

## London Calling

Kris King – August 11<sup>th</sup> 2012

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2012/07/off-with-his-head/>

Sport and I have never really seen eye to eye. In fact, we've never even really seen eye to navel, what with my general interest in athletic endeavour being somewhere in the neighbourhood of my enthusiasm for the idea of working deep in the very bowels of the Greater London sewer system; other people can do it if they want, but please don't try to include me or engage me, don't bring your passion for either into my house, and for fuck's sake stop going on about it because I really couldn't care less. For me, the seven year march of the London (copyright LOCOG) 2012 (copyright LOCOG) Olympics (copyright LOCOG) represented nothing more than a £10 billion sports day we couldn't afford and that was being run for the sole benefit of the corporate sponsors and all the fitness nazis and sports bores who get off on physical displays of repetitive tedium. So, when I sat down to watch the opening ceremony I did so fully expecting to have my abiding cynicism cemented by a cringe-making, cack-handed farce that presented Britain as a nation of deluded spanners. I certainly wasn't expecting to be proved wrong on an absurdly epic scale.

For a brief while it seemed as if my prediction that it was all going to be bollocks was holding firm; Benedict Cumberbatch's opening ode to London felt a little contrived, a bit too much like someone had said, "we need to start by bigging up the host city, only really *classy* like – 'fro in a bit of poetry or summat, and get that bloke who played Sherlock, he's dun theatre"; the lone child singing "Jerusalem", a song I've always hated, seemed too obvious; the green and pleasant land, while impressive enough in a "Ooh, it's Hobbiton!" sort of way, made me feel like it was going to be the beginning of a long parade of clichéd images of Britain as seen through the eyes of other countries (inevitably culminating with a scene of tea drinkers in bowler hats and mini-skirts dancing to the Beatles down a replica of Carnaby Street, with red double-decker buses full of Cockney chimney sweeps driving past, and hundreds of people saying "cheerio old chap!" as Big Ben is driven around in a Mini by the Queen, and red telephone boxes are filled with Benny Hill lookalikes chasing girls in their underwear).

Things weren't helped when Kenneth Branagh showed up as Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and the whole Shire suddenly went all Isengard on us. "Very impressive", I thought, but wuh? "I know it's the industrial revolution, but does it really need to have Brunel-like factory owners in hats dancing and miming actions of people digging and working?" It seemed a bit like we were being made to watch one of those TV programmes made for schools about history, and industry, and the exploitation and oppression of t'workforce like (try to imagine that in a Yorkshire accent), only with a vastly improved budget and the maximum number of drummers permitted by law. "Yes, we invented the industrialised world", I found myself saying, "but we might want to change tack before someone asks about the slave wages, poor living conditions, and drastically reduced lifespans from deadly work environments suffered by all those who toiled to make it possible". The rising chimneys, I must admit, were pretty cool, as was the forge where hundreds of workers seemed to fashion molten metal into giant Olympic rings that rose up and exploded into rivers of sparks.

As the pandemonium of the revolution drew to a close I felt a rising nausea in my stomach as we were treated to a film of Daniel Craig, heralding the start of what I was sure to be the appalling cringe-fest I'd feared the evening would be as James Bond inevitably did something hilarious involving a lookalike of the Queen who would only even be seen out of focus, in the distance, or from behi...holy fucking shit, it's the fucking Queen! Jesus Christ's bollocks in a blender, I'm watching James cocking Bond walking stride for stride through the halls of Buckingham Palace with the corgi-loving, motherfucking Queen of fucking England! When the inevitable moment came, as the helicopter hovered over the stadium before launching a stunt Queen and Bond out of the door in matching union flag parachutes, even this normally staunch anti-monarchist was starting to enjoy the fact that at least the old bird has a sense of humour and that half the world will either be pissing itself laughing or scratching its collective head at this point.

