

Performance and the City: Constructing Urban Identities in Contemporary London

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between spectators, performers and spaces is investigated in a critical perspective which aims at further developing the concept of the city as a performance place where precarious urban identities are dynamically and temporarily shaped and reshaped. Even if this essay takes into due account the seminal studies of Barthes (1971), H. Lefebvre (1974), and urban theorists such as Reyner Banham and Kevin Lynch who conceived of the city as a 'legible' text, at the same time it argues that textuality and performativity must be perceived as intertwined cultural practices that work together to shape the body of phenomenal, intellectual, psychic, and social encounters that frame a subject's experience of the city. London 2012 Olympic Games, and in particular the stunning Opening Ceremony directed by Danny Boyle, for which visitors and overseas spectators were invited to transform themselves into a global theatrical audience, can be used as a privileged viewpoint from which to analyse the different ways of perceiving, but also being looked at and performing oneself, in and through spaces which tend at modifying, or at interrogating or destabilizing one's traditional identity.

Why London? An introduction

Because London is one of the most seductive to-day global cities together with New York City, Tokyo, Berlin, Toronto and others; because it is a multicultural metropolis

where difference and sameness are always experienced; because it is a space for performance where diverse and ambivalent negotiations take place between the inhabitants/actors/performers and the urban scene, and where urban identities are continuously shaped, destabilized and reshaped through the lived experience of embodied subjectivity which inevitably interacts with or connects to a “shifting and intervening space” (Crary, 1998: 498).

Last but not least, because I had the occasion to experience London city recently in the course of the London 2012 Olympic Games, as the contemporary city *par excellence*, the world capital capable of generous and magnificent hospitality, of receiving-and-containing people, groups, factions, ethnic diverse communities from all over the globe, of constructing ‘new’ relationships between local and global, between cultures “nested in and around each other” (Etchells, 2009: xii).¹

In ‘welcoming the world’,² Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, wrote:

London is being dressed to impress, streets lined with bunting and flags, landmarks adorned with gigantic Olympic rings and Paralympic agitos, including Tower Bridge, which is being lit with new state-of-the-art illumination. Wenlock and Mandeville – the Games’ mascots – will also be appearing at different locations in different guises, from Beefeater, to pirate, to punk.

Look out for amazing outdoor performance as London hosts the largest festival of its kind in every corner of the capital. Expect magical surprises up above, in unusual places and on top of renowned buildings. Or watch the sporting spectacle of the Games on giant screens and enjoy great live music amid the leafy surroundings of Hyde Park and Victoria Park. (cit. in Manning, 2012: 3)

The invitation asks the visitors to transform themselves into a theatrical audience, ready to take part in the greatest spectacle ever staged on the wide London scaffold extending from the West of Hyde Park to the East of Victoria Park. The impression is that the Lord Mayor of London is astutely attempting to cancel or at least blur the social, economic and cultural distance between those two different and divided London areas which may not be known to foreign visitors or recognized as such by the British people; we must remember that Victoria Park is located in the East End and was “commissioned by Queen Victoria for the working class of the East End” (Dyckoff and Barrett, 2012: 127). Besides, that part of London has always been considered and lived as a difficult urban area and, in the words of the authors of *The Architecture of London 2012*, it has no aesthetic positive value if compared with the acclaimed areas of the West End: “[it] has precious little designed green space of any quality. Its long history of industry and relative impoverishment means it lacks the leafy squares lavished on the richer west and centre of the capital, and its grand parks, too, such as Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens and Regent’s Park” (127). But, precisely for that reason as a way of compensation, and under the obstinate pressure of Ken Livingstone, London’s Mayor in 2003, the Lower Lea Valley – where Victoria Park is situated – had to be chosen as the site for the Olympic Games and, moreover, because it did have great potential for

redevelopment, economic exploitation, as well as job supply for thousands. Officially, the choice was explained thus:

It was cut off, with rivers and canals east and west, the busy, brutish A12 to the north and a mainline railway to the south – good for security, even if this isolation had contributed to its recent decline. That in turn, though, presented an opportunity. This was a part of London that had so far stubbornly refused to regenerate in the economic boom of the early 2000s. The four boroughs surrounding it – Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest – are still among the two per cent of the poorest in the country.[...] The Lower Lea Valley was blighted with land seriously contaminated from centuries of the foulest industries and a constellation of small, short-let landowners. In short, a big bill, with nobody willing or able to pick up the tab. (20)

At the time of the choice of that area, it was becoming clear that building projects had to be planned swiftly in order to obtain licences to construct the Olympic Park, by erasing – so to say – the remains of already dismissed factories, chemical works, sewage pipes, the toxic underbelly of urban civilization. Apart from artists' studios which now crowd the area, that was a place in which nobody would have dreamed of living. And yet, it was there, of all places, that London 2012 had chosen to hold the greatest show on earth. It was there, where the river Lea meets the Thames, that Stratford and the whole East End of London would acquire a new attractive face, thus adding a new piece of capital city to London's life.

