FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 35 | 2024

Title	Remixing Britishness: Affect and National Pride in the London 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	35
Publication Date	October 2024

Remixing Britishness: Affect and National Pride in the London 2012 Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony

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During the London 2012 Opening Olympic Ceremony, emotional moments such as the torch relay and the celebration of the National Health Service affected many viewers. Such a spectacle of national history and culture was wide-sweeping and is still remembered today as a moment of triumph for the country. With the Paris 2024 Olympics only months away, it becomes timely to observe how the sensorial spectacle of the Olympics works to create a certain emotional effect in its viewers, and how they leave with a specific understanding of what the nation stands for. Crucially, it is imperative to survey the ways in which national histories and cultures have been edited for an "Olympic affect" during the Opening Ceremony and comprehend why they play such a crucial role in contemporary political discourse. The London 2012 Opening Olympic Ceremony revealed a particular perspective on British history, used emotion and spectacle to recount a specific version of events, and attempted to garner a certain sense of national pride during a time of national crisis. In examining specific visual and auditory cues of this Opening Olympic Ceremony, this study will define the "Olympic affect" and examine the idealised Britishness that is performed, so that we may understand what kind of affectual and political power the Olympics hold.

Introduction

For many British people, the memory of the London 2012 Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony (also known as *Isles of Wonder*) is still very present. Many remember moments such as Queen Elizabeth II's appearance in the *James Bond* franchise, the torch relay weaving through towns, or the inclusion of the comedy character Mr. Bean in a parody of *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981). Behind the direction of Scottish filmmaker Danny Boyle, the cast of performers totalled over 7,500, the production costed approximately £27 million, and the performance lasted about ninety minutes (McKinnie 49). However inspiring or comical these individual moments were, what is most memorable about the Opening Ceremony was the feeling of national pride it evoked. Even the comedian Charlie Brooker, in his satirical review of 2012, took an uncharacteristic move to sincerity to say that the Summer Olympics Opening

Ceremony "was a heartwarming spectacle that made everyone in the country feel intensely patriotic" (*Charlie Brooker's 2012 Screenwipe* 28:44). In other words, the monocultural references made in the event stood as metaphors for British people working together for a better future. Songs such as 'Starman' by David Bowie, 'Step On' by The Happy Mondays, and 'Born Slippy (Nuxx)' by Underworld, as well as reenacted film and television clips from *Chariots of Fire*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994), and *Skins* (E4, 2007-2013) highlighted moments in which the performers were seen helping each other, and dancing through British history with joy as they moved towards an exciting future.

From a cursory glance at the way that the country is represented in the performance, paired with the glowing commentary mentioned above, it is clear that the Opening Ceremony engendered many positive feelings amongst its viewers, making Britain feel like a progressive, forward-looking country. Yet, when we consider the national and political context in which the London 2012 Summer Olympics occurred, and how sounds are used to distract from certain images, another narrative can be surmised – one in which moments of British history are revised, remixed, and re-envisioned to bring about a certain reaction in its audience. With the Paris Olympics only weeks away (at the time of writing), while protests are currently taking place against both the French government's recent policies and the event being hosted in the city (Joseph Ataman et al; David Wharton), it becomes useful and timely to revisit a past opening ceremony in order to comprehend the methodology used by the Olympics to present an ideal version of the host country's history. Although opening ceremonies provide a sensorial spectacle for the visual, auditory, and sometimes tactical senses, the use of sound indicates a flattening (or silencing) of uncomfortable moments of the country's history. In examining specific sound cues in the London 2012 Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony, this paper will reveal what was being edited out, or silenced entirely, and what kind of idealised Britishness was being performed.

