



**InMedia**

The French Journal of Media Studies

**7.1. | 2018**

**Visualizing Consumer Culture**

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Martine Lambert-Charbonnier

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/1284>

ISSN: 2259-4728

### Publisher

Center for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)

### Electronic reference

Martine Lambert-Charbonnier, « From commodity fetishes to symbols: Danny Boyle's simulations of British culture in the London Olympic Games Opening Ceremony », *InMedia* [Online], 7.1. | 2018, Online since 20 December 2018, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/1284>

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# From commodity fetishes to symbols: Danny Boyle's simulations of British culture in the London Olympic Games Opening Ceremony

Martine Lambert-Charbonnier

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## Introduction

- 1 Hosting the Olympic Games in 2012 was a wonderful opportunity for Britain to advertise for its position as a hub in the global leisure economy. The Games Opening Ceremony, which was watched by 900 million viewers on television worldwide, presented a great opportunity for the mediatisation of British culture in ways appealing to domestic and global consumers. According to Sebastian Coe, chair of the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, "London 2012 was a once-in-a-generation opportunity to showcase everything that makes Britain great... The winning, planning, delivery and legacy of the Olympic Games called upon all the qualities that make the UK stand out in the global economy."<sup>1</sup> This comment illustrates the part played by the Olympic Games in soft power, defined by political theorist Joseph Nye as the ability to influence through inducement rather than coercion. Chris Arning notices that "The Olympic ceremony is unique as a cultural product with soft power impact underwritten and indirectly influenced by governments."<sup>2</sup> Benefits derived from the event included a revived image of the country which, in the words of Boris Johnson, appeared as "the capital of the world"<sup>3</sup>. Profits were also expected, though reports vary as to how much was actually generated in terms of money and return on investment.<sup>4</sup>
- 2 No doubt this discourse is at odds with Pierre de Coubertin's Olympic ethos which focuses on the values of common effort to bring in universal peace in a better, healthier modern society.<sup>5</sup> Opening ceremonies acknowledge the unique Olympic gift in highly symbolic moments: the entry of the athletes on the stadium, the entry of the Olympic flag, the

Olympic anthem, the release of the doves, the oath sworn by an athlete and an official of the host country, the entrance of the flame, and the lightning of the cauldron. How shall this Olympic spirit endure in a post-modern society in which gifts may lose some of their original symbolic value as part of the marketing process? We argue that the London Olympic Games go some lengths to retrieve the bonding value of the Olympic Games in the key event of the opening ceremony which celebrates the moment when the host country receives the Olympic gift and reciprocates it by staging its own contributions to global culture.<sup>6</sup>

- 3 As a film director, producer, screenwriter and theatre director with international recognition, Danny Boyle was best positioned to create a show that both conformed to Olympic ethos and displayed British cultural and technological contributions to the world. This essay analyses his show as a modern ritual that re-visits Britain's history and culture as a trajectory from the pre-industrial to the post-industrial age and investigates consumerism from the birth of manufacturing to the digital revolution. In "The Green and Pleasant Land" and "Pandemonium" the Olympic pageant raises issues of nationhood and consumption by presenting different forms of socialization that eventually give birth to national welfare symbolized by the NHS hospital staged in "Second to the right and straight on till morning." As society moves on to the digital age illustrated in the segment "Frankie and June Say.... Thanks Tim," nationhood is re-defined against the backdrop of global communications and increased cultural diversity in a consumerist society, questioning both individual and collective identity. We show how Danny Boyle offers various forms of appropriation of consumer products in order to create bonding symbols of British culture. We argue that he creates a strong sense of communion in a performance that emphasizes both the individual and the collective group, lifting immediate and personal perception to a higher, universal level through the use of CGI and music.

## A modern myth of industrialisation

- 4 Danny Boyle's focus on the industrial revolution as a pivotal moment in Britain's history was blamed by some critics as a leftist bias. Ryan J Thomas and Mary Grace Antony notice that:

Olympic Games are exclusive events that provide host nations the opportunity to construct a national narrative to project to the wider world. Australia utilized the 2004 ceremony to erase and undermine a problematic past (Housel, 2007), while the 2008 Games provided China a strategic opportunity to (symbolically) pivot away from its dire human rights record (Brady, 2009). In Britain, we see a ceremony that, arguably, attempted to render a nuanced, sensitive, and perhaps even radical account of British history, paying heed to the perils of industrialization and celebrating the socialist NHS.<sup>7</sup>

- 5 Danny Boyle's choice to structure his show around moments deeply changing society and the economy—first the industrial, then the digital revolution—testifies to the importance he attaches to labour culture. Despite the socialist bias, the opening ceremony is considered a bonding moment both for the British and the international audience because it builds a common ritual of regeneration through sacrifice and effort to convey British identity in ways that also fit the Olympic ethos.

