



## **Arts, Culture and Empathy**

**A lecture by Peter Bazalgette**

**25 January 2017**

Roly, thank you very much for your generous introduction. Much appreciated, and I'm really delighted to hear what you said and I'd like to thank you for hosting this lecture and indeed hosting this book launch. And I know at the British Library we are a little short of books and so I think it's an act of generosity on my part to provide yet one more book for you. And thank you all very much for coming this evening. It's fantastic to see so many good friends and valued colleagues here tonight.

When I became Chair of Arts Council England four years ago, I understood that I'd have to travel very widely around the country. I knew I should be spending more than half my time outside London and I knew that would probably mean slightly higher expenses. Now, being of a neurotic disposition I could just see that FOI request coming in from a public-spirited tabloid, revealing the profligacy of the new Chair. They'd write a story which would be full of what I think we've now learnt to call "alternative facts". So, for entirely base motives, I chose to take a cut in the Chair's stipend. Now no one could get at me. The salary forgone ticked up nicely over four years and my colleagues at ACE have had a very nice surprise for me at the end of my term. They've taken that saved money and spent it, not on me but on the Arts Council Collection. The Arts Council Collection, as you know, 8,000 works of art, 20th-century, 21st-century contemporary art, and they've added one more piece. So they've used that money to make a new acquisition, and here it is. This magnificent Yinka Shonibare sculpture. It's the...Yeah, exactly! Very good! Just for clarity it's the bit on the left that is the...

It's a lovely piece, isn't it? Look, it's absolutely just full of the characteristic excitement and love and joy and fun that... It's Fragonard-inspired, it's got a sort of Rococo exuberance. And all I can say about the figure on the right is that I did want to go down and have a look at it and so they stole a photograph of me. And I was... Jill Constantine who runs the Arts Council Collection is here tonight.

I was immensely grateful to get out afterwards because it dawned on me as I was standing beside it that probably what happens to retiring Arts Council Chairs is they get put in a drawer at the Arts Council Collection. Mummified, you know, like Lenin, and probably brought out on state occasions. But anyway here I am. I got out. Now, the lecture.

Arts, Culture and Empathy. why have I picked that subject? Well, as you may have gathered, tomorrow I do indeed - Roly, yes - publish a book about our growing scientific understanding of empathy and what it means more broadly for public policy. We're going to actually give you, with reckless generosity... We're going to give you a copy on



the way out. Take... Yes, I know. That noise was like the sound you get from the audiences in game shows. You know? That was the "tonight's star prize" noise, wasn't it? But anyway, yes, you are going to be given a copy. Please take a look at it. And if you like it, please tell your friends, and obviously by that I mean your Facebook friends.

So what sparked my interest in empathy? Two things. First, helping the government design a new memorial to the Holocaust in Central London has meant meeting elderly survivors of the concentration camps and hearing first-hand their stories of what happens in a society apparently without empathy.

And, secondly, the work we've been doing with all our friends in the arts sector properly to define what the benefits are of a public investment in arts and culture, something Roly referred to earlier. As many of you here know, we've called this the Holistic Case for the Public Support of Arts and Culture and we intone about it about as frequently as Thomas Cranmer did the Thirty-nine Articles. It's about four key benefits: Intrinsic, Social, Educational, and Economic. I won't be talking about the economy tonight. It's important but it's not why we invest in arts and culture. I will touch on the social and the educational. But it's one of the intrinsic benefits which has prompted this book. That's the second thing that's prompted the book.

So, unpacking the intrinsic, along with inspiration, excitement, entertainment, identity, we came up with this phrase "empathetic citizens". My good friend Alan Davey sitting there was chief executive of the Arts Council at the time. It was a hot July afternoon in your office. We had a felt-tip and a flip chart. We looked as though we were trying to sell margarine actually. And we were putting it together, weren't we? And that phrase somehow was plucked out of the ether that afternoon. Now, what we thought we meant by "empathetic citizens" was people with the precious ability to put themselves in someone else's shoes, see things from their perspective. The insight was that arts and culture, at their core, are a telling of human stories. Stories that rely on and feed on our basic instinct for empathy. And when that empathy results in positive behaviour, they're a force for good.

