OLYMPICS OPENING – (IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE







London – the opening of the 30th Olympiad

A bucolic pastoral green and pleasant land succumbing to dark satanic mills, in William Blake's vision, homage also to Tolkein's pitting of Hobbiton against Isengard's tower; Shakespeare's *Tempest* declaimed by Brunel on the slopes of a druidic oak-toppped Glastonbury Tor; dreams of Peter Pan and Mary Poppins; Harry

Potter nightmares; earnest workers' marches; nurses in the welfare state; Mr Bean's ironic monotony in overamplified soundscapes of chariots of fire (Blake again); our house at the end of the street – a microcosm of contemporary popular media culture, with James Bond, monarch and an ET flying bicycle overhead.

It was so bizarre that many of my American friends, even the Anglophiles, were quite mystified by what seemed arcane and esoteric (here's a guide – [Link]).

But it *was* spectacular. The press reviews were appropriately admiring of the spectacle. What then of the surreality? Was this the quirky British creative spirit, a contrast to the massed synchronized ranks that took central stage at the Beijing opening? Was this director/auteur/designer Danny Boyle's personal vision, and very much in the vein of that notorious eighteenth century maverick and eccentric Blake, given daring license by a tolerant, open and democratic (nation) state?

(Simon Schama was quite good on much of this in the Daily Beast – [link])

I have found almost no references to *heritage*, to what the opening pageant was undoubtedly playing upon – the fragments, scenarios, narrative components, characters, events, objects and places that are marshaled in forging, and in no necessarily harmonious way, senses of (national) identity. It is quite appropriate to call this the work of heritage, the heritage industry. As well as the tangible material legacy of the past left to the present – iconic artifacts, landscapes, sites (hedgerows and cottages, Glastonbury Tor, top hats and working class caps), heritage is the articulation of heterogeneous collections of things, experiences, events, stories, memories, hopes and desires – intangible as well as tangible. There need be no coherent historical narrative; criticism of whether any real historical narrative could be claimed to lie behind the miscellany of spectacle in London this weekend is quite irrelevant. *Collection and assemblage* are what the work of heritage *performs*.

There is substantial recognition now of this dynamic of tangible property and immaterial cultural values, intangible dreams, aspirations, memories, transmissions from past to future (see my discussions, for example, of the Faro Convention – [Link]). Here on show was the key to the dynamic – performance, and all that goes with it – scripting, design, rehearsal, preparation, the gathering of props,

staging, acting, and then their presentation and performance.

Heritage – a turn to design

In understanding heritage, this is the importance of design and performance.

Such work of the heritage industry was recognized long ago by, for example, Gilbert Adair in his *Myths and Memories* (published in 1986 at the onset of heavy contemporary investment in the heritage industry). Walter Benjamin in the 1930s understood very well the modernist association of property and cultural capital, identity, memory practices and the aesthetics of politics. Wasn't it that great cinematographer and propagandist Leni Riefenstahl who first realized the ideological potential of the opening ceremony of the Games in Hitler's Berlin?

Here is what I wrote in *Experiencing the Past* (back in 1990) about collection, assemblage, surreality and actuality – the process of articulating past and present.

> It has frequently been pointed out that personal as well as cultural identity is associated with acts of collecting. And not just material goods but also memories and knowledges. Unpacking his library, Walter Benjamin writes of the similarities between collecting and memory. "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" ("Unpacking my library" in *Illuminations* (1970). Here then is a constellation of collection, identity, memory, objects, value and knowledge. Memory is not like a journal, an objective record of life in the sequence it occurred. Memory is of the present and

a disorder of select moments, impressions and subjective states.

9. I remember that on the original LP sleeve of ‘My Fair Lady’ a benign Bernard Shaw, esconced in heaven, dangled Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews on puppet strings. I also remember a fad for cashmere cardigans a la Professor Higgins.
10. I remember tasting Coca-Cola for the very first time. It was at Prestwick Airport (or ‘Aerodrome’, as it was then known) and was offered me by an American serviceman.
11. I remember Spinola, the Portugese ‘Kerensky’, with his monocle, his flamboyantly braided uniform and his resemblance to a decadent aristocrat in a Simenon novel.
12. I remember the craze for matching shirts and ties, usually of a flower pattern.
13. 1 remember that Sophia Loren served a two week prison sentence for tax evasion.
(Gilbert Adair, *Myths and Memories* (1986), p. 158)

Or an apparent arbitrariness. These fragments are charged and encapsulating, crystallizing. Personal and cultural gems, or needle points; stigmata; states of

contentment, dull visceral aches. And memory is not passive: it is an active act of remembering from the present, albeit one in which the present may play a role of precipitant rather than choosing at will. “For what else is this collection”, comments Benjamin, “but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order . . . The only exact knowledge there is,” said Anatole France, “is the knowledge of the date of publication and the format of books.” And indeed, if there is a counterpart to the confusion of a library, it is the order of its catalogue’ (“Unpacking my library” in *Illuminations* (1970), p. 60). We do acquire our memories, as a collector may acquire collectibles, and order them from our different vantage points.

The collector focuses on the object, getting to know and cherishing the background, anything it suggests – period, method of production, previous owners, place and occasion of acquisition, history of the object in the collector’s possession, the memories and associations it evokes for the collector. “For a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopaedia whose quintessence is the fate of

his object" (Benjamin, "Unpacking my library" in *Illuminations* (1970), p. 60). This magic encyclopaedia, a physiognomy of the object, is full of commentary, review, classification, association, evocation, and is never complete with a growing collection and the collector's ongoing life. It is the object's resistance to classification and order.