- 6 Danny Boyle uses cosmology as defined by US anthropologist William Powers as “a relative system of beliefs and rituals which people redefine continuously in order to accommodate the exigencies of everyday life.”<sup>8</sup> The show is driven by the pattern of loss and revival, from the presentation of pre-industrial Britain to the advent of the digital age after the dramatic changes of the industrial revolution. Danny Boyle explores the issue of technological advance and its impact on society—especially on people as consumers—using cosmology as a process “intended or invented by humans to rationalize symbolically their universe and to justify what they believe to be its orderliness... even though occasionally this perceived orderliness may be perplexed by chaos.”<sup>9</sup> The sense of development through disruption and chaos is clear in the timeline of the show which, after the countdown, opens with an idealized vision of Britain’s pre-industrial age, whose harmony is then shattered by the industrial revolution. The advent of media culture and the digital age are yet another challenge for cultural identity and in the last scene Danny Boyle explores the border between simulation, communication, and communion. Faced with such changes, people certainly need a ritual to reaffirm their sense of belonging to a culture, since for William Powers rituals intend “to provide a means of enacting or reenacting and thus codify rules whereby people understand what behaviours are required of them, or disallowed, in order to maintain a sense of belonging to their own culture.”<sup>10</sup> Viewers’ responses to the opening ceremony are likely to be manifold and complex, varying with each individual’s cultural identity and knowledge of British culture; yet Danny Boyle seeks to bridge differences in different ways, in particular by referring to iconic images such as the Queen, famous writers and pop stars. Moreover, the digital age which makes up the last part of the show is a universal phenomenon which is personally experienced by all viewers in the cosmopolitan audience.
- 7 In this cosmology of Britain’s culture, consumer culture is presented as central, as it drives the narrative of development from the industrial age to the digital age. The stage presents an imaginary vision of a pre-industrial age symbolized by community leisure and labour in the self-enclosed space of the village and its fields. The vision evokes Baudrillard’s definition of craftsmanship, as opposed to industrial work: “a mode of social relations in which not only is the process of production controlled by the producer but in which the collective process remains internal to the group, and in which producers and consumers are the same people, above all defined through the reciprocity of the group”.<sup>11</sup> The idea of socialization is central in his presentation of the pre-industrial age dominated by artisanship and characterized by cohesion, community and relations of reciprocity. Moreover, the presentation emphasizes a mythical interpretation of Britain’s past, with visual effects such as the circular space of the stage suggesting cyclical, rather than linear time, as Danny Boyle stages spring—the season of birth and renewal,<sup>12</sup> to enhance the impression of pre-industrial harmony. The impression is one of timelessness, since past and modern elements—such as cricket games—merge to suggest a time of play and leisure for the community. The representation of the May Festival, with its characteristic May pole caught in a symbolical circular movement, allows him to suspend the time of labour and emphasize the myth of a harmonious, classless society, since festivals are also times when the whole community joins in common celebration. The impression of a timeless harmony is enhanced by the joint use of video screens showing children’s choirs in beautiful natural scenes from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The time of nature binds the idealized community on stage to the other communities on screen who also represent Britain’s cultural diversity across its four nations.

- 8 According to Northrop Frye, myth is not a nostalgic return to the past, but it revives man's primal desires.<sup>13</sup> Here the mythic dimension may retrieve "the authentic aspiration of humanity in its primary concerns,"<sup>14</sup> highlighting reciprocity as a permanent feature in man's happiness. A powerful symbol of reciprocity in Boyle's scene is wheat, harvested and consumed by the whole community, which thus fulfills people's primary need of feeding themselves. Wheat can also be interpreted as the emblem of Baudrillard's symbolic exchange, because it is a reciprocal gift for the community. The Arcadian vision of social harmony is not only enhanced by the visual effects, but also by sound, since children's choirs on stage and on the screens celebrate national spiritual unity across the UK with popular tunes from Scottish, Welsh and Irish folklore. Moreover the choir on stage singing the famous church hymn *Jerusalem*, originally a poem by William Blake, announces the pattern of loss and revival in the show which, perhaps, will attempt to rebuild a new earthly paradise "in England's green and pleasant land" after the dramatic changes brought about by the "satanic mills" of the industrial revolution.
- 9 Socialization through exchange and reciprocity is lost during the industrial revolution staged in "Pandemonium," which reveals the birth of a new age of mass production in a very dramatic way. This does not mean that Danny Boyle wishes a return to Britain's rural past, since he is keen to picture the new forms of socialization arising from workers' and women's rights movements. Rural harmony is shattered when a large tree, a powerful symbol of growth and nature, is pulled up from the top of the mound at the centre of the stage, creating a large hole through which a stream of workers go downhill to work in the new factories. As communal work in the fields is replaced by collective industrial work in factories—symbolized by the tall Victorian chimneys being built by workers—the scene illustrates Baudrillard's shift from the object as a gift to the commodity: "What is produced is no longer symbolically exchanged and what is not symbolically exchanged (the commodity) feeds a social relation of power and exploitation."<sup>15</sup> Visual and sound effects highlight the new industrial age in contrast with the first pre-industrial age. The constant flux of people replaces the relative stativity of the first scene. The rhythmical beating of drums conveys energy and pulse, as well as workers' mental and physical pain. (Noise in Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* also conveyed his characters' mental pain). In spite of the great number of people on stage, the effect produced stands in sharp contrast with the impressive effects of massive orchestration in Beijing,<sup>16</sup> instilling empathy in the audience on a more intimate scale. Then a new national community born of rural migration develops in a contractual form in cities, as the flux of migrants coming from different parts of the country create the new State and its citizens.<sup>17</sup> Though the rural community is lost, there is new progress in socialization seen as the process "whereby individuals unconsciously and consciously learn to act, feel and think dependably together but not necessarily alike in behalf of human welfare outside their own..."<sup>18</sup> US sociologist Bogardus wrote in the 1920s when trade unions and feminist movements developed in the US and also in the UK, and he insisted that "[t]he thrill of working together wholesomely for a common cause represents more genuine socialization than anything else can do."<sup>19</sup> Thus Danny Boyle stages workers and suffragettes marching for their rights, testifying to the new collective bond created by the industrial society. Moreover, he uses the traditional moment of the presentation of the Olympic rings to create a powerful image of collective labour. Moulded from molten metal, crafted by teams of workers, and then lifted high up above the audience, they become the symbol of "the polyvalence" which Baudrillard dreams of when he reads

Proudhon: “Proudhon had envisaged ‘the polyvalence’ by which the worker, accomplishing the whole cycle of production, would become once again the master of the complete process”.<sup>20</sup> On Danny Boyle’s stage, not only do workers appropriate all stages of production, but they also embody the Olympic spirit—the strength to overcome their physical and mental limits. According to Pavan Malreddy, the sublimation of labour is “an expression of this consolidated duality, one that not only strives to test the physical limits of the human body in regenerating labour, but, in doing so, one that tendentially re-aestheticizes the dangers, fears, pains and other existential throes of the laboring body.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore the Olympic rings further the idea of a symbolic exchange by being offered in the form of a universal gift to a global community. They do not only express the sacrifice made by labour, but they aestheticize it since the dangers, fears and pains will be transcended by the beauty of athletic performance. But the rings also encapsulate another sense of sacrifice in the next scene, when Danny Boyle pays a moving tribute to the fallen of the Great War. This paves the way for a further stage in the myth of nationhood built in the pageant, when the community is no longer bound by primary needs, but by what Northrop Frye defines as “secondary concerns”—the sense of unflinching and unconditional loyalty to the group, even against one’s own personal interest. Thus, the new community born of the industrial age matured with the experience of the War, to a large degree retrieving reciprocity in the form of solidarity and sacrifice.<sup>22</sup>

