

Olympic ideals and Disney dreams

Cultural representation at the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Gamesⁱ

Beatriz García and Andy Miah

With the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games now over, the subsequent analysis of the facilities, athletes, transportation, dopers, has begun to ensue. Generally, it would seem that there is a sense of success about Sydney; a feeling that the 'cheats' were caught or stayed away, that the transportation was much better than expected, and that the facilities were the best in the world.

Yet, no Olympic Games is without critique and an interest to build upon previous events and to learn from these is a fundamental aspect of Olympism, the philosophy of the Olympic Movement.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and significant aspect of the Games is the opening Ceremony, the biggest media event in the world, reaching the most amount of people on an international scale.

The ceremony is highly symbolic and comprises a showcasing of the host city and country, the embracing of other cultures, and the official protocol of speeches and athletes marching around the magnificent stadium.

The opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games has been heart felt by many Australians who claim it to have truly captured the spirit of Australia. In the initial, cultural section of the ceremony, amongst the Disney-like paraphernalia, the sequence of scenes endeavoured to portray the evolution of Australian heritage. The ceremony had two enduring icons, the very Anglo-Saxon little girl, dressed in pink with flowing blond hair, little Nikki Webster, and the distinctly more mature man, characterized in traditional indigenous attire, aboriginal dancer Djakapurra.

These two began their journey after Nikki fell asleep and started a deep dream that brought her back to the natural origins of Australia where she would meet

Djakapurra. He would become her teacher and show her the evolution of the country over the centuries.



Bob Carr, Premier of NSW and Nikki Webster, lead cast member from the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games opening ceremony, photographed at the Sydney Media Centre.

Reviews of the ceremony will have articulated the many symbols and meanings implicit in the programme for the ceremony. The ceremony included references to the historic cowboy country of Australia, the legend of Ned Kelly, the controversial marching bands, the athlete's parade, and the message of Olympic Truce, which was made explicit in the closing ceremony with an enormous dove of peace that took the form of a flag draped all across one side of the spectators' stand and then across the athletes. One might also recall

the importance of the torch relay within the stadium and the recognition of 100yrs of women's participation in the Olympic Games that it embraced.

Alternatively, this review could focus on the terribly worrying and wonderfully entertaining moment when the cauldron would not move after having been so spectacularly lit by aboriginal runner Cathy Freeman.

Yet, this review seeks to discuss Australia's investment in the Games and how it seemed interested to show the world that it had done a good job at hosting them. Understandably, therefore, the mainstream Australian press has tended to focus on the positive outcomes of the ceremony and the self-congratulatory opportunities that they have given the country to unite in sense of collective achievement.

In so doing, however, due reflection has not been given to what seems an essential facet of Olympic philosophy - an interest to reflect upon and critique the way things have been done and to learn from them in developing a notion of Olympism that is more reflective of the ideals to which it aspires.

As such, whilst acknowledging the splendour that is the Olympic experience and the good that it is able to do, this review will endeavour to provide some level

of critique about the ceremony and ask difficult questions about how the host city and country cultural section of the ceremony was choreographed. It is important to make explicit that the interest here is, specifically, the cultural section of the ceremony. This is the section of the ceremony for which the content is not prescribed by the International Olympic Committee (unlike the athlete's parade flag entry, Olympic anthem, Olympic oaths, torch relay and so on).

One interpretation might argue that the purpose of an Olympic Games opening ceremony is twofold: to show the world the culture of the host city and country, and to celebrate the cultures of world countries in their coming together at this international event. Traditionally, from the second half of the century on, host cultures have focused their efforts on engaging with symbols of identity in the first and most festive section, referred to as the "cultural section", while the celebration of cultures from the guest countries is very often left to the Olympic ritual section, especially, the parade of athletes.

For Australia, considering the extremely diverse demographic composition of the country, it was anticipated that the cultural section had great chances to offer an exemplar for how many cultures of the world can meet and grow together in a single,

shared space and develop into the richest culture of them all, one that knows how to tolerate, how to learn from and how to enjoy its diversity. Of course, one must be mindful of the fact that a good example through the presentation of an opening ceremony is not necessarily connected to what takes place within a culture.

It could be argued that the initial section of the ceremony did not fit with either of these purposes. Of course, it seemed to have many of the relevant ingredients: Aborigines, a reflection of migrant cultures and so on. However, their placement and arrangements brought into question the perspective that was being adopted to show Australia to the world.

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In the first place, as a country that has had immense difficulties with integrating and accepting indigenous persons into its western ways, one might have thought that the Games - particularly as they were being hosted on a sacred Aboriginal site at Homebush - would have recognised Aboriginal people as paramount. Indeed, it has been a remarkable fact that, during the

many academic conferences preceding the games, many of them began with an Aboriginal welcome and invitations to enjoy their land upon which the conferences were being hosted and the land upon which the Olympic Games were to be hosted.

