



Spectacle, Dominance and 'London 2012'

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Contributor Note

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A prolonged, spectacular, global sporting event is just too tempting and important to ignore if you're interested in its discursive potential for progressive politics. So here are some thoughts on the London Olympics, partly sparked by personal experiences.

By the time of the Olympics opening ceremony the satiric BBC *Twenty Twelve* series had already been exceeded by G4S, Border Agency cuts, the installation of ground to air missiles, and other horrors. Thankfully the endless, obsequious BBC coverage of Jubilee pageantry and its underwhelming climax (nicely skitted by [Jon Stewart](#)) was over. Frank Cottrell Boyce summarised key objections to the Games (see below) 'the money, the missiles, the Macdonalds. But above all Dow chemicals'.

But I was curious about the ceremony. Video recorder on, I went to a party—only to find everyone clustered round the TV. A couple of us made sarcastic comments on the Merrie England opening, the absence of Empire—the list continues if you expect spectacle, especially at this complicated moment, to deliver one coherent, critical version of history.





Tim Berners Lee's message, embodying his belief in 'net neutrality' as a kind of human right. NBC TV commentators were apparently baffled.

But as the ceremony went on, displaying even more eccentric, unexpected and inclusive touches and re-takes of 'Britishness,' it amused, then lingered in the imagination, got debated, and became even moving and inspiring. Giganticist spectacle though it was (see [Perryman's](#) alternatives) it felt oddly local, and well in excess of just one version of Britishness. The absence of reference to Empire, apart from the *Windrush*, helped make possible re-appropriations of the flag in later contexts, not least Mo Farah victoriously wrapped in it. A friend in LA emailed her nostalgia for public service BBC, especially when NBC chopped into (BBC) visual footage for long ad sequences (from which it made a reported \$1bn). Having, it seemed, spent zilch on researching the event, NBC's commentary on 'obscure' items such as The Suffragettes could be summarised as '*here's something else that will mean something to the Brits*' She loved the NHS centrepiece, which forced at least some US TV explanation of what those initials stood for, and why the Brits cared enough about its 'Obamacare' to have it at the centre of the ceremony. (Even the dancing doctors and nurses might, just might, be taken partly as witty spin on Thatcher's scorn for the 'nanny state').

It was not a machine tooled product for the global market, though there were moments of astonishingly fine-tuned technical achievement, not least those wonderful luminous dove-bikes. Indeed, arguably one British [structure of feeling](#) about these Olympics in general was not so much national competitive pride, vaunted by much of the media, but a kind of collective 'phew - we managed it OK'. This went all the way from security fears to the weather.

It was not a superbly drilled display of almost-super-human/robotic uniformity, such as Beijing had chosen (see Ai Weiwei's comments in Barnett below). London's ceremony was more like a rave, and could be read as a combination of public and private planning, technological pizzazz, and the fun of co-operation (again, see Cottrell Boyce). And it was amazing that the thousands of people taking part in the rehearsal, in an age of social media, did not give away any details.

The ensuing Games, also, but differently euphorised by the BBC's visual and spoken coverage, offered absorbing pleasures and fantasies, not least introductions to sports usually marginalised by lucrative coverage of professional football. Some Brits seem to have been mildly shocked to join a celebratory culture for a while, as opposed to more familiar 'shut up and shop' or 'be afraid, be very afraid' discourses. [Cottrell-Boyce's](#) script began with the words of *The Tempest* 'Be not afeard...'. It's possible to see parts of the Games as a brief escape from the miserable market fundamentalism that dominates so much UK news, political, and even educational discourses (Ironically, though London did quite well economically out of them, there were complaints afterwards that people stopped shopping there in favour of watching sport).

Dominant neoliberal discourses sought to pull all this in the direction of the 'Big Society' narrative (e.g. the key role of volunteers around London; the army 'pitching in') alongside the virtues of expensive hi-tech *competitive* sport. Glorious though the huge ticket sales for the Paralympics were, they were framed as centred on 'Super-Humans'. This left little space for much discussion of conditions needing 'lower tech' help, such as mental trauma, especially Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the need for the gentler, broadly therapeutic work, and involvement of family and friends.

