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Rodanthi Tzanelli: Ceremonial Olympism: Towards an art of democratic dialogue?

Re-public: Re-imagining democracy



I remember the euphoria that swept round Greece when the Olympiad of 2004 was crowned with Jacques Rogge's and other global players' long-awaited congratulations. Recognition is always on the cards for Olympic 'hosts', no matter how marginal the country they inhabit. But the devil hides in details, and once in the political limelight, the host becomes vulnerable to an all-embracing criticism. The organisers have to play their cards right to win the day: from public security, to entertaining global audiences and athletes alike, to forging artworks of beauty and educational value to collecting gold medals, the dream slowly turns into a political nightmare. Since their nineteenth-century inception, the Olympic Games operated as a platform on which nations articulate their own version of modernity, producing universally palatable masks and performing their public Selves for external and internal consumption.

Their opening and closing ceremonies in particular have developed into artistic narratives of the hosts' social worlds (Roche 2001). Showcasing the miracles of local and national culture, ceremonies forge a cosmological narrative against a background of human rights demonstrations for the growing evictions the Olympic project dictates and the strain it puts on regional and national economy.

The clash between the lofty aspirations of Olympic ideology with the imperatives of policy-making date back at least to the production of an Olympic Flame (*Berlin 1936*). They followed us through the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s in Mexico, the terrorist tragedy of Munich (1972), the forced urban metamorphosis of Barcelona (1992) and Sydney (2000) and the socio-political anxieties of Athens (2004) – the imagined Olympic world-centre that struggled both to counter its alleged decline into Europe's cultural pariah and to impress a post-9/11 West. A 'thin' cosmopolitan formula (of tourist imagery and palatable 'native-ness', of fireworks spectacle and political resentments-cum-artistic performance) draws a heavy veil over home-grown problems and gives shape to ceremonial Olympism: citizens of the world (to paraphrase Angelopoulou-Daskalaki), united we watch a staged democracy that puts the organisers on the global map. This has been the model at least since the days of *Barcelona 1992*, which forged ephemeral political solidarities to perform a sacrificial gentrification of working class hubs to the altar of regional prestige.

The spokesmen of the nation-state are working hard towards a solitary amnesia that will draft with one hand (brands of global appeal) to erase with the other (whole localities). Ultimately, even Olympic enactments of native culture become standardised products: volunteers and professionals flock in to re-write the same utopian scenario that excludes segments of populations it seeks to (politically and culturally) represent. While the nation-state finds a place in an exclusive club of global players (a democratic statement, no doubt), its Leviathan subjects are placed on (gendered and racialised) hierarchies of value. Olympism's material mode (urban regeneration) works alongside an expressive one (the artistic aspects of the event) that symbolically resolves the crisis generated by the calls for national development. Greece's crypto-colonial past crept into such

ceremonial expressions, producing an introspective narrative of nationhood: its cosmopolitan messages were predicated upon a falsely inclusive agenda, in which the *cosmos* (world) was identified with the Athenian Greek cultural *ecumene*. The mobilisation of a retroactively recognised Hellenic heritage as modern Greek *inheritance* (George Seferis' contribution to world poetry) turned cultural outsiders into subjects 'in need' of instruction, while simultaneously presented Greece as the damaged donor of humanity. The Olympic Flame turned into a religious rite of passage, an allegory of Promethean Fall and Greek national resurrection at the same time, leaving culturally illiterate audiences to draw their own conclusions.

Has there been a host, thus far, who dared deviate from this apocalyptic formula? One wonders what sort of narrative an Olympiad would produce, had the directors handed the *camera obscura* to the guests or the nation's internal others – not the paid performers of the ceremonies or its willing volunteers, but its transient visitors and the disgruntled folk of its social milieus. On such an occasion, a chaotic national narrative would emerge – with all its terrors, oppressions and repressions. This would shift focus from globally attractive notions of 'place' and culture to what is socially and regionally valued, advocating a popular politics of significance. It would make space for the *milieux* of local traditions (Dürschmidt 1997: 63) that a formalised ceremony compresses or represses out of necessity. Although this affective scenario would leave the 'host' hostage to the fortune, 'hosts' always are just that: exposed to criticism amplified by the endless possibilities of global mediations.

