

What Danny Boyle's Olympic pageant does and does not say about Britain

By Chris Marsden
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It is to film director Danny Boyle's credit that his Olympic Games opening ceremony aroused such a hostile reaction from a section of the Conservative right.

Boyle's ceremony was ambitious, often spectacular and sometimes engaging. Public reaction internationally was positive and in the UK, where the myriad references were more familiar, yet more warm and appreciative.

It is not hard to see why.

Boyle's initial historical tableau, inspired by poet William Blake's millenarian vision, showed a "green and pleasant land" recast in the burning heat of the industrial revolution. When dealing with the 20th century, his actors and dancers portrayed suffragettes, Jarrow hunger marchers, anti-nuclear activists and Caribbean immigrants arriving on the Windrush in 1948.

His cultural pageant began with Edward Elgar's "Nimrod" and included Charles H.H. Parry's hymn "Jerusalem" and "Abide with Me", sung beautifully by Emeli Sande. It centred, however, on pop music. Not only the more obvious commercial giants, but bands that have had a cultural impact: The Rolling Stones and The Beatles, yes, but also The Sex Pistols, The Clash and The Specials.

Sharp edges were still blunted, of course. The Jam's "Going Underground", ("As their lies wash you down and their promises rust, You'll see kidney machine replaced by rockets and guns") and the Pistols "God Save the Queen" ("There is no future in England's dreaming") were sampled so as not to offend anyone unduly. And in Boyle's eclectic mix, this was coupled with the Queen herself recast as a Bond girl.

There was an extended tribute to the National Health Service (NHS); a gay soap-opera kiss and anthem from

Frankie Goes To Hollywood; Tim Berners-Lee and the World Wide Web; a celebration of Britain's multi-ethnic society. Doreen Lawrence, mother of murdered black teenager Stephen Lawrence, carried an Olympic flag.

These are all things that people might cite in their own list of what it means to be British, rather than the trappings of monarchy, militarism and empire that many find irrelevant, unreal, if not repugnant.

It is this that provoked the ire of a section of the Tory right.

Most overt was Aidan Burley, forced to resign as a ministerial aide last year after attending a Nazi-themed party, who described the event as "multi-cultural crap" and "The most leftie opening ceremony I have ever seen".

Others including Education Secretary Michael Gove and Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt reportedly expressed their distaste more privately.

But the positive comments of other political figures are just as significant. There was, of course, the nauseating crowing of leading Labourites. One of Tony Blair's top acolytes, Alastair Campbell, tweeted, "Bloody brilliant that we got a socialist to do the opening ceremony".

MP Paul Flynn hailed its "Wonderfully progressive socialist sentiments", while Carl Sargeant, minister for local government and communities in the Welsh Assembly, called it "the best Labour Party political broadcast I have seen in a while".

The ability of such figures to pose as fellow "socialists" who share Boyle's vision of society points to artistic limitations that are rooted in the film director's own confused political outlook.

So too does the sanguine response of the government, including Prime Minister David Cameron and Mayor of

London Boris Johnson—which should not be dismissed as simple damage limitation.

Johnson declared in his usual bumptious style, “People say it was all leftie stuff. That is nonsense. I’m a Conservative and I had hot tears of patriotic pride from the beginning”.

His invocation of patriotism may be cynical, but unfortunately it is not entirely inappropriate.

Boyle (*Trainspotting*, *Slumdog Millionaire*) has attempted to compile a list of things to be proud about and, by extension, reasons to be proud of being British. Such an approach, however, cannot offer a coherent alternative to the rightist social and political nostrums that dominate today’s official Britain.

He invokes an uncritical nostalgia for the past and a sentimental view of the present in order to assert his belief that Britain can be united by a shared culture of tolerance and compassion.

“We can build Jerusalem, and it will be for everyone”, he wrote in the Olympic brochure.

“We had no agenda other than values we feel are true”, he has said. “We hope the feeling of the show is a celebration of generosity”.

His performance began with a quote from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, intoned by Kenneth Branagh, playing Caliban recast as Isambard Kingdom Brunel (the renowned 19th century engineer, bridge and tunnel builder): “Be not afeard; The isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not”.

Is any of this applicable to 21st century Britain, after a decades-long and constantly escalating offensive against the working class and its social gains—and amid a deepening global economic crisis? Is it a place for everyone? Does it celebrate generosity? Does nothing here hurt?

Boyle wants to depict a unified nation when Britain is characterised by massive inequality. The Olympics, located in that most socially polarised of cities, London, has become a monument to deep, corrosive and unbridgeable class divisions.

A ceremony meant to celebrate inclusiveness took place in a city under oppressive military and police guard, before an audience that had paid a minimum of £212 and a maximum of £2,012 for tickets. It was dominated and shaped by the dictates of commercial sponsors that include Dow Chemicals, which has

refused compensation for the 20-25,000 dead and hundreds of thousands of victims of the Bhopal disaster in India.

Under these circumstances, where does Boyle’s wishful thinking leave us?

The centrepiece of his panorama was a paean of praise to the NHS. At one point it depicted children in Great Ormond Street Hospital being menaced by J.K Rowling’s Voldemort and the Child Catcher from *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang*.

But the real villains menacing the National Health Service are Cameron and his deputy, Nick Clegg. And Labour will not play the role of Mary Poppins in coming to the rescue. Rather, it was they who began the privatisations and cuts that under the Tories threaten the final destruction of the NHS.

No one in the UK today can afford to passively hark back to a mythologised past, stripped of its essential feature of bitter class struggles. Nor is it enough to hail positive aspects of British society that are manifest despite the rottenness of the ruling elite—or which have yet to be completely destroyed by it.

To build a Britain that is truly worthy of being celebrated depends on the working class rejecting the essentially parochial and complacent viewpoint Boyle reflects. It means facing contemporary reality squarely and drawing the necessary conclusions—by embracing class struggle and socialist internationalism, rather than accepting a populist appeal for national unity.

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