More head scratching was surely to come, but so too was a dawning realisation for me that I was

watching something genuinely brilliant. As the enormous tribute to the NHS (involving hundreds of real nurses who volunteered to take part) unfolded, cannily making use of the link between Great Ormond Street Hospital and "Peter Pan" author J.M Barrie to segue into a dazzling collage of children's literary figures in a nightmarish dream sequence (including Mary Poppins, Voldemort, the Queen of Hearts, and a Child Catcher who looked suspiciously like Noel Fielding on roller skates), it occurred to me that Danny Boyle was, whether he intended to or not, using the £27 million given to him by the government to produce a spectacular opening ceremony, simultaneously delivering a not terribly subtle "fuck you" to that very same government, along with the class of wealthy, land-owning ruiners of all things good from which they mostly sprang. As I say, I don't know whether or not it was a deliberate act on Boyle's part, but it was certainly there for all to see.

The last time London had hosted the games was in 1948 (and this is my 48th post – [is that spooky or what?](#)), the same year that the NHS was born; this alone would probably be enough justification for most artistic directors to at least include it, but the fact that 2012 saw the passing of the Health and Social Care Reform Bill, an act of parliament which essentially gives the government license to smash the NHS up into pieces and sell it off bit by bit to private investment, the entire segment could easily be seen as Boyle's way of saying, "this is something utterly worthwhile, and of which we should be justly proud, that we need to defend with our last breath". Thinking back to the first act and its portrayal of the industrial revolution, I wondered whether there wasn't also a quiet nod there to how, while the achievements of that time are something we should be proud of, there was a price to be paid for it, both individually and as a nation – battles had to be fought and won, and we should never forget what we've had to go through to get to where we are today.

This was reflected, I think, in the closing moments of the main part of the ceremony where tribute was paid to those we've lost, in particular the lives of the fifty-two people that were brought to a premature end in the bombings of 7th July 2005 (less than 24 hours after it was announced that London had won the Olympic bid). This sort of "in memoriam" happens all the time in America (where it is almost impossible to get through any awards show or ceremony of some kind without a mawkish, slightly cloying tribute to the dead), but it's not something we British do very often. When we do, however, we do it well and with an appropriate sense of quiet dignity; the segment was understated, restrained, and moving, a perfect and natural contrast to the bombast of the first act. The fact that NBC, not content with airing the opening ceremony delayed by *four fucking hours* simply to hit prime time and maximise ad revenue, chose to cut this segment in favour of Michael Phelps being interviewed by Ryan Seacrest (a man who, in my opinion, needs a red hot poker inserted into his anus to assist in searching the dark, fetid corners of his shit box in order to locate whatever talent he feels he must be in possession of). If you've ever asked the question, "why do people hate America?" **right there** is an answer.

After the nurses had finished delivering a giant baby (and before the aforementioned tribute that would lead into the interminable parade of athletes), the London Symphony Orchestra, ably assisted by Rowan Atkinson in proto-Bean mode, set about honouring Britain's contribution to cinema, whilst thoroughly taking the piss out of it in the process. This seemed to me to be a fantastic example of the British sense of humour; even when we're in the global spotlight, standing before the world to announce who we are as a people, what we believe, what we think and feel, and what we represent, we simply can't help pass up the opportunity to rip the living piss out of something (usually ourselves). I've always thought (he says trying as hard as he can to be unbiased) that Britain has the best sense of humour on earth; it's the reason that, while bands are always trying to "crack" America, comedians the world over flock to the UK to make their name. When David Blaine spent forty-four days without food in a perspex box above the Thames, some genius used a remote-controlled model helicopter to fly a burger around the box to wind him up – *that* is the British sense of humour, and it was fucking *brilliant*.