Everyday experience accustomed me to adopting different viewing positions: the taxi drivers I encounter in Leeds worry less about the city's urban facelift and more about the collapse of their microcosm under the bulldozer. Changing viewing positions is a neglected practice in Olympic ceremonies: *Athens 2004's* global debut painted a host damaged by Western interventions, while Athens' very Olympic project was damaging its transient communities (gypsies and minority workers employed in Olympic sites to complete a colossal task). Sebastian Coe's recent complaint that critics of the developmental machine always take this argumentative line while Olympic organisers toil to do good work is a truth that misses a point: disconnecting Olympic culture from geopolitics replicates attitudes upheld by its German, Russian and Chinese hosts in the past. My taxi driver's (invariably of migrant background) experience still finds no place in this project, save for decorative purpose. His discursive presence would deconstruct a spectacle (of indigenous myth, Spielbergian fable, Confucian steps on Beijing's sky, Athenian-cum-Byzantine glory or Anatolian heritage or a British 'national character' from the cabinet of tourist curiosities) in favour of perspectives that truly belong to marginal groups (immigrant communities, women and even disabled people). *London 2012's* promise to work with events across the city rather than one performance for all looks promising, though the result looms large: Are taxi drivers who lament their falling parental house invited in this festival?

Increasingly, Olympic ceremonies employ fantastic cinematic plots, but their eventual fusion with history mars the opportunity to transcend such restrictions. Add to this the persistence to set Papathanasiou's Olympian music against specific cultural foregrounds or representations of man's struggle with nature (cosmonautical journeys became fashionable with *Los Angeles 1984* and *Moscow 1980*), and you are back to square one. These are good ways to circumnavigate historical traumas, but they consign everyday reality to that quarter of 'banal nationalism' that hardly sees the light of publicity. And yet, even these damaging aspects of the host's politics can turn into fabulist assets. Take for example the obliteration of colonial references from the *London 2012* handover ceremony, coupled with postmodern highlights of a London in ethnic flux: for many, the multiculturalist project has already failed in practice due to history's eternal return (its most recent incarnation being Islamophobia). How do you juggle the demands of Britain's fragmented humanity?

If, in a post-Hegelian touch, we truly become through our encounters with others, the Japanese compulsion of photographing experience has much to offer. Perhaps the very colonial practice of Grand Tourists to record and classify impressions needs some good updating: handing the 'travel diary' (a critical take on Greece's historical sequence and China's fabulist scroll) over to global guests may pay dividends for the host. *Beijing 2008's* giant stadium screen can become London's impressionist canvas, painting an English narrative with Japanese, Chinese, Greek, feminist and humanist accents. All such a mission requires is a group of skilled volunteers dispatched across the country (a gesture against the regional monopolies that affected *Athens 2004*, amongst most cases) on a hunt for travellers willing to share travel adventures. A concluding resume of intersubjective performance (my *Weltanschauung* through your impressions) might trade fixity with fluidity. This dialogical voice can 'instruct' John Bull's descendants about *who* they are *at any* given moment in time for others. We caught a glimpse of this venture in *Athens 2004* when the stage was filled with modern tourists – but this attempt collapsed into dual stereotyping with little depth. A tourist's actual viewpoint and an internal other's perspective always stand alongside the host's views: all three versions of Britain are equally valid. Performative Olympism should advocate dialogue, not democratic vacuity.

No suggestion can ameliorate upcoming tensions: to rebuild you have to destroy, and in the process, the very principle on which de Coubertin fostered his Olympic utopia – the guest's dignified recognition by a community of nations – is lost. A travesty of *filoksenia* (literally, the love of the exotic) extends to a feminised emotional labour volunteers expedite for global tourists. Giving (both in the form of familiarising others with their national culture and entertaining) grants one with symbolic power over recipients, but Olympism's canonical form invites criticism for this exclusivity. Turning the game of recognition *inwards* – to embrace not just those who run the Olympic show but also those who deal with the everyday trivia of urban mobility (the owners of corner shops, the taxi drivers, the barwomen and hotel cleaners) will pave the ground for the post-Olympic landscape. The gypsies of Athens 2004 would have been bewildered by such an act. But these options are *noli me tangere* and conveniently 'disappear' before they 'touch' the sacred national territory: the prevailing division of the world into the 'West' (evil usurpers of heritage) and the 'Nest' (our home-made, reflexive version of civilisational beginnings) still demotes femininity to a banner of domesticity and reproduction the very moment it grants it with God-like artistic qualities.

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