

## ***Twenty Twelve* vs. *The Games*: The Art of Olympic Satire**

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**In March 2011, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) launched a new comedy called *Twenty Twelve*, inspired by the London 2012 Olympic & Paralympic Games.**

Episodes follow the work of a fictional organizing committee named the *Olympic Deliverance Commission*, as it wrestles with the complex logistics and planning of the Games. The show received critical acclaim, winning BAFTAs and rave reviews across the nation. It ran for two series, with the final episode of the second series airing on 24<sup>th</sup> July, 2012 – three days before the London 2012 Opening Ceremony.

In any other circumstances, this would have been a unique contribution to Olympic cultural programming, except that it was not an entirely original idea. Twelve years earlier, the Australian Broadcast Corporation (ABC) produced a similar series titled *The Games*, which was broadcast during the build up to the Sydney 2000 Olympics. Featuring some of the country's most well known satirical

comedians, it was so successful that the stars of the show even made an appearance in the Closing Ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games. Unfortunately, the same was not true for the *Twenty Twelve* characters and this speaks volumes as to why ABC's series reached parts of society that the BBC's did not.

A lot of the discussion about the relationship between the two series has centered on whether the BBC plagiarized the ABC production, a claim that was made even more complicated to resolve, since there had been attempts from the Australian creative team to sell the idea to the BBC in the first place. When the BBC launched its series in 2010 without involvement from the Australians, it was widely discussed in the media and in blogs as a clear case of plagiarism. However, the BBC claimed it was just coincidence and that they considered them to be very different series.

While this may be true, the BBC may also be criticized for not having done enough research to ensure that its programming was truly original. Indeed, given that the ethos of Olympic cultural

programming is often so focused on producing original and perhaps even historically groundbreaking work, failing to have acknowledged the Australian series seems an oversight. Indeed, it was either careless research from the BBC to have not discovered their predecessor's contribution, or they deliberately took the premise of *The Games* for their own series without any kind of ethical concern. However, this aspect of the debate is less interesting than comparing the two on the basis of merit alone. In short, I want to consider which was the more accomplished series.

The common ground between the two series is that they both adopt a mockumentary style of television programming. However, there are differences in their delivery. *The Games* is written in a similar style to Ricky Gervais's & Stephen Merchant's *The Office*, where scenes switch between those that are filmed as a fly-on-the-wall documentary, to being more like situational comedy, where the characters are not aware of being filmed. In contrast, *Twenty Twelve* is primarily situational comedy, where the documentary components are provided in the form of interviews with characters dispersed throughout each episode.

This is also where the two are similar, since such interviews are also used in *The Games*. However,

*Twenty Twelve* relies much more on a narrator - provided by David Tennant - to reflect on the proceedings and, while the tone of the narrator is principally a realist form, there is often a sarcastic commentary on what is happening.

Where they differ is that the script of *The Games* has more overt satirical aspirations, compared to *Twenty Twelve*. While each share some similar story lines about comical errors that are made by incompetent event managers in the Olympic Games preparation, such as a broken count down clock in *Twenty Twelve*, or a 96m sprint track for *The Games*, the former focuses much more on this kind of comedy.

Alternatively, *The Games* gets much closer to satirizing the politics and culture of the Olympic industry and the Olympic movement more generally. For instance, in one episode there is a shortfall of local sponsorship and the organizing committee pursue a tobacco company to make up the shortfall. This kind of sponsorship has long since been absent from the Olympic world of sponsorship, but the narrative opens up debate about just how far the ethics of the Olympic partnerships can be stretched. Indeed, this is a recurrent theme at the Olympics and might have been taken up in *Twenty Twelve* by the BBC, especially as there were real world concerns about

BP's sponsorship of the Cultural Olympiad and Dow Chemical's world sponsorship of the Olympic movement, given the Bhopal disaster in 1984. Unfortunately, these issues were not really raised in what was generally a quite safe form of Olympic mockery.

Alternatively, *The Games* went from one real world controversy to another. Among the other examples were the scheduling of the swimming competitions at 330am Sydney time to accommodate the American broadcast audiences – an issue, which has been addressed in the real Olympics. Furthermore, *The Games* even approached criticising the IOC, by portraying then IOC President Samaranch as an unattainable, self-appointed Royal, with an almost supernatural presence. This is an impression that many around him would support, perhaps not to reflect him as a man, but the enigma that surrounded him and esteem in which he was held at the IOC. As well, *The Games* addresses the question of budgets in a way that aligns with public concerns about spiraling costs, indicating that if the estimates at bid stage were accurate, then nobody would ever bid to host the Games.

