

## “This is for Everyone”: The London 2012 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony as a Cultural Celebration

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**Within the Organizing Committee of an Olympic Games, Ceremonies, Culture and Education are often under the same umbrella, but the Ceremonies occupies a distinctly prominent place within the national and international positioning of the Games and within their political staging.**

This is because they are the single most watched event in the Olympic programme, with the Opening Ceremony often considered to be the most watched single television event in history.

While this claim is hard to verify, the related statistical claims by organisers and broadcasters further evidence the significance of this part of the Olympic programme. On the day of the London 2012 Opening Ceremony, BBC broadcasters reported a global total of 4 billion viewers, a figure that is officially used to claim total viewing figures for the entire Olympic Games.



The IOC uses a figure of around 1 billion for the Opening Ceremony, but again this is hard to evidence consistently.

More concretely, the BBC claimed a “peak [UK] audience of 27.3m and an average audience of 23.4m (84% share)” for the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, while 90% of the British population saw part of the Olympics. This compared to 81% penetration for the 2002 World Cup, its second most watched event. To further contextualize this figure 61% of the population saw the Kate and William Royal Wedding in 2011 (BBC 2012).

While it is in the interest of rights paying broadcasters to demonstrate the impact of their Olympic investment, the

comparisons speak to the significance of the Olympic media content. Whatever the actual figure of viewers, it is seen by organizers as a crucial moment to reach out to a global audience and an important symbolic moment for a nation, as it explains who the hosts believe to be to rest of the world. Indeed, the Opening and Closing ceremonies together create frames around the Olympic programme, providing moments to define its significance for a global audience.

This imbues their creation with a pre-defined set of responsibilities, which some ceremony directors have embraced, while others have resisted. The London 2012 Opening Ceremony falls into the second category, as its artistic director Danny Boyle experimented with concepts of heritage, identity and creative culture, in a way that challenged people's expectations of how Britain would portray itself through this unique moment.

This essay offers an insight into the London 2012 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, drawing on the script from the *Media Guide* for broadcasters, a document that is publicly available after the event, but which can be difficult to locate, especially with the passing of time. The essay endeavours to explore the symbolic content of the final ceremony, thus confirming some of the interpretations that people have made about what it was

trying to say. By drawing on the media guide it also offers an insight into the explicit intentions of the Opening Ceremony creators for London 2012, while also functioning as an abridged insight into how an Olympic Opening Ceremony is structured.

## Context

The London 2012 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony was titled 'Isles of Wonder', which alludes to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. However, the thematic focus of Danny Boyle is born out in the statement 'This is for everyone', which he explains is inspired by the inventor of the World Wide Web, British born Sir Tim Berners-Lee.

In this sentiment, Boyle reflects the role played by Britain in bringing about a computer revolution that would change global communications and promotes the idea that the Games – and the ceremony – are not just for a select number of people but, rather, is the widest and largest peace time gathering in history.

Further, he explains how 'There are no spectators...Everyone in the Stadium will be part of the magic' and this was achieved principally through the use of a novel digital 'pixel' apparatus in every spectators' seat, which they used to construct parts of the spectacle.

The running order of scenes for the Opening Ceremony are

summarized below (photographs used here were taken by Andy Miah during the rehearsal on 25 July 2012):

## Countdown



**Primary Sections:** Journey along the Thames, Rings in space, Olympic Bell

**Duration:** 3mins 26 secs

An opening film sequence, whereby the camera begins in the parish of Kemble in Gloucestershire, the source of London's River Thames. Viewers follow the camera from here to London encountering along the way:

Ratty and Mole, from the classic children's book *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame; the Eton Boating Song, school song of Britain's elite school; great British Olympians of the past (June Carol, Margaret Wilding, Michael Howard, John Russell, David Hemery, Richard Meade, Ian Hallam, John Knoych

and David Wilkie); the Oxford and Cambridge boat race; Battersea Power Station with Pink Floyd's flying pig; the Houses of Parliament, the London Eye and the Rotherhithe Tunnel – until we reach the Olympic Stadium itself (LOCOG 2012, p.18)

The Countdown ends with the ringing of a specially commissioned Olympic Bell – by Tour de France 2012 Champion Bradley Wiggins – and symbolizes the tradition of bell ringing in London. This new 'Olympic Bell', will remain in the Olympic Park for 200 years and was made by the same company that made Big Ben in 1858 and the Liberty Bell in 1752.