But we were gratified to discover that behind the phrase "empathetic citizens" lies an extraordinary scientific story and an important lesson for civil society. This is then what prompted me to write *The Empathy Instinct*, investigating what science means for nurturing young children, kinder health and social care, effective criminal justice with genuine rehabilitation, tackling racial and religious strife, but also why we invest public money in socially positive, empathetic arts and culture. Tonight that's what I'm going to explore, how arts and culture promote empathy.

Now, first I want you to imagine that, instead of sitting here listening to me, you're in a



theatre tonight, or the cinema, or listening to a radio play or watching a TV drama or even having a bedtime story read to you as a child. As with most of the arts and popular culture, you'll be hearing a human story which, if it's any good, will be engaging you both intellectually and emotionally. But just stop for a moment and think how miraculous that is. You're hearing something that's not happening to you but someone else, someone you don't know. Yet you empathise with them. And I haven't mentioned the real miracle yet. You're engaged emotionally and yet you appreciate that not a word of it is real. These are all entirely fictional characters. So what's going on in your brain, enabling this brilliant leap of imagination?

Well, for a start, we now think there are mirror neurons helping you feel what it's like for one of those fictional characters. As far back as the 18th century, the economist and philosopher Adam Smith... Yes. He doesn't look too bad, does he, there? ..asked why we feel nervous when we see someone else walk a tightrope. Interesting question. In the 1990s mirror neurons were discovered in monkeys, suggesting the answer. The same part of their brains activated whether they were eating a grape themselves or just watching another monkey eat a grape. It seems that the human brain works in a similar way. In 2007 an art historian and a neuroscientist tested people viewing Michelangelo's Prisoners and Goya's Disasters of War. They discovered that, in their brain activity, the people watching the works simulated the emotional expressions and the movement implied in the art. There's research which shows similar neurological patterns among dance audiences too. And Wired magazine more recently reported on brain scans of movie-goers watching the film Black Swan. I don't know how many of you saw that film. It's a very intense film and as the ballet dancer in the story hallucinates the brain patterns of the audience briefly showed a similar, disturbed read-out.

Jonathan Gottschall in *The Storytelling Animal* says this: "The constant firing of our neurons in response to fictional stimuli strengthens and redefines the neural pathways that lead to the skilful navigation of life's problems." So, from *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* to *Pride and Prejudice*, we're a species of story-tellers and story-listeners. Beyond the diversion of entertainment there are good reasons for it. It helps us to learn to read the emotions of others.

To do that, it's now known that we use a number of different regions of the brain. For example, your amygdala helps you read the emotions of other people in their eyes and their general facial expressions. Another region, your anterior cingulate cortex, activates not only when you're in pain but when you see someone else in pain. And your medial prefrontal cortex is a sort of hub for processing your own and others' thoughts and feelings.

How do we know about this? Because of functional magnetic resonance imaging. That's



the MRI scanner to you and me. In the past 25 years it's enabled the mapping of the human brain to reveal what Simon Baron-Cohen, who's Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at Cambridge, calls the empathy circuit, the ten or more regions so far identified which contribute to our complex empathetic capacity. So here's something that every potential funder of the arts should understand. Arts and popular culture, with their telling of stories about the human condition, are, if you like, the empathy gymnasium. And why does that matter? Because empathy is a glue that enables families, communities and countries to function in a civil and civilised manner. If you can see things from someone else's point of view, then you can act appropriately towards them. That's the compassion bit. The point about empathy is that, on its own, it's not enough. The real value is what it can lead to, what you might call sympathetic action.