- 10 To some extent the Welfare State presented in the fourth scene “Second to the right and straight on till morning” could be considered to be the ultimate expression of socialization in the new nation. For some papers at the time, it epitomized Danny Boyle’s leftist bias, not to mention the fact that he skipped picturing the Second World War and provided a mere glimpse from the air of the national hero Winston Churchill whose statue waved his walking stick in salutation as the royal helicopter flew past (third scene “Happy and Glorious”). The staging of an NHS hospital—a scene that Danny Boyle claims some government ministers wanted to withdraw<sup>23</sup>—puzzled US journalists and was considered by many British papers to be rather bold considering the political and economic context:

Another prominent theme in newspaper discourse was the tendency to situate the opening ceremony as either a daring challenge to the prevailing political orthodoxy or as a political spectacle itself, with particular reference to economic austerity and controversial reforms of the NHS.”<sup>24</sup>

- 11 Though the scene is unusual in an Olympic pageant, it conveys “aesthetic enchantment,”<sup>25</sup> the display of tenderness and emotion, an essential element of soft power in opening ceremonies according to Chris Arning. The scene refers to an institution that many consider a founding pillar of British society and it also pays tribute to cinematic and literary symbols in children’s culture. We may rightly use Bogardus’ words to view the NHS as the embodiment of people’s concern for “welfare outside their own...,”<sup>26</sup> when the State becomes responsible for the well-being of its citizens. Danny Boyle is obviously praising the solidarity of the Welfare State by choosing a very emblematic NHS hospital—Great Ormond Street Hospital Children’s Charity or GOSH—thus apparently emphasizing the caring and disinterested quality of the institution. And yet Voldemort’s shadow hovers over the whole scene, suggesting a hidden threat over the whole of the system. As newspapers reported at the time, the scene may be a criticism of growing marketisation in the NHS. In 2012 GOSH became an NHS foundation trust, a structure which now runs half of NHS hospitals and which further develops healthcare in a market-driven system based on principles of “a diversity of public, private and voluntary providers, payment by

results and patients in the driving seat.”<sup>27</sup> The opening of the Welfare State to private operators has been quite a recent development, starting from Tony Blair’s emphasis on public private partnership in the late 1990s, yet it vindicates Baudrillard’s argument that it was always part of an ever-productive and consuming system: “By allowing for the possibility of expanding and consuming, by organizing social redistribution (social security, allotments, salaries that are no longer defined as the strict economic reproduction of labor power...) the system created the illusion of a symbolic participation.”<sup>28</sup> Baudrillard considered that an essential function of the Welfare State was to correct the imbalance generated by the capitalist system in order to make society more competitive. In contrast with this marketized vision of the NHS, the image of the children’s hospital emphasizes human care, with real patients and hospital staff being involved in the pageant. It also suggests a possible redemption of the system as women dressed and modelled after P.L Travers’ magical nanny, Mary Poppins, land on stage after floating down on their umbrellas just as in the original story. The scene shows that with the NHS the State substituted for family care—a role that should be preserved and nurtured, like the giant baby that finally appears on stage. This personal, human relation is enshrined in the traditional act of bedtime reading at the start of the NHS sequence, which J. K Rowling is entrusted with.

- 12 There is, however, some ambiguity in the staging of the NHS scene: the act of reading bedtime stories retrieves a personal bond between carers and patients, and yet the figure of the best-selling fiction author implies that in our society dominated by media culture, human welfare is apprehended, shared and consumed through images conveyed by books and movies. The image of sick children may disclose some threatening power in media consumption even in the most disinterested fields of care and culture. The scene both praises the beauty and highlights the market value of such gifts as life, death and love when mediated by famous children’s stories featuring Peter Pan or Harry Potter. Tzanelli comments on the market value of *Mary Poppins* and *Peter and Wendy*, which are also globally-known aspects of British culture: “These stories were accompanied by famous sketches, drawings and paintings of considerable market value in contemporary cultural institutional contexts...”<sup>29</sup> Cinematic adaptations of great marketing success have also allowed the stories to reach a worldwide audience. This certainly shows that children and healthcare are not immune from marketization.

## Popular consumer culture and the digital revolution

- 13 The pageant reaches a new stage in the marketization of culture by devoting the successive sequences to the rise of the digital media, investigated against the background of Britain’s growing cultural diversity. Though Danny Boyle evokes the Windrush, he does not mention the British Empire as such—arguably because it is a controversial aspect of British history for many international viewers—preferring to emphasize today’s multicultural London. This suits the spectacular aspect of the show, as the stage turns into a giant dance floor to host a cosmopolitan party in London, symbolizing “a Britain finally inclusive enough to have made the post-*Windrush* black presence as integral a part of its national story as Remembrance or Brunel.”<sup>30</sup> Moving from the intimate, individual level to the vision of crowds and a more universal sense of belonging, the pageant redefines nationhood as it increasingly interacts with globalization in the digital age. This is a common topic in recent opening ceremonies, as countries wish to demonstrate their

skills in a multi-polar world.<sup>31</sup> At the same time Danny Boyle suggests some drawbacks as digitalization may drive dematerialization and generate loss in private space.