Understanding The Olympic E/Affect

Before we delve into what exactly the Olympic effect is, it is worth understanding how the London 2012 Summer Olympics were envisioned, and what the host city was expecting in terms of the Games' social and economic impact. While the Olympics are most commonly known as an elite sporting tournament, they play a pivotal role in how nations are marketed internationally. They have an immediate effect on their host cities, and thus national

economies. In pitching the potential London Summer Olympics in a BBC interview in 2005, then prime minister, Tony Blair, noted that hosting the Games would allow Britain to cement a "legacy" as London was a "city with a voice that talks to young people" (Ronay) and they could use the platform to express "hope" for future generations. The use of vocal terms spoken by Blair is especially fascinating, as it suggests that Britishness is told in an Olympic (and thus international) setting, and that this voice is one that is shared by all young people. This project was part of Blair's larger efforts to rebrand Britain as a nation of young entrepreneurs, encouraging foreign investment and multinationals to come to London. This use of emotional language attached to the Olympic Games is a recurring theme of the promotion of the London 2012 Summer Olympics, as a publicity paper from the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport noted that the Games were intended to have lasting effects in not just its athletes, but British people at large: "Our mission for 2012 is to inspire people to get involved and to change the way they live their lives" (Department of Culture, Media, and Sport). This inspiration could be perceived in various ways: in terms of the revitalisation of neighbourhoods of East London; its emphasis on Paralympic athletes and attempts to make London to be more inclusive for people with disabilities, or the creation of six thousand jobs to ensure that the parks and sporting venues would be maintained and accessible after the Games had taken place (Girginov 2).

From these documents, it is clear that the London 2012 Summer Olympics were built on feelings of hope and renewal. These feelings become especially important in the years leading up to the event itself, when crises such as the resignation of Tony Blair, the 2008 financial crash, and the resulting austerity crisis caused unrest in the British populace. As Polly Toynbee and David Walker acknowledge, the time between 2000 up to 2010 was a "lost" and "hopeless time" for many, as "the pressing national tasks of cutting carbon emissions, renewing roofs and railways [and] boosting technical skills" (17) were not accomplished, while "wages, adjusted for inflation, dropped by 5 per cent" (ibid). The Olympic Games came at a time in which austerity measures were at their strongest, where the sense that Britain was "broken" and needing to be reinvigorated was widespread (Ian Cummins 106).[1] Girginov adds

[1] Prime minister David Cameron's austerity measures attempted "to reduce the role of the state while, at the same time, reinvigorating community groups. It can be read as a combination of modernising tendencies and nostalgic notions of community and civic involvement" (Cummins 105). In other words, there was a sense that

that the Games were a tool that the government could use to counter this national experience as it could provide "a beacon of hope and a counterpoint to the prevailing public concerns with the social and economic hardships of the day" (7). For both the Labour and Conservative governments that were in power from 2005 to 2012, the Olympics could act as a tool to efface national political issues, where they could replace anger or unrest with hope and positive feelings for the future of the country.

Considering the build-up to the London 2012 Summer Olympics, it is clear that the nation had much to gain from hosting the quadrennial event. As John Horne notes in his study of the political dimensions of the tournament, "[the Olympics] has been seen as a generator of national and local economic and social development" (27). Economically, it has been viewed as an industry that is socially "viewed as a tool for the development of urban communities, and the reduction of social exclusion" (ibid). Thus, it is clear that the so-called "Olympic Effect" acts as an immediate injection of capital investment and urban policy decisions. The opening ceremony also creates an immediate reflection of the host nation, in which the political moment, social conditions, and cultural history of a certain country take centre stage for an international audience. It projects an image of what the country should be – not only to its residents – but to other nations as well. But how exactly is this effect achieved? Let us turn to other Olympic ceremonies, and the study of the affect, to understand how the Olympics construct this effect.

