

# THE ORWELL PRIZE 2008

## **LONGLISTED ENTRY: CLIVE JAMES, BBC RADIO 4 A Point of View**

**R4: 'A Point of View'**

**Tx: 29.6.07 at 2050; Rpt: 1.7.07 at 08.50**

**Prog No: PLN726 / 07VQ4066**

**'Why Money Can't Buy Everything'  
'A Point of View' by Clive James**

By now the momentous advent of Damien Hirst's diamond skull is already retreating into the past, like the unveiling of the Millennium Dome and the archaeological discovery of Tracey Emin's bed under the shards and remnants of a civilization. To avoid charges of timidity, I should give my own critical reaction to the diamond skull straight away.

I find it a superior work of communication to the proposed logo for the 2012 London Olympics, because the logo, based on the figures composing the date 2012, fails to convey that information in immediately apprehensible form. You have to be told by some other means the very thing that the logo sets out to tell you, which is that the London Olympics will take place in 2012, or as near to that date as can be managed by the kind of people who can't organize a successful t-shirt.

You don't have to be told by anything except the skull that the skull is a skull, studded with small glittering objects. You do have to be told that these small glittering objects are real diamonds, because fake diamonds look exactly like real diamonds to anyone but an expert, and that many diamonds all in the one place are almost always fake, unless they were once used to weigh the combined tonnage of the old Aga Kahn or appliquéd to the doorknob of Saddam Hussein's eleventh gold bathroom in palace number 17.

It's a matter of context. A knock-off designer bag looks exactly like the original but its presence on the arm of a downmarket female sex-worker leads you to believe that it might not be genuine. When she produces the receipt, however, the evidence begins to accumulate that she has made an investment purchase.

Back with the skull: once you have been told that the diamonds are real even though they look phoney because of their context, it's easy to believe that the materials of this otherwise unremarkable bibelot cost somewhere above ten million sterling and that the selling price will be nowhere below fifty million, which sounds like a profit for somebody.

We can only hope that the artisans who put the diamonds into position with tweezers -- presuming that Mr Hirst didn't do this himself -- were being paid better than the workers who build the hotels in Dubai. Those workers get fifteen minutes for lunch. But the skull isn't out to pose satirical questions to corporate capitalism. The skull takes corporate capitalism for granted.

In fact the skull exists in order to make corporate capitalism feel artistic. It's unlikely that any single individual, no matter how well off, will be in the market to buy the diamond skull. Not even Madonna, who might like the skull to go with her Frida Kahlo paintings, which it rivals in its kitsch shock value -- although the skull, unlike a Frida Kahlo open-heart self-portrait, has no moustache -- not even Madonna would be able to pay the tab without feeling the pinch.

There is an Indian zillionaire who regards the Hinduja brothers as poverty-stricken. He could afford the skull, but it would cut into the fund he keeps for getting a flying saucer pilot to defect. What he wants is an operational flying saucer, not a tarted-up prop from the Ghost Train. Damien Hirst's manager, who knows an awful lot about money, has deliberately priced the diamond skull out at the dizzy limit where individual wealth must bow to the wealth of institutions.

Even if Michael Jackson buys the thing for a paperweight, I'll be surprised if it isn't soon passed on at yet another huge mark-up to its true destination, the area between the atrium and the boardroom of the London or New York headquarters of some organization with a name like Merrill Stanley Morgan Lynch. Shining like a compressed constellation on its marble plinth, the skull will have the task of being talked about by the board members as they make their stately progress into a meeting and do a bit of international bonding before getting down to business.

The director from Oslo, in English, points out to the directors from Lima and Kuala Lumpur that the skull is the product of the same English artist who cut a shark in half. The Japanese interpreter points out to the director from Tokyo that the skull is the product of the English artist who was cut in half by a shark.

Everybody has relaxed. They have talked about art. The diamond skull has fulfilled its destiny, which is to be a talking point, what used to be miscalled a conversation piece: a way of chattering about art for people who know nothing about it. And that gives us a clue.

Because even if you do know about art, you can't talk about it socially. You don't talk about that bit in Botticelli's Primavera where the Medici prince reaches up for the orange or that bit in the Birth of Venus where her neck would look wrong if her shoulders weren't wrong too. It would be a conversation killer if you did, except among a gathering of Botticelli experts. That level of art is a different kind of event, and a much slower one. In the early nineteenth century a Botticelli could be bought for peanuts. The painter's commercial value, which is infinite, took a long time to catch up with the value placed on him by those who understood him.

Eventually the big Botticelli pictures were so identified with the soul of their country's heritage that Hitler buried them in a salt-mine with orders to destroy them if he lost the war. The pictures were saved by some Nazi officer who loved them more than his ideology. But when it comes to art, we don't talk about serious matters like that at the dinner table unless we know each other well enough to risk being boring.

Instead, we talk about the nonsense. Salvador Dali became a celebrity because he was more than half talking point. He could paint, but he was serious mainly about publicity. Tracey's bed was all talking point. I'm not sure who has it now. I think it burned down, unless I've got my stories mixed up. What I am sure of is that I have inhabited beds in far worse condition than Tracey's. But Tracey's bed is the one we all know.

This is where the mass media come in, as they once came in for Morecambe and Wise when everybody watched their Christmas show on television and every newspaper talked about it afterwards. For a certain period, the mass media give subjects of common speech even to people who fancy themselves above the mass media. Damien Hirst's shark was a common talking point for a time, and so will his diamond skull be: for a little more time, perhaps, but not for ever. The Botticelli paintings are forever because they aren't talking points. The difference is absolute.

For the diamond skull to be immortal, the culture it expresses will have to become immortal, and that culture is the celebrity culture. It might happen. I'm being positive in this series, and I have to admit that lately I've begun to feel uneasy about the low view I've always taken of celebrity claptrap.

The guilt I started to feel about questioning the achievements of Posh Spice or Britney Spears should have tipped me off. The secret of criticism is to know what your real feelings are before you try to express them. My real feelings were crystallised by that delicious comic moment when Paris Hilton emerged from the slammer to pronounce herself grateful for what she called her "learning experience". At last I realised that I didn't really disapprove of her at all. She's too valuable. She's our example, today, of the person who exists to prove that wealth for its own sake is utterly pointless.

And that's the very culture that the diamond skull expresses. Most of the Aztec crystal skulls that were once so popular in the world's major museums have by now turned out to be fake, but when they drew crowds it was because the Aztecs, though horrible, lived long ago, and the skulls were therefore thought to express a vanished culture, if nothing else. But the diamond skull expresses a culture all our own: the celebrity culture. Glittering, hollow and perfectly brainless, it reflects spendthrift emptiness with its every facet.

As with the culture itself, so with this brilliant symbol, we are left with almost nothing to say, but we can all say something. We might say that all the skull needs is Snoop Dogg's shades, David Beckham's ear-ring and a wig styled like whatever that is on top of Donald Trump's head, and then it would reflect our whole existence. But that wouldn't be quite right, because one of the things we want is art for all.

The diamond skull wants that too. You can tell by the device on its forehead: a kind of cartoon cartouche with a touching subtext saying: this isn't just a skull covered in diamonds in your bog-standard manner, a certain amount of contrivance went into it as well. And even though that touch of decoration is actually no more subtle than the bogus coat of arms on a 1950s Cadillac, it sends out a message to every viewer. The diamond skull wants you to know that art isn't just money after all. I'm delighted to agree, just as I'm sure that the merry miners all over the world who dug out the original diamonds have now realised the pettiness of any thoughts about a rise in salary.