- 14 Reflection starts on an intimate level with the presentation of a British home with an interracial family mirroring London's cultural diversity. Thus, the British family is both the image of family bonding and cultural openness, and significantly the house will end up as the centre of a mega-party in the city. With three successive generations living together, the household also reflects the development of media from television to the World Wide Web, which, in the words of Baudrillard, conveys the loss of symbolic exchange in consumer society. For Baudrillard, television epitomizes the rise of fetishes and the dematerialization of objects into signs: "Here the fetish is no longer an unreal object, believed to have properties it does not really have, but is a means of mediating social value through material culture."<sup>32</sup> Though television dematerializes human exchange, it is still a source of family bonding, as all the members can share in the pleasure of watching the same programs together. Yet the advent of the digital age creates a chasm between the generations, since the little boy is busy playing videogames while his sister is organizing her nightclubbing night, sending SMS to her friends. The mobile phone may be perceived as another fetish in the digital age as language is dematerialised into coded signs, especially in youth culture. Since the SMS are displayed on giant screens, the new, coded nature of language highlights a loss of individuality, revealing people's status (name, place, in/out of a relationship, age) rather than their character. This could be another step in Baudrillard's loss of referential objects in a hyper-real world dominated by screens displaying signs.<sup>33</sup> Yet to some extent Boyle redeems the void in digital communication when the lost phone is picked up by Frankie, who gets invited to June's home. The sequence allows people's appropriation of physical objects as the phone enters into a symbolic relation of gift and reciprocity and becomes a tool favouring the start of the love story between Frank and June.
- 15 The British home embodies Baudrillard's ecstasy of communication in a connected house which is presented as a private space at the start, but in which privacy is increasingly problematic. In his attempt to define Britishness through its contribution to popular media culture, Danny Boyle turns his emblematic British home into a screen displaying sequences from British popular movies and TV programs since the 1960s. With the rise of the digital age, the house becomes a hub in a communication network, emitting SMS that are shown on various screens on stage, conjuring up Baudrillard's image of an orbiting house: "We are here at the controls of a micro satellite, in orbit, living no longer as an actor or dramaturge but as a terminal of multiple networks. Television is still the most direct prefiguration of this. But today it is the very space of habitation that is conceived as both receiver and distributor ..."<sup>34</sup> The downside is a loss of private space as borders between private and public become increasingly seamless. So, when June and Frankie fall in love and run up to the attic, desperately looking for some private space in the girl's home, they are caught up by the images of famous cinema kisses. This is a striking illustration of Baudrillard's hyper-real world in which objects are increasingly conceived as images and copycats. Immersed in a schizophrenic world where the public space encroaches upon privacy, people suffer from "the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defense, no retreat."<sup>35</sup> Another issue is whether the digital age bolsters new forms of socialization. Certainly, various visual and sound effects enhance the idea of London as a connected city with the London tube formed by a stream of dancers holding hoops, and London nightclubs playing music from four



successive decades. Yet is connectedness a factor of social cohesion in the digital age? Certainly, with the emblematic image of the interracial family, Danny Boyle is favouring the image of a multicultural city, as fruitful cultural exchanges between communities are promoted by digital means, not only in London, but also throughout the world. At this stage it is highly significant that he should present Tim Berner Lee as the generous provider of the universal gift of the World Wide Web—as the words “This is for everyone” flash up among the audience, directly engaging their participation in global communication. And yet the gift may have a cost, as the British home is lifted from the ground and loses further materiality by becoming a mere reflection of lights. Could this be a hint that the social body has become a simulacrum? Could there be some social void behind connectedness?<sup>36</sup> The Olympic Games are themselves a *mise en abyme* of this threat in our modern communication. The Opening Ceremony may warn viewers that the Games are in danger of becoming consumerist mega-events, rather than places of communion. This is what Steven Miles criticized the Beijing Games for: “The opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics was testimony to the way in which the need for the spectacular underpins the success of collective memory.”<sup>37</sup> He contrasted the recent Games to the older ones which “would in the past have been so powerful and influential as to effectively transform the home into a public space insofar as it invited spectators to assemble into ‘viewing communities’”<sup>38</sup> In contrast mobile technology—the London were hailed as the first mobile Games—invites viewers to watch the Games on their own, threatening the suspension of disbelief that is essential for the audience’s true involvement in the event.<sup>39</sup>

## The use of CGI and music to foster universal communion

- 16 In his opening ceremony Danny Boyle tries to retrieve the Games as an event for universal communion, and not just communication. Yet in the post-modern age, communion should not abolish the individual, in contrast with Baudrillard’s symbolic exchange: “communion annuls individuality, the group is expressed and affirmed in its communality. In this sense symbolic exchange is sacrificial.”<sup>40</sup> On the contrary, Danny Boyle places emphasis on individual personality while fostering a sense of collective belonging. The denial of massive orchestration and the emphasis on individual responses concur to raise awareness of the hyperreal environment, so that collective belonging is sensed and built by mature individuals. While the joint use of theatre and CGI promotes a double perspective by linking up immediate perception with images of distant places, the use of world-known musical hits that are both personally and collectively experienced creates a universal communion among viewers.
- 17 With digital communication favouring individual responses, Danny Boyle resorts to the joint use of theatrical performance and CGI in order to create meanings that may be understood and interpreted both on an individual and a collective level. CGI also demonstrate masterful use of technology, which is an important feature to enhance soft power in opening ceremonies, as defined by Chris Arning’s category “technological prowess.”<sup>41</sup> London’s innovation is to make the most of the joint use of theatrical performance and CGI to create disruption in simulation and arouse individual awareness of the hyperreal environment. So various degrees of estrangement in people’s perceptions of time and space are introduced, opening the show to different