As the final act of the main part of the opening ceremony demonstrated, it wasn't just one of our most cherished comedians making a complete tit of himself that we wanted to share with you; Britain has been responsible for some of the greatest musicians and most celebrated TV programmes ever created, and these formed the backdrop to a love story conducted through the medium of social networking. The fact that, despite having included so many unique, original, and hugely influential artists from over the years, there was an enormous list of suggestions by the viewing public as to artists they felt *should* have been featured only goes to show how richly diverse British art, life, and culture truly is, something which was mirrored in the multicultural society portrayed by the assembled cast of "Frankie and June Say Thanks Tim" (as the act was titled). It didn't matter that this was a fair and accurate depiction of Britain's ethnic make-up; some folk very much lost their shit over this, but none more so than Aidan Burley (MP for Cannock Chase).

Describing it as both the “most leftie opening ceremony I have ever seen” and “leftie multi-cultural crap” on his Twitter feed, Burley (who had once attended a stag party in Nazi uniform and toasted the Nazi regime, along with also having been caught texting and dozing off during a talk by a holocaust survivor at Auschwitz) went from obscurity to persona non-grata in less than 300 characters – even prime minister David Cameron was to later refer to him as a “twat” (albeit in an oblique way). When it wasn’t Burley, it was right-wing journalists who whinged about the tribute to the NHS (yeah, free healthcare for all – it’s not as if that’s praise-worthy, or anything) and described the whole event as Marxist propaganda. I’m sure somewhere there will even have been one particularly bitter hack who, upon the appearance of Tim Berners-Lee (the British inventor of the world-wide web) and his tweeted declaration through the illuminated seats of the stadium that, “This Is For Everyone”, probably ran screaming out of the house, still clutching his half-written letter to the Daily Mail, and began tearing through the streets yelling “Agh! The communists are coming! The communists are coming!!”

It could be reasoned that what ultimately banished my cynicism about the opening ceremony was that I was being shown a Britain that I recognised and could relate to. I have never in my life felt particularly patriotic, I think it’s a narcissistic, self-deluding emotion in which one perceives their home nation to be superior simply by virtue of having been born there, and I can genuinely feel the cracking of my entire body as it collapses inwards to form the grotesquely contorted shape of the yet-to-be-invented “Rubik’s Cringe” whenever people express national pride (especially when they try to be as gung-ho and red, white, and blue about their country as the Americans – stop that, all of you, you sound fucking ridiculous). But, I have to confess, that there are times when I do feel an imperceptibly tiny twinge of pride by association at what some of the other residents of this quirky little isle have achieved. It feels quite nice to be able to say that I’m from the same small island as Tim Berners-Lee, Newton, Darwin, Brunel, Thomas Paine, Alan Turing ... kind of like wearing an “I’m with genius” T-shirt.

Despite having been lifted out of my despondent apathy by the opening ceremony, I still can’t bring myself round to enjoying the sport of it; it is, after all, sport, and my relationship with it hasn’t really changed enough to want to actually watch it. About the only thing I enjoyed at school was hockey (this being the UK meant it was played on concrete playgrounds that had been liberally sprinkled with sufficient grit to scrape your legs to shit on and massive cracks to twist your ankles in), and that’s mostly due to the fact that I was quite good at it and was allowed to carry a stick with which I could inflict knee-based violence upon any fucker who came near me. I used to like cross-country running too, but that was mostly due to Mat Recardo and I having struck a deal with our P.E teacher (namely that he let us run the cross-country course each week instead of playing rugby, a sport we both hated and sucked at – amazingly, he saw how this was a win for all concerned and agreed). Even so, I still can’t feel positive about the games as a whole because it really is an overpriced sports day that *will* lose us a lot of money (it always does).

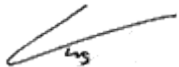
What I **do** feel positive about, however, is the effect that both the games and the opening ceremony will hopefully have on our attitude towards our national culture. As I said, what banished my doubts about the ceremony was that it showed me a Britain that I knew, one that I lived in and saw every day, rather than the one dreamed up in the minds of those whose privileged positions utterly disconnect them from the reality of living in this country. To see athletes like Mo Farrah and Jessica Ennis winning gold medals last week was satisfying not just because the British had won something, but because it was a massive “fuck you” to obnoxious twats like the BNP, the EDL, and the Daily Mail, the latter of which hastily re-wrote, then withdrew, an article from their website which noted, in reference to the “Frankie and June” segment of the opening ceremony, the [impossibility of finding an educated white middle-aged woman happily married to a black man](#). You know ... like Jessica Ennis’ parents.