Now, long before the MRI scanner, artists were exploring this, extraordinarily... extraordinarily perceptively. Here's two of our greatest. Shakespeare in his Sonnet 23: "to hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit." In other words, how you read someone else's face and emotions are essential to connecting with them. Now Shelley: "A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively... the pleasures and pains of his species must become his own." Then George Eliot thought deeply about what she called "the sympathetic imagination". In my book I've elected her an honorary neuroscientist, because we analysed for the book *Middlemarch*, arguably her greatest novel, and in it extraordinarily she anticipated and analysed several precise elements of what we now call empathy. Long before these, Aristotle famously identified "pity and fear" as the two emotions evoked in the audiences of Greek drama, leading towards what he called "catharsis". Pity is, of course, an example of sympathy, the compassion that can result from empathy. Empathy, then, helps us understand others and has the potential to lead to positive actions towards them.

I can think of no more acute example of art evoking pity and fear this past year than Jeremy Deller's magnificent event to commemorate the first day of the Battle of the Somme, *We're Here Because We're Here*, part of the whole 14-18 NOW programme. Hundreds of volunteers were carefully rehearsed by the Birmingham REP and the National Theatre. Then in 30 locations, dressed in First World War uniforms, they marched silently into public spaces unannounced. I witnessed this myself at Waterloo Station. When asked by commuters why they were there, they simply presented a card to them. On it was the individual name of a Tommy killed that day in battle. Here's a flavour from a BBC4 feature documentary about it. Let's have a look.

So that's the voice of Jeremy Deller, relating how some of those reading the cards burst into tears as the full import of the performance dawned on them. Fear for the soldiers, pity for their fate.



Fear, it turns out, is an essential element of our empathy equipment. If you feel fear, you can also identify it in others. One American psychologist calls fear: "the only neurocognitive requirement for generating sympathetic concern." Psychopaths, of course, display a failure of empathy and a key indicator of psychopathy is fearlessness. I went to a brilliant production of Mozart's Don Giovanni by the English Touring Opera at the Hackney Empire. We watched the Don, played by George von Bergen, manipulate, cheat, seduce and kill. Then we heard him sing this line: "I'll not be called a coward, I've never been afraid." The librettist, Da Ponte, had worked out exactly how empathy and the empathy instinct works and doesn't work. As did, of course, Shakespeare. Those of us who were lucky enough to witness Ralph Fiennes in Richard III at the Almeida Theatre last year saw Richard murder his way to the throne and utter this line: "Conscience is but a word that cowards use." Now, you've got two different writers who've worked out what empathy is, hundreds of years before the MRI scanner.

Another Shakespeare play, Othello, yields one of the most sustained studies of psychopathy ever written. I was privileged to go to Nick Hytner's production at the National Theatre, in which Rory Kinnear's sociopathic Iago chilled the blood. Here, thanks to Shakespeare's brilliance, we learn even more about empathy, because in one sense Iago is highly empathetic. With cruel perception he understands Othello perfectly and plays him like a fiddle. This is called cognitive empathy, which he has in spades. What he lacks completely is the other essential half of the equation, emotional empathy, where we feel another's pain or joy and are thus able to show compassion. Desdemona, of course, displays complete empathy for Othello, and even articulates it. Here's one of her lines. "I saw Othello's visage in his mind, and to his honour and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate." "Visage in his mind" - there's the sympathetic imagination.

Every year the Shakespeare Schools Festival helps thousands of school pupils perform 30-minute versions of Shakespeare plays in professional theatres. Should we be surprised to find its most recent evaluation had seven out of ten teachers judging that participants were then better able to empathise with their peers and their adults? And should we not be alarmed that the arts are being marginalised in some schools? Art, design, dance, drama, music - they belong in the curriculum.

So, Iago, like all sociopaths, displays an emotional empathy deficit. But there's another empathy deficit which has a surprising and rather inspiring connection with the arts. People on the autistic spectrum display underactivity in the parts of the brain associated with empathy. So they have difficulty, for example, sometimes working out what others that they meet are thinking or feeling. They can't always read our faces or interpret our tone of voice. I've learnt something about this from my friend Jon Adams, who's here tonight. Jon is an artist diagnosed with



Asperger's, who sat on our South-West Area Council. He's taught me to talk about neurodivergence and to celebrate this phenomenon as a gift. People with Asperger's can be brilliant systematisers but their social failings are often misunderstood. As Jon Adams will tell you, they also have a profound sense of humanity. It may not be socially spontaneous, but it's there and explains why some of our greatest-ever artists, exploring the heights and plumbing the depths of our experience and emotions, might today have been diagnosed as Asperger's. It's alleged Mozart, Beethoven, Richard Strauss, Michelangelo, van Gogh, Lowry, Jane Austen, Mark Twain, Franz Kafka. If true, there is something really to celebrate.