The Guide states:

Bells are a crucial part of London's geography: the definition of a 'cockney' is someone born within the sound of Bow Bells; the bell on the Houses of

Parliament – Big Ben – announces the New Year and the evening news on TV. Historically, church bells are rung across the country to announce the coming of danger or the arrival of freedom. At the end of war, or at a coronation, we're all united by the peal of bells (p. 19)

Wiggins was also the first British citizen to win the Tour de France making his presence particularly additionally within the ceremony.

Television audiences will not have been aware that, before this section began, the centre of the stadium was full of farmyard animals, which had been providing an entertaining backdrop in the 50 minutes leading up to the global broadcast.

On the approach to the Games, there had been various protests about the use of animals within the ceremony, which prompted Danny Boyle to respond with a hand written letter that circulated on the internet indicating that the



Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) had been consulted extensively and oversaw the involvement of the animals.

The animals were herded away from the stadium just before the loud ceremony commenced.

## Green and Pleasant Land

"This is the countryside we all believe existed once. It's where children danced around the maypole and summer was always sunny. This is the Britain of *The Wind in the Willows* and *Winnie-the-Pooh*."

**Primary Sections:** British Meadow, Four Nations, Arrival of the Brunels

**Duration:** 4 mins 24 secs

There are two main narrative ambitions within this section, one relating to the overarching theme of 'Jerusalem', which Boyle explains in the Ceremony introduction:

Woven through it all, there runs a golden thread of purpose – the idea of Jerusalem – of a better world that can be built through the prosperity of industry, through the caring nation that built the welfare state, through the joyous energy of popular culture, through the dream of universal communication....We can build Jerusalem. And it will be for everyone



The song *Jerusalem* is sung by the Dockhead Choir in London and is followed by recitals of *Londonderry Air* from the Giant causeway in Northern Ireland, *Flower of Scotland* in Edinburgh, and *Bread of Heaven* sung for Wales.

This section also conveys the spark that led to the Industrial Revolution, as the great British engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel reads from Shakespeare's



*Tempest*'.

Music during this speech is from Edward Elgar's 'Nimrod', which is the music associated with 'the laying of wreaths at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday, commemorating the contribution of servicemen and women in two World Wars and later conflicts' (p.20).

Of particular interest in this section is the disconnection between what appear to have been Boyle's intentions and how the media interpreted it. Thus, while many commentators claimed that this section bore little relation to contemporary post-riot England, the Media

Guide states that 'This is the countryside we all believe existed once' and is intended more as an allusion to collective memory, rather than a description of historical fact. Boyle does not claim this is British history, outside of our imagination.

This section also attracted attention in the weeks leading up to the ceremony, as official media briefings led to leaked content in the press. Boyle explained that the intention was to keep the media on side to maintain the secrecy by offering them a glimpse of the content, but images – particularly the set of this section – were communicated by the press (BBC 2012).

## Pandemonium

"This segment celebrates Britain's role as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution – the workshop of the world" (p.22)

**Main Sections:** The Age of Industry, Remembrance, The Parade



**Duration:** 15mins 9seconds

Within this section, acknowledgements are made to the rise of the worker class, the separation of families that ensued through urban migration, the rise of disease, and the presence of war. In a rare moment within Olympic opening ceremonies, there is a moment of silence as poppy fields and attention is drawn to the Accrington Pals who were 'over 500 casualties of World War I who died 'in the first minutes of their first battle – the Somme' (P.22).