As a matter of fact, London was shown, produced, perceived, lived and performed as a large theatrical cultural space where, paradoxically enough, everything could signify more than one thing at the same time, in spite of the fact that some kind of dominant representation could persist and supersede all the different others. Not only was London staged as reproducing and promoting its own image as a “model of dynamic relativism,” a “nondescript doorway, invisible for some” while much more visible for others, who could see it as “the gate to a magical garden, a place of work, worship or otherwise” (20). Publicly, London presented itself as “welcoming the world”, and Stratford was the “Gateway to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games”, in the words of Sir Robin Wales, Mayor of Newham in Stratford. In the brochure which was distributed by enthusiast performers in the guise of ‘London Ambassadors’ at the various Stratford Stations, his words aimed at highlighting “entertainment, shops and restaurants that reflect the amazing variety of experiences and culture for which London is famed,” and the multiethnic atmosphere significantly limited to food: “You can sample the best food and cooking from all corners of the world, including Asian, Caribbean, Italian, Latin American and much more.”

Not only that: London city was soon received as a performance place where negotiation had been already reached and where conflict, agreement, and compromise – always necessary for its functioning and for its citizens' and temporary visitors' lives alike – had already taken place.

When I watched the Opening Ceremony held at the Stratford Olympic Stadium and televised all over the world on 27 July 2012, I witnessed second hand, mediated

experience and participation in the grand spectacle that the cheering spectators and hired performers (paid and unpaid) helped construct through the rehearsal and performance of 'London' as the dynamic crucible of different cultural identities, though well deprived of all tensions, conflicts and divisions of class, gender, race and ethnicities, youth, even nationalities. Competition had to be taken into account, of course, but only for the short periods in which the running, the fencing, the boxing, the diving, and so on were being performed; after each single medal prize ceremony, it seemed that no antagonism or envy, nor other negative feeling and/or contesting attitude could find its place on the larger scaffold of London. You could only see smiling faces, great emotion, tears, all mingled with the official offering of the bunches of flowers, the rewarding kisses and/or embraces, and the shaking of the hands: after all, the Games were (somebody said), war without bullets!

'London' as a map, a pop-up book, a stage

The space of the city of London as was modelled on the floor of the Olympic Stadium you were given the possibility to see from above thanks to the eye of the camera – if you were at home experiencing it through the mediation of the uninterrupted BBC television programs – became at times a large reproduction of the traditional map of the city traversed by the snake-like river Thames. Only, now the map was a sort of gigantic representation of the central part of the capital city to become minutes later a live stage of immense size, an overcrowded, colourful, noisy and busy space, inhabited by happy British people-performers-game-makers, whom visitors-tourists-viewers from all the world and obviously belonging to different age, class, ethnic, and gender groups, nationalities or communities, had come to see: they were happily streaming into the city/stadium, looking for their seats where they duly remained seated, theatre-goers-like, until the games for each day were over.

The performative city of London was ready, and ready were both the actors and the audience: in fact, the world city which was going to be represented there was what politically correct director, Danny Boyle, called "Isles of Wonder," signalling thus the transformation of London, as if by magic, into Great Britain. After all, the enchanted dramatic universe of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was the acknowledged principal inspiration for that staging.

There was also much movement on the stage/map/London there on the floor of the Stadium: players, game-makers and, in fact, many of them, seventy thousands of them, volunteers, performed their roles either as actors in the little plays and ceremonial moving tableaux staged to highlight memorable moments of the history of Britain, or as ordinary people consciously helping make the success of the planned script by playing their roles in the wider spectacle. One has to ask him-/herself why the 'history' of Britain – not the many and diverse 'histories' of the nation – was rehearsed as most representative of the whole country. There was much well-timed rushing about from one small location to another location, and yet to another and another: the ultimate end

being that of making you, individual subjects, participant-viewers and virtual members of that urban-national collectiveness which was being articulated anew in front of your eyes, cameras and videophones.

London, and its citizens and visitors, was to perform its own cultural agency as the *capital city* of Great Britain and also as the ‘capital’ global city of that very same global whole it had already started to welcome months before the Opening Ceremony would take place: in a way, London was a host city for the world at the same time as it contained the world within its stable and yet porous borders.

London city (and the GB it stood for) was thus reasserting its hegemonic British identity in a general performance, variously acted through the immense, extraordinary phantasmagoria of playlets, tableaux, words, songs, movements, dancing, and the mixing of lights, colours, music, athletes, performers, and people. And this appeared to be much more so, if you were present there. You could witness it with all your senses and capacity of perception, and participating in it as a live cooperative performance of the city – Londoners and spectators alike were on stage, so to say. Besides, duplications of London and its famous landmarks had been staged also in other venues of the Games: its prismatic aspects, monuments, celebrities were also continuously called in and mobilized through the concrete, miniature reproductions of its famous skyline and the principal iconic buildings produced a complex *mise en abime* which was extremely successful in confirming the persistently mythical narrative of the history of London on show there, at times also fed in by the self-ironic and proverbially all British humour. Those miniature reproductions accompanied many athletes’ performances. Repetition, which is a mnemonic act, was also one of the many ways through which to confirm stabilizing values of that London as capital representative of Britishness.