Yet, for the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, the Aborigines came second to little Nikki and her dreams. It was Nikki's dream that allowed the viewer to learn about Australia's history and people. Thus, it was only through her eyes that viewers would see and discover the Aboriginal people. One could have accepted the choice if those eyes had shown complete neutrality in their viewing. But they were not. Nikki's eyes, and the story they were telling us, were the eyes of a white, middle-class, young, pretty, innocent girl: the eyes of the dominant class in Australia.

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On numerous occasions during the ceremony, one can cite evidence to support the identification of this Anglo-Saxon bias. An initial indication of this was the decision to begin the proceedings with the entry of stockmen on horses, a clear

referent to the white invasion and settlement.



Subsequent indications are all related to Nikki's dream narrative. In the first place, what can be interpreted by the apparent amazement with which aboriginal rituals are seen? While not denying the relevance of the indigenous section in the ceremony, which journalists around the world have unanimously interpreted as a step towards the "reconciliation" of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders with white Australia, let's reflect upon the way the rituals were observed.

The very approach to those "primitive looking beings", as some overseas journalists have defined them, appeared to be something that looked completely strange and, initially, even scary to little Nikki. This contrasted with the nice and not so frightening arrival of Australia's "discoverer", smiley Captain James Cook, who arrives on a light and charming "ship" in the fashion of Disney's

Cinderella's magic chariot, made out of bicycles. The implicit message would appear to be that Australia was a country discovered by the Western world and nothing was there before it was discovered or, at least, that it civilised these primitive and barbaric origins.

We have further evidence of the white character of those eyes that were dreaming of Australia and narrating it to us, soon after the colourful celebration of the "Arrivals" of many migrant cultures. Through the rhythm of cheerful musicians and dancers, this section of the ceremony reflected how the five continents of the world met together to form the Australia of today, but immediately after this festive explosion of ethnicities, it comes the time to construct Australia ("Eternity") and we see that the country is built by tartan clothed blond types tapping a modern, but not less revealing version of Celtic dances.



Building Australia... metallic structures and tap dancers replace the 'Arrivals' of multicultural migrants at Sydney's Olympic opening ceremony

Was this surprising? Perhaps not. Was it acceptable? Perhaps not. Predominantly, it seemed, quite contrary to the celebration of 100 years of women athletes in the Olympic Games, it seemed to be a missed opportunity to prioritise a community that has suffered feelings of oppression before, during and most likely after the Sydney Olympic Games, and to reflect the existence of a very diverse range of Australian ethnicities, that are not only happy folkloric dancers and singers, but also discoverers, builders and key components of the country today.

The retort might be to argue that Australian culture is, indeed, predominantly Anglo-Saxon and thus, that an Anglo-Saxon perspective is precisely reflective of this culture. One might extend this response and argue that the concept of the modern Olympic Games is, beyond the original Greek inspiration, based on Anglo-Saxon Victorian traditions, or at the very least, very Westernised.

However, embracing tradition does not preclude the embracing of ideals that contradict that tradition and to retreat into tradition is no justification for certain actions. Indeed, it would seem much more valuable for the opening ceremony to have reflected the ideals to which it aspires rather than the time period from which it originated. With this in mind, for an opening

ceremony that appeared to describe the evolution of Australia, it did not start in the place that would have been most accurate historically. Australia did not begin with white people on horses and little girls!

In conclusion, a great deal can be learnt from this spectacular, multi-faceted ceremony that can be used to inform the way in which future ceremonies are constructed. While an overly prescriptive content for ceremonies would surely hamper the creative process, it is important to make some attempt at considering worthwhile purposes of representation and to think carefully about what the world should understand from this moment. If the intention is simply to entertain - and to a great extent, this is true - then perhaps the critiques are redundant.

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However, if the ceremony intends to promote some social, philosophical message, have some symbolic content to it, then

its composition should take this into account. Whilst one would argue that the latter should be reflected in its production, it is not because there should be some moral compulsion to be politically correct or to do the right thing.

Rather, it is to identify that the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games is a wonderful opportunity to communicate, foster and promote international relationships. This is not to suggest that the Sydney Opening ceremony did not engage with such concerns. Actually, our response indicates that there has been a clear intention to represent Australia.

It is inevitable that people will take more from the opening ceremony than simply the entertainment value and it would seem possible to be entertaining and symbolic within the same ceremony. The event is a ceremony, the significance of which is tied up with its symbolic content. As such, it is not sufficient to treat it simply as a show, without depth. Indeed, it is paramount that the symbolic content of the ceremony is unequivocal.

ⁱ An earlier version of this paper was published as: 'Olympic Ideals and Disney Dreams: Opportunities and constraints for cultural representation during Sydney's Opening Ceremony', in *Human Kinetics: Social Science and Sports News*, Nov 2000.