Subsequently, the rise of trade unions and protests are represented. Notably, some performers in this segment are actual descendants of the campaigners, including 'Helen and Laura Pankhurst of the great Suffragette family' (p.22). The section ends with a 'giant ring being forged from metal which, joined together with four more, creates the Olympic Rings', which then rise above the field of play. Waves of migration to Britain are also present within these parades.



While the explanatory notes make no mention of this, the forging of a fifth ring by the British industrial revolution workers may speak to Britain's historical role at unifying the world around the Olympic Games.



Two dimensions of this are the inspiration to Pierre de Coubertin from Much Wenlock for the revival of the Modern Olympic Games and the fact that Britain took on the task of hosting the Games in 1908 and 1948 when no other alternative was available. In this sense, Boyle may inadvertently also be conveying Britain's central place in keeping the Olympic Games alive.

## Happy & Glorious

"In a film shot in Buckingham Palace itself, we see Daniel Craig as James Bond and Her Majesty The Queen playing herself, in her first acting role. She leaves with 007 in a helicopter, which swoops over the capital to scenes of great rejoicing on the journey to the Olympic Stadium." (p.24)

**Key Sections:** Bond film, Parachutists, Audience pixel screen

**Duration:** 8 mins 17 secs

In what became one of the most memorable scenes of the ceremony, Happy and Glorious takes its title from words within the UK's National Anthem. Those who saw the Closing Ceremony will also recall that the IOC President's final summary of the London 2012 Games was to say that they were 'Happy and Glorious' taking its inspiration from this being a formal section of the Opening Ceremony.

Despite turmoil surrounding the British monarchy over the years, the Queen is often considered to be the only stable personality as a role model, whose presence has been crucial at unifying public support at a time that also coincides with her 60<sup>th</sup> year on the throne – a feat matched only by one previous UK monarch, Queen Victoria.

In this respect, her presence within the ceremony and, in particular, her taking on a role that many will have found to be amusing and humanizing, transcends all previous boundaries and speaks to the intention of the British monarchy to be more connected with popular, public life, a narrative that recently begun to emerge.

This trajectory may also be seen in the context of the recent Royal Wedding and the growing prominence of the new generation of Royals, particularly Prince Harry and Prince William, but also Olympic equestrian champion Zara Phillips.

## Second to the right, and straight on till morning

"This segment honours two of Britain's greatest achievements: its amazing body of children's literature and its National Health Service (the NHS). Peter Pan and Captain Hook, Mary Poppins, Winnie-the-Pooh, Cruella de Vil, the Queen of Hearts and Harry Potter were all created by British writers."<sup>1</sup> (p.26)

**Key Sections:** Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital and the National Health Service, JK Rowling, Children's literature

**Duration:** 11 mins 26 secs



While many international audiences will have struggled to penetrate this section without guidance from their broadcasters, this is perhaps the most radical series of statements within the ceremony, particularly its foregrounding of the NHS, Great Ormond Street Hospital, and the sometimes disturbing characters from British children's literature.

Commentators later argued that the presence of the NHS, in

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Poppins was created by an Australian born writer, who moved to Britain in her twenties and wrote the story in the UK.



particular, which included actual nurses, sent a message to the British government that it must seek to further protect this health service, which often finds itself vulnerable to bureaucratic changes and discussions about its worth.

Among the literary references in this section are Peter Pan (to which the section title refers), 101 Dalmatians, Harry Potter, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, Mary Poppins also makes an appearance to banish the nightmares from the children in their hospital beds, who have become scared by the grotesque characters of Cruella de Vil and Voldemort.

