the BBC was the row over Doctor Who. I took Doctor Who off for being too violent, and it was decided not to make the reason public at the time. I think it was a mistake to start a whole violence debate, although it seemed to me a perfectly good reason to take a programme off that was going out at five o'clock on a Saturday evening with kids watching. Bill Cotton and I didn't bother to tell the Governors, and the tabloids got hold of it and there was 'GRADEN AXES DOCTOR WHO' and all that stuff—millions crying in the streets, civil unrest, etc, etc. The Governors went absolutely potty about this completely fabricated nonsense. Perhaps that is the way the Governors were taking their agenda from a hysterical circulation war in Fleet Street. The fact that Doctor Who was one of the least popular programmes in the whole of the BBC canon, nothing to with it, the fact that it was taken off because it was too violent, nothing to do with it. They just saw those big headlines in the tabloids, and instinctively reacted. It was only an issue because they made it an issue.

There are certain newspaper campaigns that you have to take very seriously. Nine out of ten of them are stick-ups. Real Lives was a classic stick-up by the Sunday Times. You've got to have the courage to rise above it and not respond.

But it was such a stick-up that led to probably more consequences within the BBC than any other event: 'Real Lives'. Real Lives was an interview with two duly elected officials in Northern Ireland, one on the Republican side and one on the Protestant side, two politically elected extensions, one alleged to be an nazi. It was never proven to have been, a staff chief in the IRA. The programme looked at both their lives and showed who the leaders were, day to day, on the extremes of the sectarian political divide. I looked at the programme and then referred it to Bill Cotton, the Managing Director. I said this looks perfectly fine to me—I don't have any problem with it—but you ought to see it because there may be a bit of a fuss. Bill looked at it and thought it was fine... so it went on.

The Sunday Times correspondent in Washington caught Mrs Thatcher on a visit there and said if a television company was going to broadcast a programme that was going to give 30 minutes of airtime to a Republican sympathiser, what would she say. And she said words to the effect—I'm paraphrasing, you know—that it was a disgrace and it should never happen and she'd be very angry, etc, etc. She was never told what the programme was. That was how the row started. This incident was followed by a letter from the Home Secretary to the Chairman of the BBC.

And then the whole thing unfolded from there. But what are the long-term consequences of that, in the BBC and in British television as a whole? Could any producer now return to such a programme? Could you interview either of those two people again, do a film about their lives?

I would think so, yes, provided you met all the strictures and all the guidelines that are laid down; if you were sure of your ground and you were convinced the programme had been responsibly and properly handled and that it was a matter of public interest. You would have a devil of a job—you'd have to go through the hooks to get it made. Once you'd made it, provided you had done what you said you were going to do, I've no doubt the BBC would screen it.
Michael Grade

Of course, Michael, we're seeing a very parallel, not exactly identical, situation at the present time in respect of the Thames Television programme about Gibraltar. Now, there you have enormous pressure from leading articles, from very senior people in government, who believe that the Thames Television programme was based on some kind of falsehood, or contained an important falsehood. And Thames is really the object of a kind of lynch mob at the present time. How do you think the BBC would handle that today?

I suspect they would handle it exactly the same way that Thames is handling it, which is to look at the allegations of misdeeds, in the conduct of the making of the programme, examine them carefully.

And supposing, then—let's take our wholly mythical case—you discover that your programme was right after all. What would you then do to fight back against the tide of opposition?

I thought that Bill Cotton and Ron Neil, the Editor of BBC Television News' rebuttal of the Tebbit evidence on the bombing Gadafi film was a marvellous piece of work. They took it line by line and admitted there were errors, but rebutted it line by line. I thought that was extremely effective. I think in the case of this mythical programme, how is the public interest better served, by a witch-hunt against Thames and electronic journalists or by asking questions and bringing the facts of the inquest and the events behind them to the public?

And yet it must be very frightening for Thames Television at the present time. They must be very nervous.

The only reason to be nervous is if the inquiry shows up anything that hadn't come to light before, concerning the basis upon which they originally made the judgment to put the programme forward for transmission, what they told the IBA, and so on.

But the incident does reinforce, does it not, the importance of there being a public and independent television service which doesn't have to fight to be refranchised every ten years or so?

You're always going to get pressure. The BBC doesn't have to fight every year for its licence, but they review it at some point. They always have that threat, but it's not sudden death, as it is in ITV.