interpretations and involvements. In *Mapping Intermediality*, Katia Arfara analyses the effect of intermediality in theatre: “This discontinuous video time makes for irruption within the spatial as well as the temporal continuum of the stage, blurring the performance’s immersive effect and breaking with illusion.”<sup>42</sup> This also raises viewers’ awareness of the signs and symbols that are created on stage, highlighting “the tendency of the theater to ingest objects from everyday life and recreate them as signs”.<sup>43</sup> So, using intermediality, Danny Boyle encourages individual awareness of collective symbols. For instance the children’s choirs at the start of the show triggered various responses, whether viewers identified more with the British tradition conveyed by the hymn *Jerusalem* sung by children on stage, or with the songs performed by the Irish, Welsh and Scottish choirs shown on screens.<sup>44</sup> While rooting the British identity in its spatial diversity and its temporal development, the sequence ends with collective symbols of the nation—the spectacular arrival of the Queen and the national anthem that is both sung and mimed in sign language. Moreover, the amazing scene of the Queen jumping from a helicopter like a James Bond heroin testifies to the use of British humour as another form of disruption that is proper to trigger symbols that can even be universally understood. In his analysis of “soft power via whimsy” in opening ceremonies, Chris Arning considers how the London ceremony goes further than previous ceremonies, using humour in unexpected ways, probably because it is so widely acknowledged as a typical feature of Britishness: “London certainly took whimsy to another level with the Rowan Atkinson portion of the show reprising Eric Morecambe with Andre Previn in goofing around.” Indeed, the sequence with Rowan Atkinson is very remarkable in the way it both questions and creates symbols of athletic performance. Here the joint use of stage and screen unveils Mr Bean’s athletic dream as he cheats very openly to win the race. At the same time, he is dozing off on stage as a bored musician in the orchestra. Here humour binds the whole audience around the symbol of the anti-hero which works as an antithesis to vindicate the athletic spirit. At the same time the scene questions what is really at stake in the Olympic Games—fairness and honesty.

- 18 Another form of disruption is change in scale, when the show shifts from spectacular effects to a more intimate level. This is perceptible in many scenes, making it possible to suggest various individual interpretations of historical events. So, the industrial revolution is presented from the point of view of rural migration, but it is also triggered by inventors and industrialists like Brunel, impersonated by Kenneth Branagh. So, viewers’ attention shifts from large crowds to single individuals, who may be ordinary people but who are often world-known celebrities like J. K. Rowling, Tim Berner Lee or Paul Mc Cartney. Celebrities who are features of Britain’s media and consumer culture also account for people’s integration into society, all the more as the audience is emerging as a social category in scholarship.<sup>45</sup> Therefore the involvement of celebrities is essential for arousing both individual and collective responses to the show. According to “the convergence within the celebrity sign of individual expression and personality within a constructed collective (the audience),”<sup>46</sup> Danny Boyle emphasizes the individual features of his celebrities to create a degree of intimacy with the audience, as he stages them in very familiar postures when J. K. Rowling is seen reading bedtime stories and Tim Berner Lee typing messages on a computer.
- 19 Another way to stimulate both individual and collective responses is to blur the distance between the audience and the stage, either because real people take part in Danny Boyle’s simulations—in particular when real patients and staff take part in the NHS scene—or

because visual effects create a continuous space between the stairs and the stage when words flash up on the stairs for example. Moreover, the building of symbols also testifies to gradual involvement from the individual to the collective and then the universal level, ensuring the audience's full acceptance. Universal communication is apprehended first in a very personal way with the mobile phone which is lost and found, before it is presented as a gift from Tim Berner Lee's orbital communications.

- 20 The emphasis on individual interpretations may explain why Danny Boyle does not provide tight mass orchestration but “flout[s] a hitherto hallowed code”<sup>47</sup> in many opening ceremonies since Moscow (1980)—especially Seoul (1988) and Beijing (2008). For Chris Arning the lack of precision is a deliberate feature of the show which matches the image Danny Boyle wants to give of Britain as a plural and diverse community. The contrast with the Beijing Games Opening ceremony and its perfect choreography may be explained by cultural differences between western and Asian societies for whom collectivism usually prevails over individualism.<sup>48</sup> Arguably, the smaller scale in London makes the show more immersive, while the overwhelming size of the Beijing show made the ceremony more impressive, testifying to China's super-power in culture and technology.<sup>49</sup> According to Baudrillard's analysis of fetishism, we may argue that the ostentatious effects in Beijing turned the ceremony into a “fetish” of Chinese culture, openly showing its social status in the world,<sup>50</sup> while the London ceremony conveyed Britain's soft power by seeking individual responses.
- 21 The experience of British culture would not be complete without its world-known pop hits. Music is clearly presented as a commodity enjoyed by every successive generation, and yet it may be argued that Danny Boyle contrives to retrieve a symbolic value of music as a collective bond. Music is part of the intermediality favoured in the show to convey energy, so that all hearts beat at the same pulse. In his previous film *Trainspotting*, Danny Boyle had already given a central part to music since “he wanted the film to pulse, to pulse like you do in your twenties.”<sup>51</sup> To some extent this is reminiscent of Deleuze's idea that music should match the energy of the internal flux of life, something that he found in contemporary *avant-garde* music but which pop music failed to achieve because of its repetitive and regular pulse and meter.<sup>52</sup> In order to retrieve the pulse of life, Danny Boyle incorporates celebrated pop hits into a musical narrative of consumer culture in which pop hits become moments of epiphanies. Musicals are very popular on the London scene and embody another aspect of British culture, which Danny Boyle reproduces in the sequence that tells the love story between Frankie and June in a dancing scene celebrating the evolution of pop music since the 1960s. As the show almost evolves into a musical, it offers a new cyclical, repetitive vision of time which escapes linearity, since in musicals “music does not unfold in ‘real time’ but imposes a suspended animation on intensified, emotional moments. Musical numbers also have the potential to collapse time—memories of the past and dreams of the future—into a heightened here and now.”<sup>53</sup> In a similar way in his seminal book *The Musical as Drama*, Scott Mc Millin writes:
- It is lyrical, it gives the pleasure that follows from rhyme, melody, and meter, and it takes effect not because it blends into the plot in the spirit of integration but because it stands apart and declares that there is another order of time in the theatre, not just the cause-and-effect sequencing of plot but the lyrical repetitions of song and dance.<sup>54</sup>
- 22 This narrative of music, which frames intense, musical moments, allows the audience to respond both individually and collectively. Each song exists independently of the show and is therefore related to cultural and personal associations for each viewer. “As fans