## Interlude

"From Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel to James Bond and Harry Potter, British cinema has produced more than its fair share of great names. Throughout this evening you'll glimpse moments from some of the best-loved British movies, including A Matter of Life and Death, Gregory's Girl, Kes, Four Weddings and a Funeral and Mr Bean's Holiday." (p.28)

**Key Sections:** London Symphony Orchestra, Rowan Atkinson, Chariots of Fire

**Duration:** 5 mins 3 seconds

It is not often that an interlude within a ceremony becomes its most talked about moment, but for London 2012, this became a globally memorable section. Set against the classical score from the British film *Chariots of Fire* the piece opens with the weighty

burden of historical importance and gravitas, with Britain's most celebrated conductor Sir Simon Rattle leading an orchestra in a rendition of the great composition, within a film that defined sports film making.

The section aims also to celebrate Britain's contribution to film – an expected feature in a ceremony directed by a leading British film director.

This gravitas is quickly lightened as a surprising figure emerges from the orchestra playing an electric keyboard – it is Mr Bean, the television character played by Rowan Atkinson. The scene then becomes a tribute to British comedy, inverting the sequence and reminding viewers that there is more to Britishness than just celebrating its political achievements.

In actual fact, the script does not say that Atkinson is adopting the role of Mr Bean, but in this sequence, he haplessly plays a single note within the *Chariots of Fire* composition, in the style of Bean, quickly getting bored, whereupon he starts reading texts from his mobile phone.

The scene goes even further by digitally reconstructing the classic beach scene from *Chariots of Fire* where Atkinson/Bean is seen running alongside the other characters, cheating at the end to ensure his victory, but failing to do so. The media guide notes this as a major surprise, asking broadcasters not to ruin it for



viewers by revealing too early what is about to happen. Sadly, the impatience of broadcasters has ruined many such moments in Olympic history.

### Frankie & June say... Thanks Tim

"The story starts in an ordinary house – the kind of house in which most British people live. Our fictional family – played by non-professional volunteers, chosen from among our volunteers – is ready for Saturday night." (p.30).



**Key Sections:** The family, the night out, Tim Berners-Lee

**Duration:** 20 mins 57 secs

This section marks the coming of the pop era, from the 1960s to present day. It is the longest sequence of the Ceremony, except for the formal protocol and parade elements. It takes viewers on a journey through British contributions to popular culture, using music, television, film and the Internet as its media. It does this by telling the beginning of a love story:

She drops her phone! He picks it up. He chases her

through a series of nightclubs that play music from the 1960s, '70s, '90s and today... but can he catch her? Will true love triumph?

The scene builds towards a segment that involves the use of social media as a route to starting a romance and concludes with Tim Berners-Lee occupying one end of the stage, as though he were the architect of all social relations in this new era.

Having founded the World Wide Web, he is also later discovered to have used Twitter to share a comment live from his appearance in the Ceremony, but the more significant point perhaps is that his tweet included links to the WWW Consortium, an organization that champions digital freedom. This may also be seen as another overtly political dimension of the Ceremony, as governments around the world threaten to restrict online freedom.



This section also returns viewers to the original theme for the Ceremony summarized in

Berners-Lee's quote 'This is for everyone', which denoted his intention for the World Wide Web.

## Abide With Me

"The beautiful hymn 'Abide With Me' was written by Henry Francis Lyte in 1847 on his deathbed. He passed away three weeks after finishing it. Its honest expression of the fear of approaching death has made it popular with people of all religions and none." (p.32)

**Key Scenes:** Memorial Wall, Akram Khan and Emeli Sandé

**Duration:** 5 mins 51 secs

In this section, one of the world's leading dance companies, Akram Khan Company, perform a short piece. In a press conference with Akram Khan following the ceremony, he explained how Danny Boyle gave him some key structures that would inform the process. He said it must respond to *Abide With Me*, which would be the backdrop for the audience and it would last just 5 minutes.

Khan went on to say that mortality was the key thematic focus of this section, which he felt resonated with the fragility of humanity, a concept he felt that many athletes would understand. During the BBC broadcast, the commentator noted that it was a moment of reflection, following the exuberance of the previous sections, which is also a radical concept for a ceremony that otherwise has a continuous, energetic pace.