The study of the immediate impact on viewers becomes a useful field of inquiry. But how does one gauge the study of general reaction? Previous studies of the event by Emil Persson, Alex Krumer and Andrew Musau have looked at the ways in which Olympic opening ceremonies cause individuals to cry, through a focus on pain and resilience in its coverage of athletes. Other studies have assessed how initial pleasure turns to overstimulation for viewers as the Olympics continue (McGraw et al.; Dawson et al.). These reactions can each be categorised and explained through what is known as the affect. The affect is here defined as the impact of certain phenomena on the individual, in which the perceptual triggers certain

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economic suffering was felt across the country, and the government in turn created a narrative that the nation needed to come together (as they did historically in events such as The Blitz) and share the collective pain so they could eventually move towards a brighter future.

sensations, and produces an emotion or reaction. It is not the study of perception, or emotion, but rather, "a capacity to affect or be affected" (Massumi 221) by a force that helps the body distinguish between "identities and the social world" (ibid). In other words, to examine the affect is to study what it means to be open to a certain sensory experience, or to be made vulnerable to a certain emotional reaction. Gregory Matthew Singh provides a useful definition of this notion in his study of how media creates affectual experiences and explains how these immediate reactions play a role in how we regularly reconsider and reimagine what we believe are established concepts. In describing how viewers react to failures in sports films (such as a character missing a penalty shot), he describes a process experienced by the viewer: "sensation tells us that something is painful; thinking tells us about the sportsman; intuition tells us about its potential (becoming, where it might lead)" (Singh 18) and finally, "feeling is an operation of evaluation about the sport and the people involved in it (reflection, how we feel about it)" (ibid). In this example, the affect is a process in which the viewer reflects on what they know about the sportsperson, and reconsiders how they understand terms like "vulnerability" and "strength" (ibid). Maximilian Stieler and Claas Christian Germelmann also write about this reconsideration of emotion, noting that sporting events have a unique ability to rally individuals around a common identity through the experience of a common emotion. They write that "individuals do not lose their identity" (Stieler and Germelmann 398) when they are at large events, such as a sports game or a concert, "but shift their existing identity toward a new one" (ibid). They term this process "the self-categorization theory," as collectively experiencing excitement or upset brings about "a salient shift from personal to social identity […] individuals make judgments about similarity and dissimilarity, especially with reference to a potential out-group" (ibid).

The Olympics can thus be attached to the affect, particularly in a positive sense, for instance during medal ceremonies in which audiences become emotional seeing an athlete succeed. It can also be tied to negative affect, in which athletes who use banned substances are caught in their behaviour and receive an outpouring of anger in the media. These two examples are devoid of national political suggestion as they could involve any athlete. But the political dimension of the affect is there. In their study of Olympic Summer Games of the twenty-first century, Maria Konstantaki et al. note that the Olympics are a useful strategy for nations undergoing political, economic, or social turmoil to focus on togetherness and shared

cultural history: “A host nation looks for recognition by the international community and at the same time seeks celebration of its own identity […] National identity is not a static entity, as it is constantly negotiated and reformulated” (41). Simply put, the Olympics engender a positive response in the individuals who are watching, and one that is often matched with memorable national images. Nick J. Fox takes this notion one step further in his study of the London 2012 Summer Olympics and Paralympics, where he notes how certain moments are teased out of the audience to receive specific reactions:

> Consider Danny Boyle's Olympic opening ceremony, which sentimentalised and romanticised tropes from British history, drawing upon baby-boomer popular culture and even the Queen to weave an emotive vision of a progressive, successful and vibrant UK that was the capital of the world (as Boris Johnson declared), for a few weeks at least. The multiplicity of emotions engendered by the ceremony established a “can-do” mood for the Games that followed, and coalesced an assemblage of a post-imperial, inclusive and self-confident society that supplies future affects for both collectivist and libertarian politics (3).

This quote from Fox’s study compels us to consider how overwhelming feelings experienced while watching the Olympics are attached to certain national imaginary. This language is similar to the language used in the government documents examined earlier. The “can-do” mood Fox describes is not just a feeling of hope in seeing athletes succeed, but of history playing out in front of the viewer.

From all these studies, it is evident that the Olympics are designed to create a reaction in its viewers – one in which they are compelled to cry, cheer, and feel connected to an optimistic version of their national histories. It becomes compelling to look at exactly how this overwhelmingly positive, “can-do” attitude is constructed. To do this, let us turn to some moments within the London 2012 Opening Ceremony itself, and understand how it develops a specific understanding of nationhood.