Sometimes, while looking at the various phases of the Opening Ceremony or watching it on television, you had the perception that the spectacle was unfolding its live pages in the guise of a colourful kinetic pop-up book highlighting famous narrated-illustrated scenes from various settings: a utopian, merry pastoral Britain of ancient times; the Industrial Revolution; children literature; marching Suffragettes; the National Health Service of nurses, doctors and patients all dancing and singing together on and round their ward beds, Daniel Craig’s 007 and Bond-girl Queen Elizabeth parachuting down the Stadium from a helicopter, and so on. All British trademarks, of course.

All this greatly contributed to the continuous search and exploration of national and international memories of Britain, proposing them on an ever changing scenario of many theatrical stages, incorporating and, as it happened, in fact erasing cultural conflicting differences in a clamorous political game of silencing the ‘other’ multicultural city dwellers especially those belonging to the East-End community. Which was paradoxical enough, if you think that the Stratford area is strongly multiethnic. However, at the end of the Games, seventeen days later, Kenyan journalist Kenfrey Kiberenge confirmed the impression I got from Boyle’s staging of the “Isles of Wonder” when he wrote enthusiastically that “Britain’s multicultural capital had won the hearts of people from every nation” (2012: 29). He interviewed some of London’s 950,000 immigrants in pubs and bars across the city, reporting among others the

following: “Ben Rehuman, a New Zealander who has been in London for a month, was struck by how multicultural and diverse the city was. ‘There seem to be people from all aspects of life and different areas of the globe,’ he said” (29). Then he went on, by quoting the words by another New Zealander which were exactly of the same tenor:

[...] Tim Lynch, now a British citizen who had spent three years in London, argued that the Games has been an amazing spectacle, showcasing London at its very best: ‘London’s position as a multicultural city is one of the key reasons I want to stay here. In no other city in the world do you get the range of cultures, experiences and people that you get in London.’ (29)

Not only then does the London emerging from some of the interviewees’ statements confirm the general positive and harmonious image built and duly displayed on the occasion of the Opening Ceremony; of course, the same Mo Farah – the Somali-born British athlete and world champion – is presented by the *Observer* journalist as the symbol of multicultural London:

Mo Farah has been the epitome of British multiculturalism at London 2012. For a boy who arrived from Somalia aged eight able only to say ‘excuse me,’ ‘c’mon then’ and ‘where is the toilet?’, he has won the hearts of many Britons not just with his performance but also his kindness. Farah scoffed at suggestions that he could have been prouder representing Somalia, saying: ‘This is my country and when I put on my Great Britain vest I’m proud. I’m very proud.’ (29)

Immediately afterwards, the words of Eid Hassan Muse, co-ordinator of the West London Somaliland Community, are quoted: “I am proud of his performance and that he represented Team GB, but would have been prouder if he won the gold for Somaliland” (29); significantly they are commented upon by the journalist saying that he “could be forgiven for wishing Farah to represent Somaliland” (29). Astutely and clearly manifesting his viewpoint, Kiberenge concludes his article in the following way:

Liban Ibrahim, who also found a new life in Britain after Somalia disintegrated, differed: “Mo is the product of the British running system. He sought refuge in this country that provided a way of life and shelter for him. He is immensely proud of this country and his achievements. We’re also proud of him as fellow Brits. Identity is multifaceted; by running for Britain he is *de facto* representing the British Somali community also.” (29)

There is no necessity, I believe, to argue differently, but what I am interested in here is to show that, even on this occasion and after the end of the Games, the magnificent London site, a likely location for contention and tough struggle (but security were alert!), has been deprived of the possibility of enacting effective counter-discourses. Something of the sort happened during the Opening Ceremony, where minority representations could appear very marginal and liable to be soon afterwards forgotten: it was the case, for instance, of the insisted dance of the performers of the National Health Service, highly telling for the British people who must have experienced it as the

emphatic desire of underlining a public institution the Government had started to dismantle! All the same, I feel that it was impossible not to make comparisons with that capital portrait of violence and apocalypse which was shown on BBC Two on Saturday August 11 2012: the astonishing program was in the documentary format and was suggestively titled by its director, Julien Temple, *London – The Modern Babylon*. As a TV critic wrote in the review he published on *The Times* highlighting the social commitment made greatly visible in the documentary: “As one would expect from the director of *Absolute Beginners*, Temple made a film much concerned with immigration into London but excited rather than dismayed by the fact that 300 languages are now spoken in the capital, a record for anywhere, any time” (Billen, 2012: 41). It was a montage of thousands of fragments of archive film which showed a contradictory city, “continually in change and yet always the same; a city haunted by itself and continually scaring itself too” (41). From this point of view, highly relevant in a documentary which was arranged chronologically from the 1880s to today was the choice of showing street violence as the most obvious constant of London city. And the comment on this reads:

As Danny Boyle did not, Temple included in his pageant the Blackshirts, Grosvenor Square, Brixton, Notting Hill, poll tax and summer 2011 riots – and the violence of police suppression: in a short passage a Suffragette recalled she had been force fed through the nostril 139 times in her cell. Temple’s old collaborator Malcolm McLaren, who got several airings and proved a far from reliable prophet, was surely right when he said the ruling class always feared the word “mob.” Not McLaren and Temple. When a group of elderly Cockney women sang “Vote, vote, vote for Clement Attlee/Punch old Churchill in the eye,” the film sang along with them. (41)

Frankly, that was miles away from Danny Boyle’s project which had to cater live for a mixed, British and other, public, and especially for all age groups, young people in particular. However, we cannot deny that something crucial for the British society and for other countries as well was evidently missing. Danny Boyle’s London was staged as a stunning media event, where the line between fiction or dream and reality was continuously trespassed, often blurred; also, the contemporary uses of screens and other technologies seemed to help construct the interplay (and at times overlapping) of at least two different sensory perceptions in the audience’s experience, namely, a real and a virtual real one. Actually, in the image and screen culture the spectators inhabited, reality and its representation were also subjected to augmentation, which, I may risk to suggest, destabilized the traditional categories that used to structure perception and affection, culture and politics.

As it happens, all the citizens (both permanent and temporary), and the visitors-tourists were transformed into ‘citizens of the world,’ thanks to the ritual process of initiation happening in that 2012 London crucible of the Olympic Games. The green, pastoral island which was coming up from underground right in the middle of the floor/map of the Stadium, soon became an authentic, wide stage addressing the world with its numerous performers (and then, was it not in *As You Like It* that Jaques

delivered the famous speech starting with “All the world’s a stage...”) and at the same time inviting ‘the world’, i.e. the audience, to be an active part of the spectacle. Besides, that stage/London/Great Britain/the world was unique, one, in spite of the fact that the show was given a title aiming at highlighting the plural components of the nation: let us remind us that the Opening Ceremony was called “Isles of Wonder” by the magician, Prospero-like Danny Boyle. Enchantment, wonder, dream, magic were the basic ingredients of that ‘imagined London’ performing the expected cultural work of authenticating history and embodying experience. Gradually, this London, this Great Britain, started to receive, give hospitality to and collect on its green shores the individual flags of the countries participating in the Games.

‘London’ as a performing site of cultural memory

The Opening Ceremony was thus a beautifully articulated way of constructing a material and virtual site where performance, memory, and identities developed a scheme aiming at remembering Great Britain – perhaps with a slight hint of nostalgia – as a unique, one, nation, not taking into due account, the diverse identities and communities that were still contributing to its formation. The exploration of memory was produced through the live performance ability to mobilize and combine spaces, sound, music, dance, icons and celebrities of the past in such a way as to constitute and produce an urban/national identity, “providing narratives or performances of events and times that are understood to define an individual or a community” (Harvie, 2005: 41). But, as we all well know, remembering is not an objective act, because each single instance of remembering shapes its subjects differently and subjectively, “eliminating some details and enhancing others as changing conditions demand” (41). Therefore, memories may either validate identities that have been “historically marginalised or oppressed, and they may revise potential imbalances in the power dynamics between communities” (41) or nations, or they may define other communities as “inherently inferior and omit or forget features that trouble the image of itself a community is striving to create” (41). Memory and forgetting were giving shape and significance to what was being performed in the course of the Opening Ceremony. In the words of *The Guardian* journalist, Owen Gibson, though, what happened there was: “The job of showcasing the country began with Danny Boyle’s opening ceremony, which packed the history and hopes of the British nation into three hours that received rave reviews at home and abroad, and proclaimed: ‘This is for everyone!’ As it turned out, it was” (2012: 6).

We may agree that the Opening Ceremony was all played around the fake and fictitious idea (after all, it was a play which was scripted especially for that occasion and play had the participants to do) that the ‘country which was hosting the games’ was made up of harmonious islands of bucolic wonders where you could even listen with wonder to its different sounds/languages (of course Shakespeare’s *Tempest* has been beautifully re-adapted, *pace* Caliban’s voice and language), and where the Industrial

Revolution with its demonic, Blake-like furnaces could show off the progress of the imperial nation, and together with it its capacity to gain and regain strength and prestige, superiority over the world, and to announce that it was ready to start a new life and assert its still hegemonic role over the terrestrial globe.