What about the BBC's financial basis and the licence fee? It appears that we have a licence fee for the next few years. It's being guaranteed, somewhat, against inflation. Is that sufficient to guarantee an independent BBC in the medium long term?

Well, yes, it Douglas Hurd who said the other week, the licence fee is not immorally. A wonderful political phrase that. I think the licence fee is, in the end, the cheapest way for people to get a range of services on television: a range of quality and a range of experience from that television at a price that most people can afford. In the end it's an imperfect form of subscription which is the most brilliant way ever invented of turning the public's money into television programmes at an extraordinarily low price. It is hard to see how it can be replaced.

But if you project the situation forwards to a BBC living not in a four-channel system but with lots of channels coming by all sorts of means, some working through subscription. In those circumstances, would people agree to pay voluntarily a sum of money every year?

It's very difficult to project that far ahead. I think that in the new market to come, as the private sector fragments and becomes very competitive, if the BBC can hang on to the high ground of British television, while remaining popular and entertaining, then they are going to shine like a beacon in British broadcasting and people are going to value it more than they have ever valued it before. I genuinely believe that it will be seen to be priceless in the next ten years. If they keep their nerve, and can keep their eye on the higher ground. I don't mean just do the difficult programmes that the marketplace won't pay for—the current affairs and the arts and the opera, and so on. They've still got to do Only Fools and Horses, and they've still got to do the shows that nobody else can do.

But some of the public in a multi-channel future might still reject paying a licence fee?

Let's have a referendum. Why should it be left to the politicians to decide? Why shouldn't the public have a say in this? They're shareholders, in a sense, of the BBC; they pay the licence fee, they pay the wages at the BBC. Let's take it out of the political arena. Do you want the licence fee or not? But the public will have to be informed as to what the alternative is going to cost.

Then by what technique can an organisation like the BBC conduct a political campaign to maintain its support?

It starts and ends with programmes. The best campaign for the BBC is its programmes. The last time the BBC ran into serious trouble was during the nonsense row about The Thorn Birds against Jewel in the Crown, and that was symptomatic of a period in which the BBC programmes had fallen a little bit. They weren't striking the rate of success that people believe the BBC ought to have. Once The Singing Detective and other new programmes started to come along, the whole debate altered. You could feel the spotlight shifting away from W12 down to Brompton Road and Knighton House, which is the trade association of ITV, and the BBC for a while had a decent run and people began to appreciate it. It all comes from the programmes and if you can prove to the politicians in the end that you have the support of the public through programmes, that's the most effective political response.

Well, now, supposing the Government wanted to move to a direct grant to the BBC? How strong would be the BBC and the public resistance to that, if at all?

I would personally resist it very strongly. In principle, the BBC would be that much closer to government control. Take the history of the grant-in-aid, the grant which finances the BBC World Service, one of the great British achievements, cultural and journalistic. They have a devil of a time each year getting their money and their services are cut at the wrong time for the wrong reason. It's a nightmare situation. I would hope the BBC would resist.

I wonder if, when Mrs Thatcher as we imagine her, looks at television, doesn't she rather see the same small group of people running it, Bax-and-Cox, with the same values and mores, to the immense admiration of the rest of the world, but perhaps very frustrating to politicians who want to bring about change?

We need to bring new people in, we need to bring different voices and people from different experiences, different generations into the industry, otherwise it solidifies. You need that expansion, and we're going to get it. The White Paper is undoubtedly going to bring in a number of channels, there's going to be a shake-up in ITV, and so on. That's a good thing. The management of that change, in order to preserve the best of what currently exists and eliminate the worst aspects of broadcasting, is something that they're struggling with now. That is why it's taken so long to get a White Paper together.

Last week I asked Jeremy Isaacs when we reached this point what could I ask Michael Grade next week. And he said, ask him what is his vision of Channel 4. If forced to put that in a nutshell, what would you say?

I would have to say that I don't personally have my own vision of Channel 4 because that's not the way I work. I think that is extremely limiting. My vision of Channel 4 is a place where an eclectic mix of experience and ingenuity and enterprise and imagination and the kind of stuff that commissioning editors can come together and work in a climate in which their passions and their interests can be brought forth on to the screen in a diversity. I don't believe that a personal vision and diversity are two things that sit together, and the whole way that I've structured the channel has been to devise the creative decision-making and the creative vision down to the commissioning editors; that's always how I've worked. At the end of the day, my job is picking those people and I stand or fall on my ability to choose people to run those different areas of programming. That's how I've always worked and that's the way I will continue to work.

Next week: Paul Fox.