London 2012: A Closer Look at the Olympic Affect

Based on the reviews previously referenced, it is clear that the feelings of national pride were present. So much attention was placed on visual icons of Britishness – several Union Flags,

red telephone boxes, and various symbols of the monarchy were seen on performers and background screens throughout the ceremony. The audience would often respond to these moments, as they are heard cheering for these recognisable icons of Britishness. Audiences cheered louder than at any other point in the ceremony when the NHS logo was spelled out in lights. The commentator on the official recorded version of the event also comments on the "loud" and "overwhelming" cheering from the audience, telling international viewers that it is "a point of pride" for British people (Olympics 44:32) and that "no society can legitimately call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of need" (Olympics 46:45), again connecting ideas of British patriotism with togetherness and altruism. A similar effect is achieved in its soundtrack – recognisably British songs such as 'Bohemian Rhapsody' by Queen, 'My Generation' by The Who, and the main theme from *Chariots of Fire* by Vangelis encourage the audience to sing along with lyrics on screens in the background or clap along to the beat. It is evident from these examples alone that British national pride was being encouraged by the Opening Ceremony, and a sense of national unity was established through the cueing of certain emotional resonances with particular images and songs. However, upon closer examination of the soundtrack in the middle two segments (entitled *Pandaemonium* and *Frankie and June say… Thanks Tim*, which both portray a retelling of British history from pre-industrial times through to the present day), it becomes evident that, while certain visuals are emphasised, matching sounds are edited out. While it is expected that a nation would not purposely present itself through its tragic moments at an Olympic opening ceremony, looking at this reediting of history allows us to observe how the Olympic affect of national pride is utilised, especially in an era of political tumult.

The *Pandaemonium* segment uses its music to create a hopeful version of British history and demonstrates how tragedy can be rewritten through musical cues and dance. To provide context, this segment features performers moving through recognisable moments of history, such as the construction of factories, women's suffrage, all the way up to the 1970s with the arrival of the Windrush vessel. Within this segment, there is a consistent use of song. This twenty-minute piece is named 'And I Will Kiss', composed by the musician Underworld, featuring a percussion arrangement from Dame Evelyn Glennie.

In this segment, the performers are instructed to begin their movement after Kenneth Branagh (as Isambard Kingdom Brunel) reads from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

> Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises
> Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
> Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
> Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,
> That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
> Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
> The clouds methought would open, and show riches
> Ready to drop upon me; that, when I waked, / I cried to dream again. (Olympics 17:28)

As soon as this speech ends, the beat of a drum starts, guiding the movement of the performers as they all perform labour – whether it is pulling ropes, pulling levers to move gears, welding metal, or moving the green landscape off set. Already at the beginning of the piece, a language of sound is being established, where the workers all move to get the "riches" spoken about in the piece. For the rest of this segment, the performers all move in a rhythmic manner as they conduct labour in various forms throughout the stadium. Here, hard labour is translated to dance, and the music keeps it timed within a fast-paced tempo. Not only does *Pandaemonium* transform historical labour into dance, but it also makes historical tragedies brief moments that can be quickly passed over. Moments of tragedy such as the effects of both World Wars, dangerous labour during the Industrial Revolution, and the loss of life in protesting for women's suffrage, are rendered as dance moves, all lasting no more than five seconds each, with a consistent percussive track playing in the background. As such, the audience is compelled to recognise these moments as brief devastations, but ultimately press forward and look elsewhere at the other action happening in the arena. The overwhelming amount of history being represented inspires awe, and the affect of national pride is evident as the viewer is encouraged to keep applauding with the advance of history.

The final part of this segment is the Olympic rings being "welded" from the result of all the performed labour, with the dance ending with everyone looking on as they form, applauding. As such, history is told as continuously socially progressive, where everyone always contributes to a better society. In addition, the audience is encouraged to clap along to the drumbeat and cheer for the rings once they come together. The key also shifts from A minor to C major for the first time, ringing in a victorious and concluding note, as if this is the

peak of British history up to this date. As such, the use of music creates an affectual reaction of celebration in the nation's history.

