

## WHAT THE CRITICS SAID : Excerpts from some recent reviews

'From its delirious counter-factual opening, through a cavalcade of arguing and asserting voices, a necessary, intelligent, and balanced response to a moment of local and national hallucination is achieved. If the book works, the Olympic madness can serve a useful purpose: in making us look harder at ourselves and the place where we have chosen to live.' **Iain Sinclair**

Phil Cohen's cantankerous, meticulous, jam-packed investigation of the coming of the 2012 Olympic Games to East London, *On the Wrong Side of the Track? East London and the Post Olympics* (Lawrence & Wishart), took me by surprise. It is the kind of guide to presentday Spectacle I had been waiting for. Back in the 1960s, Cohen was the most brilliant of the early English readers of French Freud and the structuralists. I remember pages of his impatient handwriting peppered with Lacanian algorithms aiming to reconcile, or at least analogize, the structures of unconscious repression with differential class language use, and hence (this was the ambition) with the epoch's emergent youth subcultures. Already at that point Cohen was deeply involved with the East End. He was fascinated and horrified by the psychic landscape thrown up as London's classic working-class neighborhoods—the tight worlds of Hackney, Stratford East, and Bethnal Green—fell apart. He thought they might turn out to be the terrain of a new class struggle. *On the Wrong Side of the Track?* is at one level a continuation of that old inquiry. Partly it is a study of last year's implantation of the Spectacle of Sport in (of all places) this wrecked and polluted proletarian non-site. The book, unsurprisingly, is no friend of Olympic puffery: Its two-chapter analysis of movie director Danny Boyle's opening ceremonies is unsparing. But partly Cohen's volume is a call—directed very much at people like me, who left town in a hurry as the Olympic torch fumed closer—for an end to dismissive generalizations about Spectacle, and the start of real “ethnographical” work trying to understand what the arrival and departure of such quasi-events *do* to a social fabric, and how Spectacle is perceived and resisted in practice by those whose world it invades. As the Brazil World Cup approaches (through clouds of tear gas), Cohen's book is required reading. **T.J.Clark Art Forum**

Academic and writer Phil Cohen has been taking the pulse of east London and its Essex hinterland for a long time now, so the 2012 Olympics provided him with the perfect observation deck for a new series of thoughts as to the likely shape and future of the territory in the years to come. Complex though some of his formulations are, he is always worth attending to, and in his latest collection of essays, *On the Wrong Side of the Track? East London and the Post Olympics* (2013), he gathers together what is in many ways an East London version of Humphrey Jennings' great work, *Pandaemonium*, which was the inspiration behind the Olympic opening ceremony created by Danny Boyle and Frank Cottrell Boyce. A mixture of ethnography, documentary, oral history, cultural theory and sporting politics, Cohen ranges widely across the disciplines to try to understand what lies ahead for 21st century London east of the Lea. **Ken Worpole**

'Written since the Games ended Phil Cohen's [On The Wrong Side of the Track?](#) locates legacy claims firmly in the social and geographical context of East London. This was where the regeneration was supposed to take place, acting as a leveller between the city's tourist and retail mecca, the West End, and the depressed East End. Beautifully written, with an uncanny eye for cultural detail Phil's book is a powerful response to the overblown myths and broken promises of the Olympian legacy agenda'. **Mark Perryman**

Phil Cohen's masterly book is anchored in an enormous body of literature that ranges from architecture, history and sociology to economics, planning and poetry. It embraces a wide range of methodologies, including many interviews with local residents and with workers who created the infrastructure and buildings of the Olympic site. It is enriched theoretically by its author's long experience of and very broad take on 'cultural studies'. Some three dozen, full-colour illustrations from local photographers and artists are included, and three visual essays are posted on Cohen's website to supplement the images in his book. Appearing in the spring of 2013, both author and publisher worked with remarkable speed to produce this impressive – and well-priced – book that deserves to reach and be appreciated by a very wide readership. **Hugh Clout Cercles**

Of the many books, reports and articles that have been and will be written about the 2012 Olympics, it is unlikely that any author will match Phil Cohen's passion for and knowledge of East London.. the strength of the book lies in Cohen's determination to hear the voices of people going to school, working in and living around the Olympic Park and to listen attentively to their suspicions, fears and aspirations without shoe-horning them into a simple narrative of disenfranchisement and despondency. **European Journal of Communication Studies**

Cohen is most impressive in analyzing the spectacle of the Olympics/ Paralympics, and in particular in decoding Danny Boyle's 'Isle of Wonders' opening ceremony. He describes the gulf between the classical Olympic ideals and the commercialism of modern sport; the irony that the rise and veneration of elite athletes has been accompanied by a decline of popular sporting participation; and, very importantly, he recognizes that sport has become a proxy for politics, a 'simulacrum of the plebiscitary forms of direct democracy' dissimulating active participation in the public realm. **George Morgan Space and Society**

Cohen's flair for social observation, coupled with extensive personal insight derived from longstanding involvement in the area have allowed him to produce a memorable book that places issues of Olympism and legacy in a truly rounded perspective. The book is a major contribution that may be profitably read by anyone interested in where the Olympic project is ultimately headed. **John Gold Sport and History**