We may also agree on the fact that there was some kind of joyous playfulness and self-irony which could not escape the majority of the urban citizens of London and its foreign visitors: but, while the memory of past moments of glory was mobilized in line with the ancient tradition of other street popular spectacles the British had always organized over the last centuries for other official occasions³, thus helping strengthen the cohesion of the British nation and leave little space to the impetuous coming of age of what Appadurai defines “the world of flows, people and goods, ideas and ideologies, images and messages, technologies and techniques” (2001b: 5), and Andreas Huyssen sees as being affected and created “by international media coverage and its memory obsessions” (2001: 75) – of course, memory and forgetting go hand in hand and often amnesia succeeds consciously and unconsciously in covering important slices of the national past.

But, memory too may be part of a more general process of globalization; and I think that on this specific occasion the globalization of memory was activated also with the help of several devices: screen images representing focal segments of the making of the history and traditions of London and Great Britain, live and recorded music, professional and volunteer performers, and of course the athletes of the different nations celebrating both competition and rivalry and a harmonious way of living that experience together. However, “while memory discourses appear to be global on one register, in their core they remain tied to the histories of specific nations and states” (63). There seemed to be a contradictory performance going on during the Games.

Actually, such a fluctuating world has by now become nearly dominant; even if on the occasion of the Games (and above all in the course of both the Opening Ritual and the Closing Ceremony) the opposition to that was made highly visible: objects and people in motion were resisted through the stable social and political forms of organization and structures and infrastructures that did make the British state soundly firm; paradoxically enough, this double movement between the foreign athletes (and their supporters who, though differently, took part in the Games for their nations and yet became ‘temporary citizens’ of London) and the Londoners and the British people, allowed them all to share a common, cosmopolitan, sense of belonging: the host Londoners and their guests, athletes, fans and tourists, did sense to be part of the same urban community. The guests came to be endowed with London temporary urban identities. And I think that the same did happen also to the host Londoners: they too were acquiring new temporary identities.

Not only that, though. What was apparent was that the Olympic Games opened up for Britain – and the western world, I must say – the possibility of highlighting the many ways the global money and financial power could easily and magnificently perform on the Olympic London stage for the entire world. What seemed to happen was that the nation state of Great Britain (but also, significantly, the individual athletes

forming what was constantly and emphatically named Team GB) was encouraged to show off those acquired characteristics of globalization enabling itself to be one nation and, at the same time, multiple nations, or – if you like – a trans-nation. Again, Appadurai's words are highly telling when underlining his way of looking at globalization through the power of global finance:

Globalization is inextricably linked to the current workings of capital on a global basis; in this regard it extends the earlier logics of empire, trade, and political dominion in many parts of the world. Its most striking feature is the runaway quality of global finance, which appears remarkably independent of traditional constraints of information transfer, national regulation, industrial productivity, or “real” wealth in any particular society, country, or region. The worrisome implications of this chaotic, high-velocity, promiscuous movement of financial (especially speculative) capital have been noted by several astute critics [...] so I will not dwell on them here. I am among those analysts who are inclined to see globalization as a definite marker of a new crisis for the sovereignty of nation-states, even if there is no consensus on the core of this crisis or its generality and finality. (2001a: 4)

But never as in this case, globalization was so apparently exercising its powerful presence, even if, never as in this case, the nation-state of Great Britain constructed and organized a new urban space – a sort of city-within-the-city, in fact – where its global identity was made to devise an enchanted territory in order to seduce all the participants in a kind of trans-national game where the projection of its past and present was to be enacted in such a way as to obtain general consensus to a partial representation of the history of Britain.

London “welcomes the world” was one of the most widespread slogans you could see written anywhere – on brochures and posters – and extraordinarily performed at railway, tube and bus stations and airports; you could even read on flying manifestoes and banners that the 2012 London Olympic Games were aiming at proposing themselves to “inspire a generation.” Was this aimed at young people? Yes. Was it meant to address the young urban travellers from all over the world, who were streaming through the streets of the capital, world city of London to reach the diverse sport locations of the newly redeveloped and further redeveloping East End London? Yes. Was it an encouragement for the many unemployed young people from all over the world to forget the current, grim, economic situation of their present and, unfortunately, of their near future? Yes. Possibly.