Within the *Frankie and June say… Thanks Tim* segment, British history from 1950 onwards is examined through the realm of popular culture. The narrative of this segment surrounds two teenagers who leave their homes at night and dance with others like them to various popular songs from a variety of genres (including rock, house, and rap). There is a house made up of screens in the centre of the stage, projecting various memorable moments from film and television. While the two teenagers are the protagonists of this segment, the background dancers all reflect various sub- or counter-cultural movements, such as the rise of hippies, punk, and nightclub culture. The main goal of this segment is designed to be a celebration of how British youth use pop culture as a rebellion against oppressive norms and find connection with each other no matter their backgrounds. While this segment also reflects a sense of British unity, the use of editing suggests another message – one in which all reference to class prejudice or violence is erased, rendering an image of Britain where everyone is equal.

An example of such manipulative editing is present during the section dedicated to the punk movement. There are several dancers wearing helmets with Skinhead haircuts and symbols, bouncing on pogo sticks to replicate a sort of mosh pit. Short audio clips from punk songs like 'Smash It Up' by The Damned and 'Clash City Rockers' by The Clash are heard (as well as the dance song 'Firestarter' by The Prodigy), with lyrics such as "People call me villain oh it's such a shame / Maybe it's my clothes must be to blame" (The Damned) and "I'm the trouble starter, punkin' instigator […] I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter" (The Prodigy) briefly heard before the song eventually settles on 'Pretty Vacant' by The Sex Pistols. The lyrics to this final song are shown on the screens to encourage viewers to sing along:

> We're vacant […]
> Don't ask us to attend 'cause we're not all there
> Oh, I don't pretend 'cause I don't care
> I don't believe illusions 'cause too much is real
> So stop your cheap comments 'cause we know what we feel (The Sex Pistols, PV).

Thus, the use of music in this segment encourages engagement with the punk movement as far as imagery of teenage ennui (which is reinforced by the sing-along suggestion on screen, and the images of teenagers jumping in a form of dance), but the editing of the soundtrack avoids engagement with any lyrics referencing violence or systemic injustice (such as "I'm gonna scream and shout til my dying breath / I'm gonna smash it up til there's nothing left" (The Damned) from 'Smash It Up'). This editing of punk music echoes a moment earlier in the ceremony, in which 'God Save The Queen' by The Sex Pistols is played, but abruptly cuts to the theme from *EastEnders* before the lyrics "The fascist regime / there's no future" (The Sex Pistols, GStQ) can be heard. The imagery of punk is therefore celebrated in terms of a teenage rebellion but ignores the protest of societal issues that the punk movement represented. Therefore, the feelings associated with the punk movement are re-envisioned, and the affectual reaction is rendered to be apolitical – one in which the audience celebrates adolescence instead of feeling anger at societal injustices.

This kind of abrupt editing is consistent throughout this segment. In the section dedicated to the 1960s and 1970s, clips from popular films of the decades are projected onto the house in the centre of the stage. Clips from *Coronation Street*, *Life of Brian*, and *Quadrophenia* are all seen at various points. However, there is a moment in which the footage cuts solely to screen, without the presence of the performers. This cut is to the conclusion of *Kes* (dir. Ken Loach, 1969), where the protagonist, Billy, releases his kestrel. It is paired with the beginning of the first bridge from 'She Loves You' by The Beatles. In actuality, the scene projected shows the moment in the film where Billy is coming to terms with his lack of agency as a working-class child in his native South Yorkshire. The audio in the original scene is a crescendo into a minor key, indicating a sad and irreversible moment in Billy's trajectory. But here, the notes of The Beatles' song are from the G major chord, indicating that this, like the final moment of the *Pandaemonium* segment, is a victorious moment worthy of celebration. Thus, once again, this clip is celebrated as an essential part of British art and popular culture, but its original context is removed, so that its political and social commentary is rendered silent. As the music of this scene is remixed, the affectual and political power of it is also reimagined to become a celebration of British culture.

