



The Olympic Dream

by Alexander Beaumont

A day after the buzz of self-congratulation that followed the Olympics' opening ceremony had died down, Andrew Gilligan, The Telegraph's blogger on all things London, broke the moratorium on politicised responses to the event with the headline: LONDON 2012: HOW THE OLYMPICS SUCKERED THE LEFT. The two weeks of games that followed the opening ceremony would, he wrote, be "the most Right-wing major event in Britain's modern history [...]" Billions of pounds are taken from poor and middle-income taxpayers and service users to build temples to a corporate and sporting elite. Democratic, grassroots sport is stripped of money to fund the most rarefied sport imaginable. The police and the state are turned into the enforcement arm of Coca-Cola..."

And what does the Left do? Does it respond with the usual brew of high principle, piety and self-righteousness that it so excels at fomenting? No. Because "all it takes is a few nurses dancing round beds, some coloured lights spelling out the words NHS and we all go weak at the knees and collapse in the IOC's embrace".

The disconnect between reporting on the Olympics in the left-wing press before and after the ceremony is certainly remarkable. For weeks the Guardian had been providing regular updates on the Ministry of Defence's decision to place surface-to-air missiles on the roofs of low-income housing blocks close to the Olympic Park - a perfect example of what Stephen Graham describes as the "new military urbanism" that has led to the fortification of urban space around the world over the last decade or so. The newspaper also ran a piece for anybody who refused to have their TV tuned to the BBC for the following two weeks, and could barely control the "told-you-so" tone of its reporting on the failure of G4S to meet its contractual obligation to provide security at the Games. Still, the bile had apparently turned to booze by the time of the opening ceremony, and Peter Bradshaw, Tristram Hunt and Ai Wei Wei were soon falling over one another to toast what the former called the "biggest, maddest, weirdest, most heartfelt and lovable dream sequence in British cinema history".



The relief was palpable. Not only had Danny Boyle avoided humiliating the nation after the daunting precedent set in Beijing; he'd managed to smuggle in a giant middle finger to any tubthumping Tory who might be tempted to dismiss the proceedings as "leftie, multicultural crap". Even as nurses jitterbugged around the stadium, screengrabs were doing the rounds on Twitter featuring the message, "This government is sacking over 50,000 doctors, nurses, midwives and other NHS staff. We love our NHS. Don't let this government destroy it", and on Sunday the Observer gleefully announced that the "[o]pening ceremony was a Trojan horse for socialist values".

Across the Atlantic the right-wing talkshow host Rush Limbaugh voiced condemnatory - if similarly gleeful - agreement, describing it as a "gift to Obama" from "a bunch of commie collectivists". The New York Times preferred to respond in a fashion that wasn't certifiably insane, describing the ceremony as "hilariously quirky" and adding that "Britain presented itself to the world [...] as something it has often struggled to express even to itself: a nation secure in its post-empire identity".

This isn't what I took from the event - however enjoyable it might have been. In fact, despite its manifestly left-wing agenda - which made a virtue of industrial labour and celebrated unionism, the Jarrow marchers and the suffragettes (as well as the NHS) - I'm with Kemila Shamsie, the Pakistani-American novelist, who described empire as "the elephant in the stadium". This isn't so much because the expansionism that was coeval with UK's industrial development - which provided the British imperium with new international markets and kept it fuelled with natural resources and cheap (or free) labour, all at the end of a cannon - didn't make an appearance. On the contrary: the Empire Windrush docked dutifully at Tilbury not long after the ceremony began, and the carnival of youth culture that followed featured at its heart a digital romance between two children of that moment. True, there was no apology for the horrors of the middle passage, but that was even less likely than a paean to what Limbaugh decries as "socialised medicine". And while Aiden Bailey might prefer the channels of molten steel that formed the olympic rings to have been rivers of blood, a direct condemnation of Enoch Powell and the hideous agenda he embodies was, let's face it, out of the question.