For sure, the urban multi-national people, British and others alike, who temporarily inhabited London city, helped stage anew their own cultural identities of urban citizens of the world, while at the same time they contributed to perform London and GB as the dominant iconic and powerful image of the metropolis. Above all, what they mostly contributed with was their role as performers of urban collective identities constructed by and through the process of yet another way of being global metropolitan inhabitants in the multi-performance spaces organized in and across London city. Further, their cooperative presence did not work only *per se*; rather, it gained strength and more

valuable visibility in the interplay between the general live performance they took part in and its mediated performance, duly relayed through all the official media coverage (BBC, above all) and the social media comments and counter-representations. They were involved in the making of cultural practices and meanings, affected as they might have been by the locations of the whole performance. In sum, they made available the general and shared meanings of their complex lived experience as urban performers. In this I am greatly indebted to the influential 1989 book *Places of Performance* by Marvin Carlson who wrote:

The way an audience experiences and interprets a play, we now recognize, is by no means governed solely by what happens on the stage. The entire theatre, its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location within a city, are all important elements of the process by which an audience makes meaning of its experience. (1989: 2)

As the above quotation is rightly commented upon by Jen Harvie (2009), the material conditions of theatre and performance are indeed relevant, especially when referred to the specific site or sites where they take place together with all its/their involved architecture, economics, demographics who work in that area and in what conditions, and who spend their leisure time there, and so on.

Stratford International, not Stratford-upon-Avon: capital London

The Olympic Games took part in an area – Stratford – that, once marginalized and considered a dilapidated and rough district, is now becoming something like the now-fashionable South Bank, which resulted, as is well known, from “urban expansion and local gentrification” (Harvie, 2009: 26-27) but “more importantly because of the ascension of Shakespeare’s cultural status” (27). Of course, the market and tourist-commercial aspect both of the South Sea Bank district and, more so, of the newly redeveloping Stratford area are self-evident and cannot be kept aside or distinct from the cultural role they surely play.

The experience of going there and seeing with your own eyes but as a participant observer was too juicy to be set aside, and so on the Sunday morning of 19th of August, in the transit period between the end of the Olympic Games, on 12th of August 2012, and the start of the Paralympic Games, I decided to go and visit the place, try to understand what this city-within-the-city was, how it could be experienced by its temporary and steady inhabitants, and finally what, if and how enduring relations could be activated in the London community of that district.

The first impression was certainly one of the grand magnificence and also the gigantic, spacious efficacy of all the spaces involved in the sport/tourist/commercial initiative of the Stratford performative city. In a way my wonder was quite banal, since the gigantic, spacious, leisure and pleasure, economic and commercial symbiotic aspects of London as the global, or world, city are now taken for granted. But, all the

same, the scene was rather impressive. You felt you were entering a newly rebuilt area of the city, and beyond that you could notice the grand emphasis the world of bank and finance deployed by helping both to build, geographically and topographically, the whole place with all the shops, restaurants, and bars and to construct the new city inhabitants identities which were being performed there. I can make fruitful use of Michael McKinnie's words in his important essay on "Performing the Civic Transnational" where he underlined what was at stake when a new place was being devised in a metropolis and new identities were being constructed; I gather that on this specific occasion as in many other similar cultural events and cultural sites as well, you could not but interrogate yourself about the roles "culture and performance play in imagining a political subject who is reconciled to London's globality, and who moves easily within and between the institutions of the global city (whether they are state-centered or in a wider civil society)" (McKinnie, 2009: 112). And then he goes on by saying:

If there is a broader consensus that London is a global city, it does not necessarily follow that an urban-global citizen exists as well – political-economic change often involves the reconfiguration of polities before it is apparent exactly what the contours of these new polities are, or how one practices citizenship as a member of them. Such a citizen needs to be imagined, and cultural policy and performance institutions are exemplary sites in which to undertake this ideological labor. (112)

Indeed. One has to think this over to understand whether the project McKinnie had in mind could be culturally and concretely realized. Of course, we may share, referring the question to our specific site of Stratford, some of the problems he faces especially when he writes:

Imagining civic transnationalism, I suggest, is part of the attempt to reproduce London's urban globality. The aspiration to civic transnationalism is not located in a single place but is, instead, formed through the intersection of at least two related spheres: through the local state's positioning of culture as an ideal means to reconcile Londoners to the material effects of an economy based increasingly on international finance; and through recent instances of performance that attempt to bridge local and global civil societies in especially harmonious ways. (112)

And this never-ending search for a global harmony is something of a revelation; again in McKinnie's words, it is rather important that we think about the implication of such a search:

I will also reflect upon the political ambiguities and critical implications of the aspiration to achieve civic transnational citizenship, and the use of culture and performance as the means to realize it. Culture and performance may offer much in a global city like London, but whether they can accomplish what policy-makers, practitioners, and critics desire is quite another thing. (112)

From this point of view, particularly relevant are the two key books he mentions and makes use of, *London: Cultural Capital*, which was released by the Mayor of London in 2004 (and adopted as the city's culture strategy) and *London: A Cultural Audit* (2008), which was produced by the London Development Agency in order to benchmark London's cultural activity against four other world cities: New York, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Paris. The second book emphasizes the market, rather than the civic, value of London's transnationalism, while the first book underlines the political-economic logic of much cultural policy during the past ten years in the United Kingdom: "in order to deliver culture effectively, it must be planned as part of the broader infrastructure that sustains London. That means placing culture in the context of economic policy, plans for land use and transport development" (115).⁴ Obviously, there is the urgent need to understand that a more expansive sense of culture had to be taken in due consideration especially with reference to the ability to "negotiate London's diversity" as the precondition for an "ability to negotiate institutions of transnational civil society: cultural institutions and events have analogues abroad, and participating in cultural activities in London implies membership in a civic transnational network populated by other urban-global citizens" (115).