The climax of this segment arrives when the music reaches the present day of the 2010s, and where, in the narrative, the two teenagers host a party at their home to celebrate

their blossoming relationship. Here, the rapper Dizzee Rascal appears and the rap 'Bonkers' starts playing. The song is about negative representations of Black and working-class individuals, and how they are portrayed in the media – the lyrics proclaim "[they say] all I care about is sex and violence / A heavy bassline is my kind of silence" (Rascal). Yet, the original political context of the song is gone, as he only sings the first verse and chorus, which reflect his self-confidence through the lyrics

> some people think I'm bonkers
> But I just think I'm free
> Man, I'm just living my life
> There's nothing crazy about me (ibid).

The original music video features Dizzee Rascal walking around the area of Brixton in London and encouraging others to dance with him. The rapper wanted to reflect the working-class community who raised him and allow them a chance to dance with him in the club scene (4Music). Yet, in the London Opening Ceremony, he is alone, wearing a designer bomber jacket with "E3" as the central logo that serves as the sole reference to the east of London. The camera's focus is also largely not on the rapper himself, as sixty percent of the song's runtime is visually focused on the various dance styles of all the performers coming together. Once again, the realistic imagery of Britain is removed and replaced with more generic imagery of teenagers celebrating. While this action could be read as a form of rebellion against the social traditions of older generations, the narrative of this scene involves a couple celebrating their relationship by holding a house party. Thus, the affectual power of the reimagining of this song encourages the audience to understand it as a commemoration of British adolescent culture rather than a song about the Black experience in East London.

From an overview of these two sections of the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, it is clear that a message is being formed about British history, and where the British people are headed. Any reference to historical struggle, class difference, and violence is aesthetically rendered, and sonically remixed, to re-envision British history as an optimistic tale of progress. As such, it recreates the "can-do" attitude that Fox speaks of and relies on the language of inspiration that the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport used to advertise the ceremony. The Olympic effect does not just immediately create an impact on the economy, but it also creates a longer lasting imagination of how the country is handling

national crises. Through the opening ceremony, the Olympics' host nation is able to create a message that all is well, and that positive attitudes will prevail over national suffering.

Conclusion

While it is not surprising that an Olympic opening ceremony would understate the unpleasant moments in the host nation's history, this study makes clear what was emphasised through certain images and what was edited out sonically in the ceremony that opened the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games. More specifically, this examination of the *Pandaemonium* and *Frankie and June say… Thanks Tim* segments demonstrates how Olympic opening ceremonies can become exercises in national affect. Through the retuning of affectual moments in the London Opening Ceremony, there is a clear reinforcing of British identity as being able to withstand hardship. The messaging of the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games thus ties directly into the messaging of the Conservative government during the austerity crisis. It would be foolish to assume that an entire history of a long-lasting and diverse country can be told within the space of a ninety-minute ceremony, but it is crucial to recognise the ways in which national identity can be edited for an affectual reaction.

This study becomes even more imperative as the next Olympics approaches, and a discourse has developed over how the Paris Olympics will acknowledge the growing unrest that has been developing over the past two years. Paris, much like London in 2012, has been undergoing many political changes that have dominated its national discourse. This discourse includes the protest to pension policy change that began in summer 2023; the demonstrations hosted by far-right and far-left ministers and activists against the French Constitutional Council and Interior Ministry's changes to France's immigration law in January 2024, and, of course, the continued rise of the far-right party National Rally (and concurrent protests against the National Rally) in its current snap election campaign. This paper was written in early July; as such, it can only conclude that we must consider how the Olympic opening ceremonies are used to convey unity in a time of political division. It is then likely that the Olympic Games will be used to achieve a similar affect in its audience. As we watch the Olympics this year, we must then consider how the affect is being used, and how images and sounds are being remixed to understand how a nation is constructing (and reconstructing) itself.

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