

In Cameron's fantastical world it's "Off with their head" or Arkham Asylum

Teetering on the edge of madness, Gail Brown wonders whether the insanity is hers or if it is spreading from Westminster.

When Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded it took the executioner three swipes of his axe before her head finally came off. Legend has it that when the executioner held her head aloft to the crowd her once striking red hair had turned completely white. Fast forward to 2010 and similar tonsorial transformations can be seen in every cultural vestibule as the hollow sound of culture's head tipping off the neck of the arts sector and bouncing into the woven basket of the coalition echoes across Britain. The pain is not lessened by the fact that we knew it was on its way; this is the kind of pain found in the houses of Soho dominatrices, the kind that keeps on coming. To use another metaphor, in the style of a really good Marvel comic the public spending review sent 'shizams', 'blams' and 'doiiings' reverberating around the world of culture.

'BOOM': a year-on-year reduction in council funding of 7.1% for four years and steep cuts – 'ARGH!' – to Arts Council England. Cultural life as we know it, Jim, will never be the same. 'KAPOW!': colleagues in the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) are among the very worst affected so far.

It will take the analysts (visions of mad scientists in large bubbling laboratories come to mind) some time to unpick the consequences of these enormous cuts to public services. To put it into some context, education and health budgets will both be reduced by 7% and if you add a further 30% to that (at this point in the comic the Joker just gives in to Batman and is taken to Arkham Asylum) you have the impact on culture in front of you. Yes, that is a reduction of 37%. Local government also faces funding cuts of 7% year-on-year, reducing available cash by 28% by 2015. Provision of cultural services is not a statutory duty for local authorities – and there is a wider debate as to whether this is a plus and or minus for cultural services – and Arts Council England has already declared itself to be operating at its most streamlined. It is not yet clear how extensive cuts will be in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as these are decided by each of the devolved governments, all of which have also undergone cuts as part of the review.

Following the Chancellor's statement, the DCMS confirmed in a press briefing that the budget for the Arts Council has been cut by 29.6%. This could be likened to the final battle scene of one of this year's more popular motion pictures, Kick Ass, in which an 11-year-old girl kicks the living daylights out of every henchman on the evil leader's books. The overall cut to the DCMS will be 24% in real terms. The Tate and British Museum extensions will both go ahead at a cost of £350m but Creative Partnerships will be cut in total and there will be a 15% cut to the British Film Institute. On the other hand, the Olympics will not suffer budgetary constraints but will receive the full £9.3bn currently ear-marked. Only £9.3bn for all of those people running around in shorts? Bargain.

In the face of all this chopping, salami slicing and saving the money up front – which surely must shock the creativity either in to or out of the arts world – the question must be asked, what does it actually all mean? If we liken David Cameron to a comic book villain then ultimately this means there will be a price to pay; it always does in the world of Marvel after all. But the price in this episode is likely to be paid by any artists that manage to emerge from the coalition chrysalis. Will artists survive, thrive or dive off the edge of uncertainty and build a new future? Will all our artists flee to pastures new and set up Mad-Maxian creative outposts in far-flung corners of the globe, living off desert squirrels and dust with nothing but their own wits and a post-apocalypse tin dustbin with which to create the next Angel of the North?

One is duty-bound to ask whether the cost of keeping one current artist working is as valid an exercise as ensuring that more mainstream jobs exist in nursing or that real pensions are paid to former taxi drivers but at the same time please ask whether risking everything that makes us civilised – galleries, museums, libraries, arts and the experience of beauty as designed by the cultural or creative sector – is worth the price of a hospital wing. Surely we can work together to enable both? Hospital wings designed by artists, architects and the community. Now that's a Big Society I'd like to be part of.

The coalition may have the idea that up-front pain creates savings long-term but any



A vision of culture: shining and soaring or dull and ditch-bound?

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comic buff will know that this is not the case. When main characters are spurned, hurt, rejected, humiliated or kicked when down things go one of two ways: either we see the birth of a super evil genius or the violent, cleansing flames of a phoenix light up the metropolitan skyline. Are Cameron and the coalition ready for either?

In the aftermath of the apocalyptic event that was the 2010 spending review, where are we? In desperate need, quite frankly, of something akin to the Justice League, a film by the way that is due to be released in 2011 complete with an all-star cast. Who will be the stars in our cultural Justice League? Arts Council England? Local authorities? Arts organisations? Graduates of the future? Currently successful artists? A battle between our own Justice League and the Big Society might be a Clash of the Titans worth seeing but what would it achieve? A wise one would tell us that its too early to say and then some meditation and reflection time should be taken. Perhaps that isn't such a poor idea so, in line with all good action stories, here is the question we all have to answer: "When the cultural revolution comes which side will you be on? Which side will generate, create and enable the greatest art, motivated by the prospect of one day lifting its long-lost ambassador's grey-haired head out of the coalition's guillotine basket? And which side will bury one of the world's greatest, artistic countries knee-deep in toxic waste while being wrapped up and disguised as a typical British family with 2.4 children and an address at No 10 Downing Street? In the immortal words of Bonnie Tyler, we need a hero. Bat phone anybody?

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The Leisure Review, November 2010

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