‘Isambard Kingdom Brunel Wasn’t a Marxist’: The Opening Ceremony of London 2012

In her insightful article of 2003, the sociologist Jackie Hogan noted that, in their post-1984, Hollywood form, Olympic opening ceremonies were ‘elaborately staged and commercialized narratives of nation’; these narratives necessarily contained ‘ideological tensions’.¹ The commercial value of these ceremonies is not in doubt. Sky News reported late in 2011 that: ‘The opening and closing ceremonies of the London 2012 Olympics could net broadcasters up to £5bn in advertising, organisers have said’.²

This chapter will entail a discussion of ‘Isles of Wonder’, the spectacle devised by the film director Danny Boyle and a creative team appointed by LOCOG in 2010 to open the Summer Olympics of 2012. ‘Isles’ took place on 27 July and, according to the California firm FiveCurrents, one of the companies responsible for staging it, had a cast of 18,000;³ Reuters news agency estimated the global television audience for this event to have been around 900 million viewers.⁴ The chapter will assess the ceremony, which was widely praised, in relation to the politics of the time, both British and Olympic. To do so it will review a range of responses to

---


the event and, in that regard, pay particular attention to (often intercon-
connected) then-current debates about: the writing and teaching of history;
the welfare state; popular culture; ‘race’ and national identity; and impe-
rialism. The principal argument will be that in order to fulfil its task of
engaging a global audience – and, indeed, a national one – a number of
key signifiers of Britain and Britishness would have to be omitted and,
to reiterate an earlier point, items of the ceremony would fly markedly
in the face of much established political orthodoxy in the United King-
dom at the time – something that could, of course, be said equally for
other aspects of the 2012 Games.

The truth but with adrenaline? The opening
ceremony – prescription and prospect

The Olympic Charter is brief on the matter of the ceremony to open
the Games. It provides a simple sentence to be enunciated by the host
country’s head of state in declaring the Olympics open and asserts the
IOC’s customary denial of politics:

During the entire period of the Olympic Games, including all cere-
monies, no speeches of any kind may be held by any representative
of any government or other public authority, nor by any other politi-
cian, in any venue placed under the responsibility of the OCOG.
During the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, only the IOC Pres-
ident and the President of the OCOG are entitled to deliver short
addresses.5

Beyond this, Olympic planners are referred to the IOC’s protocol, which
in regard to the opening ceremony, requires organisers, first, to reflect
the ‘tradition and humanistic principles of Olympism and […] assure
the continuity of the Olympic tradition and ritual from city to city and
Games to Games’6 and, second, to ‘capture the flavour and culture of the
host nation. The Opening Ceremony is the one true, global beginning
of the Games, and a chance to highlight the people and traditions of a

www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf; accessed 9 November
2014.
6 International Olympic Committee, Technical Manual on Ceremonies (Lausanne: