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Grayson Perry Speech to the Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards, 11th May 2010

Hello, good evening. I'm afraid that Lady Gaga wasn't available this evening, so you've got me instead.

The last time I spoke publically just after an election, was on the 5th of November 2008. I was at Yale University, and it was the day that Obama won the election. I started my speech by saying "Well done, America." Of course, I was in liberal academia and the audience all went "Woohoo, woohoo!". So I wondered, what shall I say tonight? "Quite well done, Britain"? The only American reference I could think of that roughly matched the situation we now find ourselves in – apparently David Cameron has been to the Palace this evening, and Gordon Brown has left – was looking at the austerity that the next government faces. My mind turned to that famous scene in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* when he's punished by having to paint his Aunt's fence, and he convinces his friends that this is a great honour, and he gets them to *pay* him to have a go at it! And so, you can imagine David Cameron having a similar argument with Nick Clegg, really. And Nick Clegg offering him probably more than a dead rat or a kitten with one eye...

Well, there's one thing of which we can be pretty sure about - whoever's the next culture minister, they will be thinking of cutting the cultural sector. Even though the cultural sector is amazingly valuable to this country, the politicians know that we are a minority; an endangered minority, and very few people are probably going to really bleat loudly if highbrow entertainment gets a little bit of a pinch. During the run-up to the election, there was little talk about the arts. I recently read an article, in which Chris Smith – the former culture secretary – put it down to the fact that people like Alastair Campbell – the spin- doctors – thought that 'real people' watched football and went to pop concerts. And when they use the word 'real', politicians quite often mean depressingly average, sentimental, bitter and anti-intellectual types.

Campbell himself is a fan of Jacques Brel: that's not exactly Robbie Williams. David Cameron likes the Arctic Monkeys; Gordon Brown likes Glee (I'm a great fan of Glee myself) Nick Clegg, he's probably classical music's best friend: he likes Schubert and Chopin. Seems to know what he's talking about, so let's hope that he has an influence on the cultural life of the country coming up.

Those who work in the arts are dedicated to beauty; it's a life and death business for us, although for many, the arts are a 'day-off' leisure activity. I think it's a very serious business. In the art world, I have felt at times like going round Hoxton with a hunting rifle and picking-off – culling – the lame artists, because I think there is a bit of an over-supply. I'm not going to begrudge anybody the experience of learning about art, because it is a very important thing, even if you don't go on to make a living at it. Afterall, there are more important things than money. The cultural sector often talks about the 'happiness economy', which – let's

face it – is the only one that's left intact nowadays, and the Arts are central in promoting an idea of the happiness economy and what makes for a better life, rather than what makes us richer.

Of course, arts organisations will react to these threatening cuts. I was recently at the Cultural Capital Campaign at the British Museum, and there, lined-up on stage, were the panjandrums of high culture - Nicholas Serota, Neil MacGregor, Jude Kelly, Nicholas Hytner, and Alan Davey - all talking about how important to the economy the creative industries are (8% of GDP, an incredible amount given the comparatively small number of people employed in the sector). Yet, I had a suspicion that those people arrayed on the stage were like the glamorous lost leaders of UK Culture PLC, and that the real money is made by computer games designers, high street fashion and – dare I say it – Top Gear doing well in Poland or something like that.

That doesn't mean of course that what we do here isn't important, but it does bring me round to the central issue for me, and why I felt like there was something I wanted to say to you tonight, about art and class; culture and class. We all care about the quality of our culture, but are the tears shed at an opera any better than those shed at a football match? Are they better quality tears? Sometimes I think that the people do think there's a sort of vintage type of tear that's shed at Glyndebourne.

When I was first asked to deliver this speech, my first reaction was, "Ooh, that's a very posh gig! It'll enhance my standing as a member of the establishment." And my second reaction was, "Ooh, I'm not qualified to do this."

I've suffered terribly through my career from what I would call 'Imposter Syndrome'. I grew up in what used to be called a working class household (I was trying to think of a politically correct equivalent to that term and came up with 'people of restricted taste'). We didn't have classical music on in our house; it 'wasn't for the likes of us'. To this day, when I'm listening to classical music – and you know, I like it a lot, I love it – I still feel like I'm pretending. It's worse when I go to the theatre, where I feel as if I've wandered into a particularly middle-class drawing room with a game of charades going on. I want to stand up and say: "Stop pretending!"

I do understand the effort cultural institutions have made to attract a wider audience, because visual art and music have been through a very similar game. When I started out as an artist thirty years ago, it seemed a very rarefied, obscure activity. I got into it because I liked drawing. I climbed up the greasy pole of the art world and I must say that I was a little bit cheesed-off when I finally got up into a sort of middle class stratosphere of the art world, it suddenly decides to go all accessible. The galleries were full of screaming parties, school parties, and baby buggies, and people taking with their camera phones *democratising* art. Perhaps it is a bit churlish of me to complain, because I have benefitted personally from the popularity of contemporary art. Maybe class travellers like myself are the worst snobs.

I'm aware that classical music has gone through a similar sort of transition; it's let its accent slip quite a lot, it's put on a bit of lipstick, dabbed-on some hair gel. But please, please, classical musicians: avoid the c-word. And the c-word I want to talk about this evening is 'cool'. Cool is a word that often crops up in describing art and artists, and it's always been a bit of a term that's bugged me. The minute something is described as cool, my instincts tell me it's on the wane. For me, being creative as an artist, it's all about being unselfconscious and being prepared to make a bit of a fool of myself. That's a very important thing. And cool, in a nutshell, is the opposite of that. In my experience, embarrassment is not fatal. Coolness somehow implies that there is a 'right thing to do', whereas creativity is making mistakes.

Few groups can be straighter, more conservative than teenagers, who take cool seriously. What makes cool very immature in my book is it's a sort of binary judgement. You know, it's hip/square, in/out. My 15 year-old neighbour tells me the current slang for cool is either 'sick' or 'nang', and uncool is 'wack'. Or interestingly, for me – considering the attention span of the modern youth – another word for uncool is 'long'. "Man, that opera was long." Beware cool.

I'd like to end with a plea for difficulty. Because I think that is the coolest thing that you musicians do. You do something incredibly difficult. And there seems to be a bit of an allergy to that word: "we want to make it all easy for everyone so they can all have a go!" One of my guiding principles has been to follow the path of most resistance: as soon as I can start doing something well I get a bit bored of it and try to do something a bit harder.

One of the enemies I like – because artists need an enemy, because now we've got a Lib-Con coalition to hate it's gonna' be much more juicy as an artist now - one of the enemies I particularly like is consumerism, because consumerism will always make it easier for you. That is one of its principles: it will make it easier, faster, simpler. Apparently, the sale of oranges has declined because they're quite difficult to peel. I'm thinking of setting-up a new web service to replace Twitter; I'm going to call it 'Grunt' because I think in the present attention span deficit, you can only send five characters at a time.

When I listen to a piece of classical music, what makes me well up is not just the melody, the sublime melody of a sensitive interpretation by the musicians, it is the thought of the thousands and thousands and thousands of hours of practice. The philosopher Richard Sennett – himself a musician – says it takes 10,000 hours to become good at something. 10,000 hours! That's four years of full time study. I find that moving in itself: that there are people dedicated to that. I'm in awe of the rigour, and actually, a bit jealous of musicians; you seem to have a much clearer vision of what you're aiming at. In art nowadays there's that terrible thing that anything can go, and it does make me a bit sad sometimes.

So, please keep doing insanely difficult things. Please continue to make difficult music that I will aspire to understand, and please do it for the love of it. For here in the arts, we have to set a good example. Thank you.