perform and reperform musical moments and incorporate musical stories, songs, and characters into their lives, musical theater ruptures the division between performers and audience members, between creators and consumers".<sup>55</sup> Yet Boyle encourages their involvement not only as individuals, but as part of the whole audience, by cutting short the musical hits as he weaves them into a sequence pulsing like a giant collective heart. This results in rapid successive cycles of music in each decade, connected by pulse and energy and the dynamism of the dancers. The fast succession of musical hits also suggests the fast consumption of music, which could be a threat to innovation, in cases when music is produced as a technical, rather than an inspirational product.<sup>56</sup> Yet Danny Boyle's aim is to retrieve fan communion across generations from consumer culture, and he encourages participation in a performative and interactive show, as viewers can sing along to the hits. The whole international audience is finally invited to join in the final song "Hey Jude" sung by Paul McCartney, which was also a worldwide commercial hit, testifying that pop hits are universal bonds.

- 23 The combination of linear and cyclical time captures the essence of youth culture itself, in its successive manifestations since the 1960s, as essentially mobile, as symbolized by dancers' mobility on stage and the object of the mobile phone.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, by breaking the linear pattern and the cause-and-effect sequence, the form of a musical is proper to suggest changes and open up possibilities for new life trajectories.<sup>58</sup> Danny Boyle celebrates social mobility against the background of London's cultural diversity, choosing two teenage heroes from the Afro Caribbean community. Born of a mixed-race couple, June also embodies the rise of the mixed race which has been much celebrated in British ads in recent years.<sup>59</sup> Yet in the context of David Cameron's quotas, the scene is sometimes viewed as an indirect criticism of his immigration policy and his attacks on "segregated communities."<sup>60</sup> In contrast Danny Boyle suggests that cultural diversity is a driving force behind the dynamic leisure culture in London. Tzanelli observes that the sequence "operates on a meta-level as a reminder that any emerging sub-cultural style joins the market and is consumed as a commodity."<sup>61</sup> Frankie and June's successful integration into Britain's social life is conveyed by their joining the digital age and participating in London's nightlife. Quite expectedly they join the crowd celebrating Tim Berner Lee's World Wide Web, which also becomes a symbol for social cohesion. Yet Tim Berner Lee's free gift also highlights controversial issues about consumer culture. It vindicates Britain's position as a global power, illustrating Baudrillard's "ostentatious displays of disinterestedness."<sup>62</sup> It discloses the Olympics as an event to promote Britain's soft power, as it reaffirms its power and influence. Moreover, the Olympic rings finally orbiting above the dome are not just a transcended symbol of Britain's power to connect the world. They also illustrate what Baudrillard called "the ecstasy of communication"—"the passage into orbit, as orbital and environmental model, of our private sphere itself"<sup>63</sup>—questioning socialization and identity in the digital age.

## Conclusion

- 24 Danny Boyle's Olympic ceremony is very relevant as a *mise en abyme* of the referential void created by consumerism. It highlights many aspects of consumerism analysed by Baudrillard—the process of commodification and its impact on social classes, the fetishism of objects, as well as dematerialization in a culture dominated by signs in the digital age. But Boyle also shows how revitalized relations may emerge from

consumerism through the aestheticization of objects—when objects become emblems of sportsmanship and both individual and collective effort. And he praises the power of music as transcending consumerism by arousing both singular and collective emotions. The celebration of the World Wide Web is consistent with the Olympic Games' integration in a gift economy, which is emphasized by Tzanelli's analysis: "The overriding objective in a gift economy is to give away resources to secure and retain status—in London's case, to demonstrate abundance in digital resources and the power to distribute them as gifts."<sup>64</sup> Yet as the Olympic spirit is seen orbiting over the dome, it sends more than just a message of universal communication. It is the ultimate accomplishment of Boyle's ritual of modernity, which started from the loss of a golden age in rural Britain to reclaim the sense of play, leisure and harmony in an idealized digital age in which values can be freely exchanged and shared. Moreover Boyle's opening ceremony fulfils Fredrik Barth's function of a ritual as "it generates not a unified system of knowledge agreed by all, but a range of understanding sufficient so its members can be moved by the same symbols and thoughts".<sup>65</sup> Participants' involvement in the show certainly helped them to grow from the giant baby represented in the NHS scene into adults "who think and feel about—sense—nature and themselves in certain ways and with certain imagery."<sup>66</sup> As people's living environment now mostly consists in urban places that are also part of a global consumer culture, Danny Boyle raises people's awareness of the dangers, and also the opportunities, of the digital age, by fostering a sense of communion around the ideal of the Olympic spirit.

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1. Paolo Cardullo, Rahila Gupta and Jamie Hakim, eds, *London: City of Paradox* (University of East London: CMRB on-line publications 3, 2012), 5.

2. Chris Arning, "Soft power, ideology and symbolic manipulation in Summer Olympic Games opening ceremonies: a semiotic analysis," *Social Semiotics* 23 (2013): 523.

3. Cardullo, 5.

4. **The final report published by LOCOG showed that profits eventually exactly matched losses, bringing the financial position of the Company to £nil, not to mention the boost to tourism and construction. Overall the Olympics were profitable for London. See London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games Limited 2007-2013, *London 2012 Report and Accounts. 6 month period ended 31 March 2013* ( London: LOCOG, 23 May 2013), 33. [https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/Games\\_London\\_2012/London\\_Reports/LOCOG\\_FINAL\\_ANNUAL\\_REPORT\\_Mar2013.PDF](https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/Games_London_2012/London_Reports/LOCOG_FINAL_ANNUAL_REPORT_Mar2013.PDF) <accessed on 1 March 2018>**

5. Pierre de Coubertin, 1892 Sorbonne Conference: "Let us export oarsmen, runners, fencers; there is the free trade of the future—and on the day when it takes place among the customs of Europe, the course of peace will have received a new and powerful support." Quoted in John A. Lucas "Olympic Genesis: the Sorbonne Conferences of 1892 and 1894," *Olympic Review* (1974): 608. <http://library.la84.org/OlympicInformationCenter/OlympicReview/1974/ore85/ore85u.pdf>. < accessed on 1 March 2018>