It is a highly physical piece in which dancers portray aspects of our biological system. In fact, while the audience was hearing the hymn, the dancers themselves were listening to a different tempo through earpieces, one that was much faster and reminiscent of a beating heart. While the script makes no direct references to comparisons with athletes, Khan indicated that he spent time learning how athletes train and how this shaped his process around this choreography, particularly in learning how to strengthen his body.

The dance also resonates with a later theme in the ceremony, as Khan (also the lead dancer) encounters a child – perhaps his child – inviting audiences to construe this as a composition that is about passing on life from one generation to another. This was adopted thematically in the eventual lighting of the Olympic cauldron, where 7 relatively unknown young athletes were nominated by well known Olympic champions to light the torch on their behalf, thus

foregrounding the transference of obligation and celebration of future champions, a core dimension of the Olympic movement. Indeed, the Games are expressed within IOC rhetoric as being principally a celebration of the world's youth.

The dance is preceded by a *Memorial Wall*, a digital visualization of people who had lost their lives in recent times. The Media Guide says that spectators were invited to 'present images of loved ones who couldn't be with us tonight'. While it is common during important symbolic moments to use a memorial wall to celebrate the lives of people who were lost within political conflict, this wall was just for everyday people who had passed away recently. In this respect, the section transforms an otherwise narrowly defined concept into a celebration of life that has passed and is perhaps one of the most thoughtful aspects of the ceremony, though it is easily overlooked. A further dimension against which one may interpret this section, is the use of such memorial walls within film ceremonies, such as the Oscars or BAFTAs and this presence seems to speak directly to that principle.

## Welcome

"At every Games, the Athletes' Parade is led by Greece to honour the birthplace of the Olympics. They're followed by teams from the rest of the world in alphabetical order, with the exception of the Host Nation who conclude the

Parade. So this evening, that's Team GB." (p.33)

**Key Sections:** Teams, Flitter Drop

**Duration:** 1hr 29mins

The first formal part of the proceedings is the Athletes Parade or 'Welcome' as it is called for London 2012. In the past, this has been seen as an excessively long part of the ceremony and some have called for it to be shortened, but it is the single opportunity for all athletes to partake in a common ritual. Having said that, many athletes do not attend since their competition may be the next day and they would need to be standing around for a significant length of time.

## Bike a.m.

"This segment celebrates the bicycle – not just its part in the Games, but its role in ordinary life" (p.34)

**Key Sections:** Dove bikes, Arctic Monkeys

**Duration:** 3mins 1second

A traditional closing sequence in the Olympic Games opening ceremony refers to the peace dove in some way, alluding to the Olympic Truce. For London, these 'dove bikes' refer further to the naturalist Louise Helle', whom the Guide quotes as having said "Bicycling is the nearest approximation I know to the flight of birds". The prominence of the bicycle also aims to build an association to

British history, the modern bicycle being invented “in Scotland by a blacksmith named Kirkpatrick Macmillan”.

## Let the Games Begin

This segment marks the official opening of the Games and includes traditional elements common to all Opening Ceremonies: speeches by the Chair of the Organizing Committee and President of the IOC; raising the Olympic flag; singing the Olympic anthem, and Oath taking. It culminates with Her Majesty The Queen officially declaring the Games open” (p.35)

**Duration:** 12 mins 24 secs

The choice of flag bearers is generally considered to be the more symbolic element of this section, from the host nation’s perspective. Among the London 2012 flag bearers, were:

- **Daniel Barenboim** (co-founder of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra)
- **Sally Becker** (aid worker during the Balkan war and Goodwill Ambassador for Children of Peace)
- **Shami Chakrabati** CBE (Director of Liberty and human rights activist),
- **Leymah Gbowee** (Nobel Peace Prize winner),
- **Haile Gebrselassie** (distance runner and London 2012 Ambassador for International Inspiration),

- **Doreen Lawrence OBE** (Londoner and founder of Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust, pursuant of justice),
- **Ban Ki-moon** (UN Secretary General),  
**Martina Silve** (fighter against destruction of the Brazilian rainforest), and
- **Muhammed Ali** (former boxer and charity worker).