I take a certain perverse pleasure in the cognitive dissonance that must have raged through the empty minds and purple faces of right-wing fuck-nuggets when Mohamed Farrah, a Somali-born muslim immigrant and British citizen, was to be seen proudly draped in the union flag and clutching the gold medal he’d just won for a country that, if the average racist dick-splash were given half a chance, they’d gleefully kick him out of. One of my absolute favourite tweets was from last Saturday night when Britain scooped an astonishing six gold medals (three of them in the space of an hour); [@PrimlyStable](#) wrote “One black champion, one white champion, one mixed-race champion. THIS IS BRITAIN, 2012. Fuck you, EDL”. I couldn’t agree more. I hoped every last bigoted shit-bag in the country was choking on their own apoplectic rage that night, just as I hoped to see the dream of [@OliverCooper](#) realised in which an image of Mo Farrah wrapped in the flag was pasted on every billboard in the country just to shove it down the EDL and BNP’s throats.

When I look at the opening ceremony (and the games themselves) I can see without doubt that this is the Britain inhabited by you and me, not the wealthy, white, inheritors of a faded empire – an imperialistic anachronism of dubious glories that's being lived in by the government, the monarchy, and the right-wing, flag-waving cock-wallets who insult every one of us whenever they open the sluice gates in their faces and a torrent of sewage floods out. This Britain is vibrant, pulsating with life, bursting with colour, it has energy, variety, and it has heart. It is a Britain that is richer *because* of its differences, not in spite of them; I have always felt that we should be far more proud of the fact that we are, without doubt, the most successfully integrated multicultural society in the world. Nowhere else will you find such a gloriously diverse ethnic and cultural mix working with such co-operation and cohesion, not even in America (sorry guys, it's true – you might have a black president but you still have far greater socio-economic inequalities along lines of race and ethnicity that most western nations).

Britain is a better place than it otherwise would be because we open ourselves up, not shut ourselves away, and so much of what we've done we have shared freely and with great pride; Tim Berners-Lee invented the world-wide web and just *gave it away* – he could have patented his creation and made enough money to employ Bill Gates as his "groom of the stool" (look it up), but he didn't because he just wanted to make it easier for people to share stuff over the internet. We birthed the industrial revolution and then practically handed it over to the rest of the world saying, "there you go, see what you can do with it". We gave everyone The Beatles, The Who, and The Rolling Stones; then, when we had a few decades spare, we gave them Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, The Sex Pistols, Queen, The Cure, Elton John, The Clash, The Jam, Radiohead, Dizzee Rascal, Pink Floyd, The Prodigy, New Order, Frankie Goes To Hollywood, Joy Division, Duran Duran, Kate Bush, George Michael, and countless acts besides.

Kenneth Branagh opened his role as Brunel by quoting Caliban from "The Tempest" (act 3, scene 2); "*Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises*". I can think of nothing finer to describe how a nation that positively fizzes with a million different kinds of energy, the sights and the sounds, is something to be celebrated, not feared (unless you're Saudi Arabia or Iran, in which case, due to the ceremony being carried live on TV, you will have accidentally broadcast the first lesbian kiss ever in your respective countries – never mind, eh?) We should be proud of all this, far prouder than we are, and we should welcome the never-ending change with open arms and embrace the infinite bounty of difference we enjoy, because, as we were quite rightly told, and as the 205 copper petals of the stunningly beautiful Olympic cauldron came together to represent the competing nations, "this is for **everyone**".

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'ms' or similar, written in a cursive style.