The physiognomy of the collected and personal object is a power to fixate. As with memories, this is a quality of uniqueness. Collectibles and memories do not just inform or educate. They return to haunt. Their disconcerting fascination is one of dis-ease and disruption. "The true, greatly misunderstood passion of the collector is always anarchistic, destructive. For this is its dialectics: to combine with loyalty to an object, to individual items, to things sheltered in his care, a stubborn subversive protest against the typical, the classifiable' (Benjamin, quoted by Hannah Arendt, Introduction to *Illuminations* 1970, p.45). Collection and travel tap this interplay of order and fascination; tourism holds it out as promise.

Gilbert Adair lists his four hundred memories. There is an order to them. Not their numbering, but a coherence

given to them by our recognition of things held in common with him, and the significance of the memories he notes. We all have such collections of memories which are vital components of personal and cultural identities.

Ornamental fountain before a Vanbrugh stately home; Sunday cricket on a village pitch; the smell of wild garlic in a bluebell wood; a drovers' track over a sheep moor; disused lime kilns; war memorials; oak trees; steam traction engines; a pint of cask ale; a moated castle; cuckoos in spring; a Norman parish church; fish and chips. These might be some of the things which would come under a heading of 'English Heritage'. These are bizarre juxtapositions, but loaded and directed towards particular ends by personal interests, commercial and political powers.

Surrealism

Wherever the living pursue particularly ambiguous activities, the inanimate may sometimes assume the reflection of their most secret motives and thus our cities are peopled with unrecognized sphinxes which will never stop passing dreamers and ask them mortal

questions unless they project their meditation, their absence of mind towards them But if the wise have the power to guess their secret, and interrogate them, all that these faceless monsters will grant is that the dreamer shall once more again plumb their own depths (Aragon, Paris Peasant)

Surrealism is an aesthetic strategy which directs fragments into unexpected juxtapositions and exotic collections As a literary and artistic movement it made a plea for a revival of imagination as irruption of otherness from the unconscious, and championed irrationality, accident, magic, dreams and symbols. Its intelligibility, or rather accessibility (especially through the polished figurative techniques of Magritte and Dali), has enabled its takeover by the advertizing industry, from Vogue to corporate imaging. And in our (post)modern condition we all make sense with wildly eclectic cultural mixes, massive surreal image and memory banks in our heads.

But surrealism was also part of a distinctly modern sensibility of revolt. Fascinated with the profusion of cultural objects, surrealist art arranged incongruous meetings of everyday objects (Lautreamont’s summation

of beauty as the chance encounter on an operating table of sewing machine and umbrella), evoking childhood astonishment and mocking confidence in reality's external form. The forms of things mutate in the defamiliarized and permeable world of surrealist painting, while fetishistic objects, fur tea cups and mannequin sex dolls, disturb the repressed calm of bourgeois reproductive sexuality. Not all of this looks dated now in its professed revolutionary subversion It may no longer shock, but it adds to a considerable tendency in capitalist modernity to question a reality with identity defined in terms of an exclusion of otherness.

Archaeology has its immediate surrealist elements juxtapositions of fibula and quernstone, gold ring and ox scapula m sifting through the cultural rubbish tip, the strangeness of some of those things which mystify archaeologists and which they call 'ritual' objects This may often be just a momentary feeling of the bizarre, it may not.

The archaeologist gathers objects, selecting those to be studied on the basis, ultimately, of age and authenticity, originality But these are not intrinsic

values, essential qualities What would be an essential quality of ‘authenticity’? Truth to self? The hope for such a quality involves abstract definitions of self (object self) and truth, on the basis of which the inessential may be excluded, it would seem. Alternatively the archaeologist prefers to guarantee authenticity through context – where the object comes from, the traces remaining of the objects ‘present’. Though the traces are of our present, the object’s value depends on it being removed from the present. And to return to the question of value. Value may be exchange value, what something means to someone else, its value for an other Or it may be use value, the object’s relevance to some interest or purpose. This makes of the object a tool. Tools are fitted to particular purposes, are useless for others In the same way choice may be exercised in selecting and gathering objects, in this case for archaeological purpose. Both these forms of value include acts of choice and selection on the part of agencies beyond the object itself. Value is about desire.

To think of age and authenticity as essential and intrinsic disguises the relation of exchange which

exists between past and present. It is to forget that an object's value is decided in moving from past to present through the work of desire Archaeologists want what they find. What is found is not naturally 'authentic, its 'original' context is not natural. {What is natural about the commingling of the cultural garbage heap, of the abandoned home' Only perhaps the decay and entropy, disruption and disorder.) There is no 'archaeological record' as such. What is found becomes authentic and valuable because it is set by choice in a new and separate environment with its own order and its own temporality – the time coordinates of the discipline archaeology which give the object its date. This is a moral setting.

The systems of value according to which archaeologists gather and order their 'finds' are not natural then, but tactical and strategic. This is not to say arbitrary. I am not saying that the archaeologist's choice is arbitrary, though if I were a surrealist I might well say that the archaeologist's choice was as meaningful as the irruptions of irrationality and the unconscious represented by the surreal object. Archaeologists gather with particular meanings in mind.

And we may wish to think of the purpose and interests lying in the archaeological order and use of the past …



(image – AP Photo/Matt Dunham @ havredailynews)



Unless otherwise indicated, these great photos are courtesy of ESPN – [Link]