Importantly, *Cultural Capital* put much stress on the necessity to encourage "active citizenship" and in this it surely helped outline a sort of "a civic economy of which culture is a linchpin" (115). As McKinnie suggested by quoting from *Cultural Capital*,

Culture is an important tool in empowerment. The cultural activity of community-based groups may provide opportunities for people to determine their own agendas and encourage active citizenship' [...]. The activities of theatre companies like Cardboard Citizens, which works with homeless people, are identified as playing leading roles in a civic economy that brings together a variety of voluntary, care-based, and community 'safety' [...]activities (such as sport coaching, elder care, and youth clubs, respectively) that are often not visible within a market economy, but upon which London's civic health depends. Participation in this civic economy is, in turn, the basis for participation in international events like the London Olympics – one can undertake the latter because one knows how to 'do' the former. (115-116)

Perhaps, in such a perspective, we can better understand why the marvellous participation of 70,000 volunteers in the London Olympics was highly considered and emphasized in every single official speech; and indeed all over London's railway and tube stations, street routes leading to London Stratford, and so on, the presence of the unpaid volunteers or game-keepers (as they were called) was 'the' highlight of that cultural event and made us all reflect on how central and productive such an active co-operation was and would be for the national and transnational economy, and also for the formation of new civic-urban identities.

Of course, in all this a crucial part was and is surely played also by performance institutions, such as those which are analysed by McKinnie in his already mentioned and quoted essay on transnationalism. At a certain point he writes significantly:

If cultural policy is the exemplary space where the local state imagines civic transnationalism, then performance institutions are, arguably, the exemplary cultural sites that produce transnational ideals of citizenship. Two institutions that occupy different places within a year of each other and have collaborated periodically since, are illustrative here: Lift (formerly the London International Festival of Theatre) and the Barbican Centre. Founded in 1981, Lift is a small performance company that produces a biennial festival in London and a range of different arts events, often in association with community organizations, between festivals [...]. In recent years Lift has focused on east London, which is a part of the city characterized by tremendous urban redevelopment (including preparations for the 2012 Olympics) and cultural diversity, but also by enormous socio-economic challenges (the area contains some of the United Kingdom's poorest postcodes). (117-18)

As far as the Barbican Centre is concerned, he says:

It is the United Kingdom's largest multi-purpose arts organization, with a program including theatre, music, dance, visual art, film and education. These, along with exhibition and conference facilities, are housed in a huge complex that sits within the City of London (the financial centre of London, commonly known as 'The City'). The Centre is only one part of an iconic development that also contains restaurants, shops, and over 2000 residential flats [...] Significantly, the Barbican Centre is also owned by the City of London Corporation, which makes it the largest civic arts centre in the United Kingdom. (118)

What is relevant to me here is the fact that these institutions offer ideal spheres in which to act like a citizen (and to learn how to do so) but, as currently instituted, they offer circumscribed means to be a citizen, at least in the fullest social sense identified by T. H. Marshall in his *Citizenship and Social Class* (1992). Moreover, the type of citizenship they rehearse "begins to look less like a new and expansive one and more like a return to the limited, bourgeois conception of citizenship that dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which civil and political rights were pre-eminent" (124).

Perform or else: London as the identity place of cultural performance

As a matter of fact, those who experienced the city of London were in a way forced to perform both in the theatrical sense of the word and in the way discussed by Jon McKenzie in his intriguing and suggestive book titled *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001). Here the author, who teaches interface design and multimedia at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, explores an uncanny relationship between cultural, organizational, and technological performance and demonstrates that all three paradigms can operate together to create powerful and contradictory pressures to 'perform or else'. Linking together the theatrical concept of performance elaborated by Richard Schechner among others with Herbert Marcuse and

Angela Davis's arguments and the words and actions of the student radicals of the 1960s, McKenzie affirms: "Today, as we navigate the crack of millennia, work, play, sex, and even resistance – it's all performance to us" (2001: 3). But then, are we not, all of us, in the world depicted years ago by the Situationist International self-styled leader, Guy Debord, in his *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), especially when he wrote: "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1994: 12)? But, we should also add now that that relationship is much more complex than the one outlined in his pages, because of the mediatised, screen urban culture, where liveness is at times obscured by the many ways and technologies that reproduce or create what is being appropriated: television, social networks, mobile phones, and so on (Auslander, 2008).

And, on the occasion of the Olympic Games, were we not – all of us, even if differently shaped, both as participant observers and as television spectators – playing on that large performance space which had become London in its once notorious East End area from where many narratives of urban conflict stemmed forth? Stratford has now become the area where money and international finance dominate in a larger scale than that which was put on stage by Caryl Churchill in her successful play titled *Serious Money* (1987), located precisely in that district.