Roman Krznaric wrote a book about empathy. He quotes in it *The Persians* by Aeschylus. The dramatist challenged his Greek audience to imagine what it was like for their enemies to suffer the slaughter of battle. Radically, the play features Persian wives mourning their lost husbands, just as Greek wives had done following the conflict between the two powers. So to experience a story in that way is to participate in it.

But it can be even more powerful to perform, like the children in the Shakespeare Schools Festival that I mentioned or indeed like singing in a choir or playing in a band. In 2012, the journal *Psychology of Music* published a Cambridge study which concluded that interacting with a group through music makes us more emotionally attuned to others, even beyond the immediate setting. And if you've ever sung in a choir or played in an orchestra you'll say to me, "Of course." It may seem a mysterious alchemy when music stirs us, but there are now a number of studies which show how listening to melody can release hormones in our brain, such as the neurotransmitters prolactin and oxytocin. These are also the hormones which play an important part in our neurologically-driven empathetic responses.

So, empathy is an extraordinary, human gift that enables functioning societies. The arts allow us to rehearse it and, in the process, also help us to deploy it. We know far more about the empathy instinct than we ever did before thanks to brain mapping and the MRI scanner. And neuroscientists, geneticists, psychologists and medics are doing the work to demonstrate just how pro-empathetic and pro-social the arts are.

Literature, theatre, dance, music, art, museums... These are some of the rooms in the empathy gymnasium. Film, TV, radio, video games at their best... These represent other rooms too. Keith Oatley - now, he's both a novelist and a cognitive psychologist - affirms how literature works in this way. He calls it a "safe space" in which to "practise" empathy. He also points to the universality of the phenomenon. Indian poetry promotes the idea of fictional characters being created in our minds by a process of suggestion. The Sanskrit word for this is *dhvani* and gives rise to empathetic literary emotions which are called *rasas*.



Empathy is also becoming more explicit in the practice of the arts here in Britain. There's the virtual Empathy Museum which last year mounted a travelling exhibition called "Walk a Mile in my Shoes". Visitors... Did some of you go to it? Yes. I think you're nodding. Because visitors put on headphones to listen to people telling their life stories, while you actually wore their shoes. Amazing. And last summer the London International Festival of Theatre, LIFT, put on the play, Minefield. This required three British and three Argentinian veterans of the Falklands War to perform together. It involved lengthy development where the participants got to understand their differing experiences, and culminated in their all playing in a band together. One review called it "a cathartic reunion".

So the empathy gymnasium of arts and culture is a public space in which we can nurture our better instincts. And as this is increasingly understood, arts and culture are also playing a bigger role in the public realm, for instance, health. This is where systematically attending to empathy results in sympathetic behaviour. At Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals all the student doctors take the Circle of Care course in their fourth year. It's a response to recent scandals such as the failure of decent, humane care at Mid Staffs. Circle of Care deploys a series of theatre-led exercises, such as voice development and movement classes, designed to hone skills including verbal and non-verbal communication and appreciation of the person. By the way, this is important because the evidence is clear. Patients who are shown empathy get better more quickly. And in care homes, where the accent should be on care but often isn't, Arts Council England has been collaborating with the Baring Foundation to fund cultural activities. At Abbeyfield care homes in Nottingham they've been taking live digital transmissions of concerts from the city's Theatre Royal, and the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, no less, even recorded an exclusive video for the chain of care homes about the treasures of Chatsworth.

