From Pixels to Drones: Visualising The Nation in the London 2012 and PyeongChang 2018 Olympic opening ceremonies

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1. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hobbes’s Leibian (1969) famously features a title page picturing a figure made up of smaller figures, vividly and memorably visualising the relationship between a state and its citizenry. Two recent Olympic opening ceremonies can be seen as also attempting this, by differing means: visualising the UK in 2012 and South Korea in 2018. I will bring together observations on the weird technical elements so heavily present within this micro-genre of large-scale performance, alongside a consideration of the offering to both global and local audiences from two image-conscious nations.

2. VISUALISING THE NATION

Any Olympic ceremony is a broadcast event that attempts to produce and mediate an image of the host country. As early as 1936, Leni Riefenstahl constructed a hybrid image of Germany in her film Olympia (1936), which encompassed a filmed narrative introduction to the games Berlin games, the opening ceremony and the sporting events themselves, intended to be shown in cinemas around the world. Arena events such as these fuse different kinds of presence. There are the athletes, celebrities, politicians and heads of state; there is the audience in the building and a remote audience via broadcast media and the internet; the stadium floor being a space of image production. Together these constitute an image of a country for consumption both at home and internationally, that can tell us interesting things about that country.

2.1 London’s pixels

Danny Boyle’s production for London 2012’s summer games mixed amateur performances, celebrity appearances, large scale and complex sets, and an approach to broadcast that he likened to making a ‘live film’ (Gibson 2012). What might seem like a participative and inclusive work was actually more like an automated panorama made for the ‘eye’ of the world’s media – and this viewpoint was also visible to the performers themselves on the arena floor, via large screens all around the top of the building.

A device that was first used in London (and also used in PyeongChang) are small sets of lights called ‘pixels’ attached the spectators’ seats in the arena. These effectively turn the arena stands into a low-definition screen, further emphasising the spectators’ role as part of the image. In this visualisation of the UK Spectators are fused together within the broadcast images as part of a video screen that displays and watches simultaneously. In Boyle’s production, the arena was intended as a model of the UK, its culture and history, with nostalgia at its centre.

2.2 PyeongChang’s drones

The opening ceremony of the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in 2018 was another huge and diverse spectacle, including puppets, musical performance, projected video and a record-breaking drone display (Chang 2019). Thousands of light-carrying drones created images including the figure of a snowboarder and, although this was actually performed before the night of the ceremony, was part of the performance as an edited video (a device widely used in contemporary ceremonies).

Whilst Boyle’s ceremony dwell on the past (both technologically and culturally), the PyeongChang ceremony frequently highlighted current and future technological innovation, reinforcing South Korea’s established image as a place of hi-tech and rapid progress.
2.3 The arena floor as studio

These ceremonies are both marked by their peculiar ways of illustrating the host nation ‘coming together’ for the games. In 2012, the UK was two years into a programme of austerity, seemingly belied by the extravagance of the games and associated regeneration in East London. Boyle’s ‘green and pleasant land’ rolled out over reclaimed London ‘wasteland’ and the Queen apparently parachuted in with James Bond.

In 2018 the two Korean states – still technically at war – walked under a single flag and apparently celebrated the possibility of reconciliation. In Boyle’s ceremony we watched the arena audience watching the show; in PyeongChang we watched President Moon Jae-in, Mike Pence and Kim Yo-jong (sister of dictator Kim Jong-un) awkwardly watching the ceremony together.

In these largely post-industrial countries relying on soft power, the image is the product. The live and recorded blended and the arena floors were productive sites of image making; bodies on the stages, seats and screens used to manufacture specific images of the host nation.

3. REFERENCES


Olympia dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Tobis Müller: Berlin 1938).