As a matter of fact, McKenzie opens his theoretical discussion by analysing the cover of a popular business magazine, the 3 January 1994 issue of *Forbes* which published its "Annual Report on American Industry." What strikes you when you look at the image of a white-skinned, gray-haired businessman's head, whose neck is menacingly wrapped by a cane hook, is the hierarchical order of the signs in the cover are: the first thing you see is the name of the magazine – *Forbes* – in white. It covers the nose leaving the eyes and the mouth free, while the head-line "perform – or else" asks imperiously for the attention of the reader:

The cane itself embodies the challenge, brandishing a high-gloss polished gleam; more subtly still, its hook casts a shadow across the executive's red-striped tie. This shadowy adornment gathers the pathos of our tableau, for it ties together the cane's gesture and the words 'Perform – or else,' knotting them in a fashion that's got this performer by the throat. (McKenzie, 2001: 4-5)

The fact is that three paradigms are central to his theoretical approach, and they are explained through the analysis of that image: the efficacy of cultural performance; the efficiency of organizational performance; the effectiveness of technological performance. I do believe that all three paradigms could be easily detected in the performance spaces of London city. Also, I do think that what helps to make new urban identities in contemporary London is the urgency to perform, take part in cultural events in a simultaneous interplay of the inside-and-outside of a specific place.

What can be witnessed in London during the 2012 Olympic Games is the different ways of perceiving, being looked at, performing yourself, in and through spaces which tend at modifying, or at interrogating or destabilizing your traditional identity, visual attitudes and lived experiences. It is exactly what you can experience in the Orbit by

artist Anish Kapoor in the Olympic Village of Stratford 2012. Let us look together at the reproduction of this monument-icon which is defined thus by Sarah Weir, Head of Arts and Cultural Strategy at the Olympic Delivery Authority: “It’s a symbol of modernity and yet has a timeless feel”, and also: “It’s an extraordinary marriage of art, design and engineering” (Dyckhoff and Barrett, 2012: 145). She added: “In the same way that three things formed the original ethos for the Games – culture, education and sport – with the Park it was about bringing together art, design and engineering. [...] The thinking was that art was not just added on, but that it was integral” (137-138). And this was what happened with the artistic monument by Turner Prize-winner Anish Kapoor who collaborated with world-renowned engineer Cecil Balmond. They realized the most impossible monument so far. Technically it reflects London 2012’s wider aim to make the Games the most sustainable yet – it is made of 63 per cent recycled steel. At the top of the looping rings of steel there is a double viewing platform from which you get a stunning vision of London. It is accessed by an enclosed lift that allows mere glimpses on the way to the top, where the viewing platform reveals Kapoor’s signature hand through mirrors – both convex and concave – that distort and play with the viewers’ perception. From the top you can make your way down through the structure via a winding external stair. What an experience! How intriguing and how destabilizing is the complex transformation your senses undergo when you explore, experience and actually live the whole artistic structure: you are not just a viewer, you become a creative, moving urban performer.

As viewers/spectators/*flâneurs*, twenty-first-century pilgrims and citizens of that ‘London’ we were made more aware of our ever changing roles of urban, world performers constantly on the move, subjected to complex metamorphoses, caught in-between global and local urban identities, and challenged by and challenging the shifting grounds of materiality and lived experience in a culture of screens.

Notes

1. Tim Etchells is an artist and a writer based in the UK. He has worked in a wide variety of contexts, notably as the leader of the performance group Forced Entertainment and in collaboration with visual artists, choreographers, and photographers. His first novel – *The Broken World* – was published in July 2008.

2. I take the expression from the magazine *London Planner. The Official Monthly Guide to London*, London: Morris Visitor Publications, July/August 2012, where Chris Manning, Publisher, writes: “In summer 2012, London welcomes the world and invites all our visitors to witness a number of global events of varying magnitudes. There are undoubtedly few occasions that are as exciting, inviting and inclusive as the Olympic and Paralympic Games.[...] no other year is as unique as 2012, and no other city in the world is as thrilling, vibrant and cosmopolitan as London. This is, without doubt, the biggest year in the capital’s recent history, a ‘summer like no other’ to quote the Mayor of London” (Manning, 2012: 5).

3. Just to mention a few The Royal Wedding and the procession which crossed the streets of the metropolis after the ‘war’ against Argentina for the possession of the Falklands/Malvinas; not to say anything about the Royal ‘history play’ that was enacted in the

course of Lady Diana's funeral ceremony; Medieval and Renaissance Royal Entries and Entertainments, the Lord Mayors' Show come to my mind, among many others.

4. Here the author is quoting from the formulation of the lord Mayor of London about London's cultural industries, on the basis of the advice of a Cultural Strategy Group.

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