In contrast, *Twenty Twelve* does not approach discussing Olympic politics with such insight or intellectual rigour. For example, in one episode characters are discussing advertising campaigns

that can build on the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebration and the Olympics, coming up with brand 'Jubilympics'. Yet, the script never allows viewers to understand just how inconceivable such a proposal would be, which would have spoken to the extreme measures to which organizers are contractually required to go to produce the Olympic assets – including words – may be used.

Indeed, after some years of hearing about stories where the London Organizing Committee for the Olympic & Paralympic Games (LOCOG) has restricted the activities of small businesses or even non-profit enterprises, this is a missed opportunity to address a matter that many members of the British public would most likely welcome being satirized.

For example, a real world case discussed in the British media just one month before the Games took place concerned advice to caterers within Olympic park. Catering companies that were providing food for cast and crew in preparation for the Opening Ceremony were issued guidance from LOCOG that they could not sell 'just chips' to people, as this would infringe the exclusivity rights of Olympic partner McDonalds. Given the British passion for chips, this was a matter of considerable importance, but the absurdity – reflective of the problems with the Olympic contracts – is that

LOCOG managed to get agreement from McDonalds on the condition that caterers could only sell chips, if fish accompanied them. The case received considerably mocking within the media, but raised an important issue about commercial freedoms around Games time (Booth 2012).

Thus, there are no explicit exchanges between characters about why branding of this kind would be a problem at the Olympics. In general, the fictional organizers of the Games in *Twenty Twelve* are much less astute than those of *The Games*, with the exception of Hugh Bonneville's character who provides a reality check for the rest. Moments when *Twenty Twelve* gets close to satire is in such stories as the one about the multi-faith centre that was to be constructed within Olympic park and the complexity of accommodating all faiths in this project. However, these are exceptions and it spends a lot more time on the characters' relationships than *The Games* and this detracts from the strength of the script.

Perhaps the key distinguisher between the two in terms of their historical value is provided by *The Games*, which, in the second series, accomplishes something that most ground-breaking comedies rarely achieve. After some years of real political debate about the exclusion of indigenous peoples from Australian society

and Games planning and accompanying campaigns for the Australian government to issue an apology to Aboriginal populations, *The Games* invents a story line within the series that effects just this. The scene attracted widespread media coverage in Australia attracting such headlines as "ABC Wins Hearts With its Moving 'sorry from PM'" (Macklin 2000) and 'Satire puts our leaders to shame' (Mitchell 2000), transforming a comedy show into an important political intervention.

One of the major differences between the two may be that ABC was not the Australian broadcaster for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, whereas the BBC has a long history of being the UK's Olympic broadcaster. The cameo appearance of Chairman of London 2012 Sebastian Coe speaks further to this possible compromise, which may have restricted the format to situation comedy rather than satire. While each has its value, their social function is different.

In closing, this critique aims to take nothing away from how funny each of these comedy series is in their own way. They are both enriched by excellent performances from first rate comedic actors and I defy anyone not to laugh out loud throughout each of the series. Yet, back in 2000, I recall colleagues using *The Games* within their Master degree courses to teach students about the highly unusual world of the

Olympic movement and I suspect the same will not be true of *Twenty Twelve*.

Admittedly, their relative similarity as mockumentary style programmes may be a distraction from how their differences make a comparison unreasonable. After all, *Twenty Twelve* is principally a situational comedy, whereas *The Games* is a more deliberate satire. In this respect, a comparison between the two may be unfair. However, rarely does such programming happen around an Olympic Games and so it seems valuable to ask which is the more accomplished, if only to consider how future broadcasters in Olympic Games nations ought consider their contribution.

Given the long history of British satire, the BBC may look back on this series as a missed opportunity to say something really important about the Olympic Games hosting process. At the very least, it is more likely

that Olympic scholars remember *The Games* for years to come whereas *Twenty Twelve* will slip slowly into obscurity once the London 2012 Olympic cauldron is extinguished.

## References

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