Private privilege was also cloaked, as were vast inequalities between and within some of the less powerful nations. At first there were coy radio comments on 'the lovely village of Dorney', near 'the rowing lake'. A little later it emerged as 'Eton Dorney', which Wikipedia outlines as [a lake](#) costing £17m, owned and managed by Eton College.

Broad positions in established study of such huge public events include a) those of journalism studies, often focused on a critical exploration of 'the public sphere', including its capitalist mode of production, and often seeing such events as the 'circuses' in 'bread and circuses', examples of simply mesmerising spectacle. Accompanying these can be a narrow view of 'representation', often stopping at a 'positive/negative images' binary. And an overriding focus on 'economic base'.

b) Approaches in cinema and cultural studies have often taken a more sympathetic interest in such public forms, and understood '[spectacle](#)' as satisfying the desire to 'see everything', especially that which exceeds normative or everyday visual experience. But these approaches

have also included forms (like romance, and melodrama) which invite close-up involvement or even empathy from their viewers, and different kinds of 'intimate' spectacle. Cinema, with its screenings experienced as both public and private, has provided classic instances of such involving entertainment forms. The utopian yearnings, or perhaps fantasies, which these seem to opaquely express have understandably fascinated leftist writers.

So the 'how did they do that?' astonishment, which the Beijing opening ceremony evoked, could be seen to connect a discourse on spectacle affording it merely (?) *spectating* power for the powerless. The spectacle of the very different London Olympics opening ceremony was brilliantly explored for different possibilities by Anthony Barnett in [his article](#) for Open Democracy. Interestingly, this ceremony was both distance gee-whiz spectacle, but also, often through the commentary, or the script for those present in the stadium, intimately involving—through details such as some of the construction workers lining the tunnel through which the flame came. Such cultural attempts to seize the meanings and pleasures of the Olympics are trying to re-shape part of common sense. A new sense of public possibilities could include the yearning for meaningful involvement, for empathy (going far beyond the incessant 'how does it feel?' of commentators to winning athletes), for shared rather than privatised 'public space'. This goes along with recent academic explorations of the radical importance of *empathy* (for one, see [Rifkind's](#) TED talk), and of the return of social relatedness to such fields as economics, where an emphasis on '*trust*' needed for even the 'freest' markets has been revived.

Of course this was unevenly embodied in the Olympics. Raymond Williams (1981 and elsewhere) argued that culture and social change can be thought through the Gramscian terms *dominant, emergent, and residual*. There's no space to explore/update his model here. But they might illuminate the confident, securely *dominant* militarisation of the opening (once Empire was banished). The Red Arrows in all their eco-busting, screaming, red white and blue glory are now a requisite for Class A events. The cameras picking out the two Princes, both linked to the military, democratised them as 'in the crowd'. Such [deft handling](#), including a new PR firm, soon afterwards helped Harry get over the 'we're all in this (pool) together' moment.

A very different (emergent?) response was the [booing](#) of George Osborne by an 80,000 audience (*'Why 80,000?' 'That's the capacity of the stadium'* went one joke).

It was likened by Will Self (on *Newsnight*, 10 September 2012) to the 1968 Olympics Black Power salute, another moment when social tensions and the shaft of an oppositional discourse erupted within a ceremony.



The Black Power salutes of Tommy Smith and John Carlos on the victory plinth, during the US national anthem at the 1968 Olympics. The third athlete, Australian Peter Norman, wore a human rights badge to show his support.

The discursive tussles over these events will continue – as part of ‘the legacy’. Within days after the end of the Games the trade unionist [Brendan Barber](#) had emphasised the importance of focused planning and public investment for their success, and called for Olympic scale infrastructure investment across health, education, etc. Cameron announced, at almost the same time, that the army, substituted for the failed G4S operation, can in future be used to break public sector strikes. Legacy will be there in the ways that the main political parties frame clips from the Games in election broadcasts. And of course in the future of the spectacle's clown, ‘Boris’.

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