6. Tzanelli, 27.

7. Mary Grace Antony and Ryan J Thomas, "Competing constructions of British national identity: British newspaper comment on the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony," *Media, Culture and Society* 37:3 (2015): 501.
8. William K. Powers, "Cosmology and the reinvention of culture: the Lakota Case," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 7:2 (1987): 166.
9. Powers, 166.
10. Powers, 166.
11. Jean Baudrillard, *Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St Louis: Telos Press, 1975), 79.
12. "We see spring as childhood, summer as adolescence, fall as maturity, and winter as old age. On the religious or mythic level, the cycle of the seasons becomes the birth, death, and return of a divine being." Wolf, Virginia L. "The Cycle of the Seasons: Without and Within Time." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 10:4 (Winter 1986): 192.
13. Northrop Frye considers the Bible as The Great Mythos, "a vision that rises above the progression from past to present into a higher form of the present, a vision of human creative power continually making the new by reshaping the old." Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*, edited by Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 269.
14. In his review of Northrop Frye's *Selected Essays*, John Meagher states that "literature of permanent substance recognizably preserves the authentic aspiration of humanity in its primary concerns and speaks beyond the secondary ideologies to offer to other times and places not a message but a permanent reminder, a self-recognition, a renewal." John C. Meagher, "Religion & Literature," *Religion & Literature* 24:2 (1992): 86.
15. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, 143.
16. "The Fou drummers' sequence was the most impressive lockstep rhythm synchronization ever seen. The drummers were not just in time, but they moved their bodies either side of the drums in lockstep. Indeed, tightness of choreography in mass orchestration was Beijing's trump card." Arning, 524.
17. The new liberal, capitalist society is connected to the rise of citizenship, which "reflected a shift from rural, communal relations and social rights rooted in village membership into a sense of a national community and of individual rights guaranteed by the State." Sallie A. Marston and Katharyne Mitchell, "Citizens and the State: Citizenship Formation in Space and Time," in *Spaces of Democracy: Geographical Perspectives on Citizenship, Participation and Representation*, edited by Clive Barnett and Murray Low (London: Sage, 2004), 96.
18. Emory S. Bogardus, *Fundamentals of Social Psychology* (New York: Century, 1924), 229.
19. Bogardus, 231.
20. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, 105.
21. Pavan Kumar Malreddy, "Labour, Pleasure and the Sublime: The 'Work' of the Dalitbahujans," in *Reworking Postcolonialism. Globalization, Labour and Rights* edited by P Malreddy, B. Heidemann and O. Laursen (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 140.
22. "It is these secondary concerns and their supporting literary propagandistic counterpositions that permit the doctrine of war to supervene upon the desire to live and that allow structures of authority to suppress the longing for freedom." Meagher, 86.
23. As revealed by the documentary directed by Angie Mason and James Rogan, "Olympic Imagine Special: One Night in 2012", BBC and Rogan Productions, broadcast on BBC One on July 17, 2016.



24. Antony and Thomas, 497-98.
25. In "Soft power, ideology and symbolic manipulation in Summer Olympic Games opening ceremonies: a semiotic analysis," Chris Arning defines 6 categories conveying soft power in Olympic ceremonies: mass orchestration, technological prowess, symbolic ingenuity, aesthetic enchantment, whimsy and humour and musical grandeur.
26. Bogardus, 229.
27. Rudolf Klein, "The new model NHS: performance, perceptions and expectations," *British Medical Bulletin* 81-82:1 (January 2007): 42.
28. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, 144
29. Tzanelli, 56.
30. Catherine Baker, "Where did it all go wrong? The Windrush myth after London 2012," <https://imperialglobalexeter.com>, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2018. The Windrush had become an ambivalent symbol of Britain's openness to foreigners, especially considering recent restrictions on immigration: "Today, however, members of this same symbolic generation have been threatened with deportation – and some have already been deported – because they have been unable to prove their immigration status despite living in Britain for more than fifty years."
31. "It is possible to see modern opening ceremonies since 1980, as being driven firstly by the cold war, then by the development of a multi-polar world, where soft power gains are at a premium." Arning, 540.
32. Tim Dant, "Fetishism and the social value of objects", *Sociological Review* 44:3 (1996), 498-99.
33. **"In this passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials—worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, which are a more ductile material than meaning, in that they lend themselves to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra."**Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sharia Faria Glaser, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.
34. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze (MIT Press, 2012), 127.
35. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 128.
36. Baudrillard criticizes the conventional approaches of sociologists who imply that socialization depends on exposure through the media and on the contrary he argues that the emergence of media has created a void in the organization of society. Keith Tester, *Media Culture & Morality* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 1994), 118.
37. Steve Miles, *Spaces for consumption* (London, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2010), 140. Actually "the production and interpretation of the Olympic ceremony ... will be determined through a process of negotiation between stakeholders at local and international levels with different political, economic, social and cultural aims. [...] As part of the historic development of the ceremonies, Olympic protocol has been overshadowed by the spectacular cultural performances of the host, which is reflected in the relative lack of attention generally paid to Olympism and sport values by the broadcasters" in Luo et al. (2012), "Representing the Opening Ceremony: Comparative Content Analysis from USA, Brazil, UK and China" in Luo, Qing and Richeri, Giuseppe (ed.), "Encoding the Olympics. The Beijing Olympic Games and the Communication Impact Worldwide. Routledge.
38. Steve Miles, 139-40.
39. Steve Miles, 140