## There is a Light That Never Goes Out

“Kindled from the rays of the sun at the Temple of Hera in Olympia, the Olympic Torch has spent 70 days travelling around the UK, carried by 8,000 inspirational Torchbearers chosen by their own communities for the light that they bring to the lives of others” (p.36)

**Duration:** 7 mins 7 secs

Perhaps the most anticipated moment of the Opening Ceremony is the lighting of the Olympic cauldron, which is often seen to make some historically significant statement about the host nation.

At the Atlanta 1996 Games, it was boxer Muhammed Ali, who famously cast aside his Olympic medals from the Rome 1960 Olympic Games, after returning home only to find the colour of his skin still dominated how people treated him. Being given this honour in the state of



Georgia was seen to be especially symbolic of how the world had changed since and a fitting tribute to one of America's 'greatest' athletes.

Alternatively, at the Sydney 2000 Games, aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman lit the cauldron causing reverberations across Australian society, where there had been significant tensions between white people and indigenous Australians for some years.

It is in this context that the person chosen for the task is seen to be important and London's approach extended further its alternative Olympic programme, which began the moment they chose the radical design for the emblem. Thus, in London's case, they did not choose a single athlete, but 7 young and relatively unknown athletes who had been nominated by more senior athletes.

As mentioned earlier, it conveyed the passing of the torch from one generation to the next and gave priority to the youth of the world. It also allowed London to incorporate all of its most significant symbolic individuals within this most important section. First, David Beckham brought the torch by speedboat along the River Thames in its final leg towards the stadium joined by women's footballer Jade Bailey.

The torch was then taken by Steve Redgrave – Britain's greatest Olympian (until the

successes of Chris Hoy at the London 2012 Games) and then the nominating athletes: Lynn Davies, Duncan Goodhew MBE, Dame Kelly Holmes DBE, Dame Mary Peters DBE, Shirley Robertson, Daley Thompson and Sir Steve Redgrave CBE.

### And in the end...

"An impressive pyrotechnic display in the Stadium and around the Olympic Park will bring the Opening Ceremony to a close. Having sat in darkness all evening, the 115m-high ArcelorMittal Orbit will be bathed in light before one of Britain's greatest musical icons takes to the stage under the Olympic Bell" (p.37)

**Key Sections:** Rings in space

**Duration:** 2 mins 30 secs

Of particular cultural significance in this section was the appearance of Sir Paul McCartney who sung 'Hey Jude' to end the evening, a song that often ends a night out in Britain. The Orbit is also the largest public art piece in Britain and was brought about by a collaboration between artist Anish Kapoor and architect Cecil Balmond.

### Conclusion

The London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony broke ground in two important ways. First, its unique irreverence and sheer humour brought a different grammar to a ceremony that is, otherwise, seen as a very serious

affair, perhaps too serious. Second, it delivered a nuanced, artist led vision for a ceremony, returning Olympic fans to the creative innovation of the Albertville 1994 ceremony.

In more recent history, opening ceremonies have been so packed full of representational statements that the opportunities to draw people's attention to specific matters of social importance, rather than the entire history of a nation have been limited.

The London 2012 Opening Ceremony demonstrated a confidence in Britishness, at a time when an identity crisis looms, with questions about its future in Europe and further Scottish devolution are key political issues for the nation.

The complex set of signifiers within Danny Boyle's Opening Ceremony may be the reason why historians will reflect on London as being an exceptional and transformative Games, not just 'happy and glorious' as IOC President Jacques Rogge would have us remember them.

## References

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