The Opening Ceremony
Text by: Tilman Spengler

When the Opening Ceremony is all over – the fireworks, the flag-waving, the procession of athletes and the spectacle, staged at vast expense, of a humanity that is destroying itself and its rainforests – so, when some measure of peace has been restored, a young woman asks me: "Doesn't this event remind you of an absolutely enormous opera? Perhaps by Verdi or Wagner?"

For me, other operas would have come to mind, not least because in the work of neither the German composer nor his Italian colleague do we hear the sounds of samba and bossa nova, but in at least one respect the young lady was right: this Opening Ceremony is, in the same way, a statement about the state of the world. Loud and colourful, with fast-moving pictures.

I had already noticed the woman, because, as she went to find her seat, many photographers in the stand above called out her name, and were rewarded with a smile and a dainty wave.

Well, that could have happened in Bayreuth, too. The whole of society is here, and no less of a mixture on the upper stands than on the Green Hill there. For the glitterati of society, attendance at such social gatherings, accompanied by a blaze of flash photography, has long since become compulsory, whether the
occasion is an opera, a papal visit or, as here, an event which has chosen "peace" and "sustainability" as its themes. How else to explain the appeal of this spectacle to the masses, or to the white-haired supremo of the business of racing unnecessarily powerful cars, who, further to the right of me, watches the proceedings with no outward sign of emotion?

In the words of the popular moderator of the event, the idea of "masses" is expressed as "billions and hundreds of billions of spectators". This may well generate respect, but also fear, when you think about the aesthetic impact of other sporting events, for example, football World Championships and their glorification of the mascot. The mascot at Rio, by the way, bears the name Vinicius, was named after a Brazilian composer and is apparently a composite of different manifestations of the animal world here. It reminds me of the fabled creature, the Wolpertinger, in my homeland of Bavaria. With all due respect to the work of the art director responsible, I hope that the figure of Vinicius will be denied the attribute of sustainability. Not everything created in the interests of culture for the masses deserves to be a protected species.

I am firmly put in my place a short while later, and a few rows lower down, at the cold buffet in the zone for those who are a little less privileged. Ever since reports of the miracle of my re-finding my identity outside the "Museum of Modern Art" appeared on an online network, complete strangers have been paying me a degree of attention that is sometimes less than welcome. In this case, it is a fellow countryman who says that I remind him of his former German teacher in Weimar.

"He, our teacher, was just as humourless as you," he says, when I try to explain that Dove, the work that made Pablo Picasso more famous than any other, does not owe its popularity to the fact that the artist was trying to create a particularly comical symbol. "You're being far too elitist about it all. But anyway, I'd still like to take a selfie with you. Cheers, I'm Karl-Heinz!"

Naturally I agree – after all, I am a member of the Olympic Family. A large part of its activities seems to consist of taking quick snaps of one another and sending them out into the world. Their faces automatically assume an expression of pre-set cheerfulness. To the observer, this automatic response seems to be a vain but ceaseless attempt to confirm to themselves the reality of their own life. After all, a person only really exists if there is a picture of them.
In the past, the TV camera used to move on quickly if a spectator waved at it, but now spectators are actively encouraged to wave – because the TV is also part of the family, is even one of its leading members. Anyone watching the Opening Ceremony realises this very quickly, if they try to follow what is going on in the Maracana Stadium. It is not possible for any one pair of eyes to watch at the same time all the dancing, climbing, spinning, swaying and jerking about that is going on in this vast space. So the eye is happy to relax from watching the swinging of hundreds of legs, the bending of hundreds of backs, when the spotlights settle, with rare unanimity, on a single guitar player and a child who is tap dancing.

This happiness cannot last long, because the event – and we are talking now about the narrative – must move on. And now, if not before, we long for a good TV presentation that would make the selection for us and explain the scenes, and for the voice of a wise commentator - it could even be an art critic.

"You have to see the scenes as a vision," says Karl-Heinz, who has taken on the role of commentator at this point. "Those white blocks towering at the back, for example, they could be the favelas – after all, the word comes from "grow tall" – and the green in front, that was definitely the rainforest. You just have to make a bit of effort, think a bit. Just go along with it, feel the spirit! Look at my girlfriend, for example!"

The young woman to whom he points is wearing in her dark hair a paper flower in the colours of the Brazilian flag. In the confined space, she is dancing to the beat of the samba. At a sign from Karl-Heinz, his girlfriend grabs my hand and pulls me to her. We are not the only ones swaying on the spot. Anyone who has ever seen me, or put up with me, on a dance floor will understand how glad I was that no-one captured this on film.

By the way, one of the particularly ambiguous themes of these Olympics is "Passion and Transformation".

"There we go," says Karl-Heinz, as his arm resumes possession of his partner's waist.

©Tilman Spengler, August 2016