Still, the opening ceremony had plenty to do with Britain's post-imperial malaise, and in large part this was down to the doom-mongering that preceded it and the relief that followed. As Shamsie puts it: "Nothing better expresses the profound and deeply sentimental patriotism that exists across large swathes of Britain than the seven years of moaning, pessimism and invective that have preceded these Olympic Games". This is because "[i]t's been clear all along that what lies beneath is the desperate desire to show the world that London is one of the world's greatest cities - perhaps even the greatest of all cities - and the fear of being seen, instead, as not good enough". The desire to be seen, still, as a great nation may not have manifested itself in the same way as during the Royal Wedding or Diamond Jubilee; it might not have taken the form of a roll-call of the nation's glorious sons from Nelson to Churchill. But despite the skittish, self-deprecating humour, the ceremony was nonetheless marked by the same melancholia that has afflicted Britain for at least the last thirty years.

It's important to understand that we're not dealing with a simple case of a nation mourning its lost empire here. Melancholia is not mourning. For Freud, the former is "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction, which had taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on". But melancholia is something far stranger, beyond mourning; something that can be described as pathological, in that the lost object (whether a person, country or ideal) has become unclear, internalised, and so the individual channels the negativity associated with loss towards him, or herself, becoming anxious, morbid and self-recriminatory. As Freud famously formulated it, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself". This helps to explain the fear and relief that parenthesised the opening ceremony, whose animating anxiety was not so much "Will we screw this up?" as "What will it confirm to the world when we do?"



It also explains why, once the ceremony was out of the way, we quickly grew anxious at the dearth of gold medals brought home by Team GB, and why we closed ranks in such a rapid and vituperative fashion when Mitt Romney voiced a perfectly reasonable (if undiplomatic) concern over the UK's preparedness to host a £12bn bonanza that nearly bankrupted Montreal, made a virtual mockery of Atlanta and Vancouver, and came close to doing the same for Salt Lake City.

The Brits might make a meal of doubting themselves, but doubt them as an outsider and their press will make you a pariah, for the simple reason that they fear you might be right. (The United States, incidentally, should take note. It will be in our shoes soon enough, and as the optimism of the Obama campaign in 2008 is inevitably exposed as hollow the antiphon is likely to be rephrased, "Can we do it?" "No we can't.")

To clarify: I thought the opening ceremony was great, on both an aesthetic and a political level. The persistent use of the word "bizarre" in the American press - even the liberal press - to describe the celebration of the NHS simply demonstrates the poverty of the debate over healthcare on the other side of the Atlantic. It speaks of a complete failure to understand how a fundamentally egalitarian institution, formed in a historical moment of genuine national crisis, has - entirely against the odds - been sustained over a period of interminable political ravanchism by a collective faith in the simple fact that it represents "the good". If that's collectivism - fine. If it makes me a commie - fine. I'm quite happy to praise any ceremony that celebrates an institution such as the National Health Service.

But a symbol of Britain's newfound ease with its place in the world? I'm less convinced. Browsing Twitter during the ceremony I noticed that a number of commentators had cottoned on to just now "northern" everything looked, once the prelapsarian bliss preceding the portentous construction of Blake's "dark Satantic mills" had passed into history. (In fact, the opening passages of the ceremony were so similar to John Major's preposterous evocation of England as "[l]ong shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers [...and] old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist" that I'm certain they were intended to be ironic.)

A few locals evidently had high hopes for Radcliffe-born Boyle: one tweeted to say that his vision of English history looked peculiarly like the history of the North, and another wryly anticipated the ceremony's satire of England's obsession with the pastoral by noting that "[i]f the

#olympics opening ceremony is a triumph, Danny Boyle comes from Lancashire. If it's a disaster, he comes from 'Greater Manchester'. But all these amateur pundits who lauded the ceremony's progressivism failed to pick up on the fact that the North is, ironically enough, where the English come when they're afraid of the future; when the system has crashed, the money's gone, and all that is solid has melted into air. The North is where we go when we want a dose of "grit", "truth" and "authenticity" - however illusory these things might be - and it's been this way for the entirety of the post-war period.

Far from being a vision of a nation at ease with itself, then, the Olympics opening ceremony spoke of a country as uncomfortable with its circumstances as it has ever been. It was, as Peter Bradshaw puts it, the "most heartfelt and lovable dream sequence in British cinema history". But it was a dream sequence nevertheless.