It should not surprise us that GPs are now beginning to refer patients to arts organisations. Dance is being shown to be a glorious way of taking exercise, better than those miserable health clubs with their torture chambers and their incredibly high subscription charges. Family doctors are now also directing patients to art classes, Books on Prescription and choir activities, all particularly beneficial for those with mental health problems. Talking of this growing trend for so-called "social prescribing", one GP in Gloucestershire told me recently, "I've got more evidence that the arts work than I ever had that Prozac worked." So there you go. Oh, sorry. Somebody's on Prozac obviously. They disagree with me. Maybe not.

Another growing role for the arts is in prisons, not a mandatory part of the offenders' education service, but at least it's expanding. Of course, the Koestler Trust has been running prisoners' art competitions for 55 years and they also, of course, offer creative



writing. The Reader Organisation now has volunteers who read aloud in prisons to inmates who were never read to as children. Dance United runs dance classes for young offenders, often giving those who are not naturally articulate an eloquent alternative to words. The Clean Break Theatre Company puts on plays about marital strife for men convicted of domestic violence. In Norway the rate of reoffending is 20%. In the UK, give or take, it's around 60%. The accent in Norway is much more on rehabilitation, in which arts and culture play a key role.

Finally, in education, the experimental Empathy Lab is collaborating with a handful of primary schools. They organise specific empathy lessons with stories, drama and music. They also work relevant values into the core principles of their schools. These are designed to promote key empathetic skills: communication, the ability to understand and value others' feelings, strong imagination and the capacity for reflection. A pretty good list. But is it one which we feel we've been perhaps in short supply of in the year that's just gone?

2016 was a pretty dramatic, if not traumatic, year. Our referendum result was followed by an outbreak of overt racism, both online and in our streets, which shocked Leavers and Remainers alike. Now, it may sound counter-intuitive, but empathy may well be to blame. Consider an observation from leading primatologist Frans de Waal. He's spent a lifetime studying chimpanzees and apes and the strong empathy instinct displayed by those primates. They've got about 80% of the human empathy equipment. Frans wrote this: "We've evolved to hate our enemies, to ignore people we barely know, and to distrust anybody who doesn't look like us. Even if we are largely cooperative within our communities, we become almost a different animal in our treatment of strangers."

So empathy can be problematic. It can make us loyal to our own tribe but hostile to outsiders. Could this be the origins of racism? But when we extend empathy to those outside our tribe, rival football supporters, people of a different race or religion, those of a different age group, whatever it is, that's when we can truly call ourselves civilised. And arts and popular culture are one of the main ways we achieve this. What was the biggest-selling book in the 19th century after the Bible? In the 19th century, yes, in America. Your starter for ten. Any offers? Sorry? Absolutely right. Well done. It was Uncle Tom's Cabin. Now, Uncle Tom's Cabin is a book whose title is today rather disliked, and for good reason. But it did, for the first time, help many white Americans to realise that black people were the same flesh and blood. Uncle Tom's Cabin is credited with having assisted Abraham Lincoln to command the support he needed to prosecute the Civil War, in the cause of a more civil society. There's a connection between this and one of the most successful plays that Arts Council England has helped fund in recent years.





Ira Aldridge was a jobbing black actor born in America whose antecedents had been slaves. Unusually he came to work in Europe in the 1820s. The invitation you received to this lecture had an image of Ira Aldridge as realised by Adrian Lester in the Tricycle's production of *Red Velvet*. He's wearing white make-up, which I will explain in a minute. The play shows how Aldridge happened to be in London at the time of the great tragedian of his day, Edmund Kean. Edmund Kean was playing *Othello* in Covent Garden. When he fell ill, the producer drafted Aldridge in to replace him. Let's have a short reminder of the *Red Velvet* play and remember, of course, the production had to capture the extravagant acting manner of the 19th century. Yes, bear that in mind. And, of course, *Othello*... It's all about the handkerchief:

Now, you heard me mention earlier the *Othello* at the National Theatre which Nick Hytner directed and this happened before that. And Nick came to see *Red Velvet* and greatly enjoyed it. But Adrian Lester told me that when Nick saw him play *Othello* in the manner of Edmund Kean in 1820 he went up to him afterwards and said, "Christ! You're not going to do it like that, are you?" The reaction to Aldridge back in the 1820s, to Aldridge as *Othello*, was immediate and extreme. The public was outraged at a black man playing the part of a black man. The producer bowed to the protests and sacked Aldridge from the part within days. That's what that play is about. The Tricycle's Indhu Rubasingham came across the story and commissioned Lolita Chakrabarti to turn it into a play and Indhu directed it. As you know, it was a multi-award winner. It closes with Aldridge putting on white make-up to play the part of *King Lear*, because the only parts he can get as a black man are those of a white man. Indhu told me this: "Theatre is powerful because it emotionally engages you with character. I feel strongly that you can't change society unless you walk in someone else's shoes, understand a different point of view."