40. William Pawlett, *Jean Baudrillard: Against Banality* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), 26.
41. While London pioneered extensive use of CGI, the footsteps towards the stadium in Beijing in 2008 were an earlier example of this and we may even consider that the idea of an inter-textual event was inaugurated by the Soviets in 1980 when they provided the link up with the Cosmonauts in a live transmission in the Moscow Olympics.
42. Katia Arfara, "Instance: Purgatory (2008)", in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, edited by Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender and Robin Nelson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010) 111.
43. David Coley, *Projected Performances. The Phenomenology of Hybrid Theater*, Phd dissertation (University of Missouri, May 2012), 202. [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations/4051/](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/4051/) <accessed on 1 March 2018>
44. 'Londonderry Air' from Giant's Causeway, Northern Ireland, 'Flower of Scotland' from Edinburgh Castle, Scotland and 'Bread of Heaven' from Rhossili Beach, Wales.
45. **David P. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 61.**
46. **Marshall, 61.**
47. Arning, 530.
48. See Hofstede's cultural dimension and François Jullien's essay "De l'être au vivre" (2016) which goes deeper into the cultural differences with China.
49. "This discipline was complemented by the lighting effects in both the drums and fireworks to send a message of power; in this instance China proved both dominance over its people and mastery over light." Coley, p. 194-95.
50. Tim Dant on Baudrillard's definition of fetishism: "Now, it is the extent to which an object demonstrates ostentation, a sign of value that accrues to the possessor of the object that turns the object into a fetish." Dant, 504.
51. Maureen Callahan, "The Scottish Invasion." *New York* (15 July 1996), 39.
52. Mark Abel, *Groove: An Aesthetic of Measured Time* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 100.
53. **Sarah Taylor Ellis, *Doing the Time Warp: Queer Temporalities and Musical Theater* (University of California: escholarship, 2013), 6-7.**
54. Scott Mc Millin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton and Oxford : Princeton University Press, 2006), 9.
55. Ellis, 9.
56. This interpenetration is something that Baudrillard comments in music in the 1990s and which he views as a threat for innovation, all the more as it is combined with perfect technology and the perfection of musicality, rather than music itself.
57. For Baudrillard also the mobility of objects conveys people's desire for social mobility. Thus he analyses fashion as a characteristic of mobile societies since the renewal of objects mirrors a desire for social mobility, though this desire is not necessarily fulfilled. Jean Baudrillard, "La morale des objets," *Communications* 13 (1969): 40.
58. Ellis, p. 9. Sarah Ellis suggests that the cyclical time of musicals, in contrast with linear time, opens up new possibilities, since it breaks with the cause-and-effect sequence.
59. "The 2011 census revealed a country that is decreasingly white and British: England's ethnic-minority population grew from 9% of the total in 2001 to 14%. But the biggest single increase was in the number of people claiming a mixed-ethnic background. This almost doubled, to around 1.2m. Among children under the age of five, 6% had a mixed background—more than belonged to any other minority group." "Into the Melting Pot," *The Economist*, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

**60. David Cameron, "PM's speech at Munich Security Conference," 5 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference> <accessed on 1 March 2018>**

**61. Tzanelli, 61. Tzanelli, 61.** "The casting is emblematic of a British multi-cultural utopia (both teenagers have an Afro Caribbean appearance) that real politics challenge in a country with intensified border control and strict immigration policies. Policies of ethnic exclusivity are replaced by a narrative of youth, joy and leisure – three coordinates that defined black community contributions to Londonese sub-cultures of consumption and protest alike over the last century. ...; This operates on a meta-level as a reminder that any emerging sub-cultural style joins the market and is consumed as a commodity."

**62. "L'ostentation du désintéressement joue comme fonction sociale de la richesse. » Bernard Dantier ed, *Sollicitude des sciences sociales et sollicitude économique-politique: Jean Baudrillard, La société de consommation (Chicoutimi : UQAC, 2008), 16. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1522/030092645> <accessed on 1 March 2018>***

**63. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 128.**

**64. Tzanelli, 39.**

**65. Frank Barth, *Cosmologies in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 79.**

**66. Barth, 76.**

## ABSTRACTS

Hosting the Olympic Games in 2012 was a wonderful opportunity for Britain to advertise for its position as a hub in the global leisure economy. The Games Opening Ceremony, which was watched by millions of viewers nationwide and billions worldwide, whether on television or via digital applications, presented a great opportunity for the mediatisation of British culture in ways appealing to domestic and global consumers. A film director, producer, screenwriter and theatre director with international recognition, Danny Boyle was well-positioned to create a show that both conformed to Olympic ethos and presented evolving images of British cultural and technological contributions down to the digital age. Moreover Danny Boyle's simulations in the show can be interpreted as investigations into consumerism, especially in the leisure industry. While Danny Boyle featured the network of signs surrounding consumers – from emblematic tourist hotspots to British musical and cinematographic hits –, he also suggested personal and collective re-appropriations of products to counter the commodification of goods. Thus he chose to present products crafted by human labour as symbols – rather than fetishes – for human values such as solidarity, social rights and the promotion of ethnic diversity. The use of digital technology in the show was effective to spread those values, presented as part of British nation-building, across cultural borders. Though sometimes viewed as an implied criticism of the Conservative government's policies, the Opening Ceremony was generally praised by the British press, which was responsive to the collective symbols Danny Boyle chose to present of British culture.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Olympic Games, Opening Ceremony, national identity, symbols, fetishes

## AUTHOR

### MARTINE LAMBERT-CHARBONNIER

Martine Lambert-Charbonnier is associate professor at the University of Paris-Sorbonne She teaches British cultural studies and International Affairs in the LEA (Business and Languages) department. Her field of research focuses on intermedial studies both in Victorian culture and in contemporary Britain. Previous publications include « The Gioconda and the subjective spaces of art criticism in Walter Pater's works » (« La Joconde et les 'espaces subjectifs' de l'écrit sur l'art chez Walter Pater. *Ecrire l'art / Writing Art: Formes et enjeux du discours sur les arts visuels en Grande-Bretagne et aux Etats-Unis* ed. Anne-Pascale Bruneau-Rumsey, Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada, Shannon Wells-Lassagne. Mare & Martin, 2015. 101-113. She is currently co-editing a volume entitled *Testing New Opinions and Courting New Impressions: New Perspectives on Walter Pater* which is to be published with Routledge in 2018.