In rural Nottinghamshire, near Newark, is a museum called The National Holocaust Centre. It attracts some 20,000 visitors a year, and one of the most popular exhibits is "The Journey". We enter the life of Leo, a young Jewish boy suffering increasing prejudice and exclusion in 1930s Germany. The centre's been using "The Journey" with schools, particularly in communities which have seen recent influxes of immigrants. And there's been an evaluation of the programme and it concluded that the work they did with the children positively influenced their attitudes and indeed of other young people too towards those who are seen as different from them. So you had children looking at what happened in Germany and realising that other children are just the same, reminding us once again that empathy is crucial, but on its own it's not enough. It's the positive behaviour flowing from it, mediated by the ethics of a civil society, that makes the difference.

So, look, this evening I've talked about street performance, opera, theatre, Shakespeare



in schools, literary fiction, poetry, visual art, dance, museums... And they all have something in common. They all tell us human stories which help us put ourselves in other people's shoes. They nurture the empathy which allows us to reach out beyond our immediate tribe to rivals, opponents and strangers. And when shrewdly deployed they can lead us to change our behaviour towards others. These iterations of arts and culture have something else in common too. They've all been partly funded by you, by paying your taxes and buying your lottery tickets.

When we came up with the phrase "empathetic citizens" we had an idea of what we were getting at. But we discovered behind it lay some revelatory science with huge significance for the arts. Public support of arts and popular culture is one of the ways that we agree to invest in a civil society. Long may we continue to do so.

In my four years as Chair of Arts Council I've seen some inspiring work the length and breadth of the country, one or two examples of which I've been able to mention this evening. And I've been fortunate to work with the talented team at the Arts Council, whom I admire for their unfailing industry, intelligence and creativity. For every Chair, at the end of their time, we can say no more than what's been achieved is "work in progress". But I am particularly proud about three things. That the leaders of our sector are now articulating more powerfully than ever before the value and benefit of their work.

Second, we've been able to grow the sector. Yes, despite cuts in national public funding and despite the particular pressure on local authorities, the cake is now actually bigger, chiefly because of the commercial acumen of our arts and cultural organisations. This does not, by the way, lessen the impact of the grave situation in some local authorities, where some museums are threatened with closure. This is the single biggest challenge currently facing the arts sector.

The third thing we've got on with is spreading the benefit of the arts more widely across the country and to more diverse communities. We're correcting the historic imbalance in favour of London, and we're seeing arts organisations work hard to broaden their audiences and draw on more diverse talents. But, as I say, work in progress.

So I'm... Excited is the word. I'm excited to be handing over to Nick Serota who's with us this evening. He has a lifetime of brilliantly and eloquently making the case for arts and culture. He has always demonstrated the ambition to grow the sector. And of all the leaders of our national museums and galleries, Nick is the person who's most clearly demonstrated he understands what the word "national" really means. All this bodes well for Arts Council England. I know that Nick, working with Darren Henley, our Chief Executive, and our friends at DCMS, several of whom we're delighted to have with us tonight, will continue to re-invent how and why we support arts and culture. So, in conclusion... Dead on time, Roly. Dead on time. If you're thirsty, we're dead on time.



Don't panic. In conclusion, if I may be allowed to take issue with Hippocrates's original aphorism, which I think was mangled into Latin and now I'm going to mangle it again... Instead of "Ars longa, vita brevis", shouldn't it be "Ars longa, vita longa"? Wouldn't that be the empathy instinct at work?

Thank you very much.