SYMBOL AND RITUAL IN OLYMPIC ARENA

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Abstract

Olympic Games are an unique, incomparable event concentrating the all world attention in one place and keeping the highlights for many successive days. Beside de sporting competition side, Olympics aggregate also a ceremonial, a festive and an entertainment component. The ritual space is clearly defined by substantial enclosures, lights, and security personnel, creating the context for inducing in the collective consciousness the exaltation and the feeling of being part of an exceptional moment. In the opening ceremony, the Olympic symbols including the flag, the circles, the anthems, the oaths and the Olympic flame, are presented in solemn moments recalling ancient religious rituals from the time when the games in Olympia were dedicated to the Greek gods. The ceremonial containing the Olympic symbols invests the event with dignity and solemnity. The opening and closing ceremonies include cultural performances and bring out the spirit of the hosting nation through its most valuable historical, cultural, and scientific symbols and personalities in a profane festive atmosphere. The modern Olympic Games were from the beginning part of world culture and modern history, reflecting political tensions, economic crises, cultural flowering, and technological development.

Keywords: culture, sport, propaganda, ceremony, global event.

JEL classification: Z1, Z10

1. Introduction

The Olympics is a display of performance in a specific context, an event which takes four forms at the same time: ceremony, competition, fete, and entertainment (Piette, 1994). The ceremonial side is more obvious in the opening and closing ceremonies, or in prize award moments. In the opening ceremony, the Olympic symbols including the flag, the circles, the anthems, the oaths and the Olympic flame, are presented in solemn moments recalling ancient religious rituals from the time when the games in Olympia were dedicated to the Greek gods.

The competition is the core of Olympics, each sportsman or team aiming the best result, performance or place. The winners are always honored and rewarded as a sign of public recognition of their talent, effort and dedication.

As the eyes of the world turns more purposefully toward the Olympic city, issues as national identity take on increasing urgency and visibility (Mitchel, Yeates, 2000, p 219). The festive moments of Olympics are coming after seven years of...
preparations, significant financial efforts for the hosting country and with the contribution of thousands of volunteers enrolled for augmenting all kind of activities.

Olympism or Olympic philosophy exalts and combines in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Since London edition in 1908 in addition to the athlete’s competition, Coubertin established an arts contest called “The Pentathlon of Muses” - pentathlon because of the five arts involved in this competition: painting, sculpture, music, literature and architecture. Due to the subjective criteria of art assessment and classification after 1952 the presence of arts in the Olympics would take the form of cultural exhibition and festivals instead of competition. Nowadays the cultural program is seen as a marginal Olympic experience, rarely interacting with other dimensions of the games (Garcia, 2012, p. 37). For the tourists visiting the Olympic sites those exhibition and festivals beside the cultural dimension have also an entertaining function.

2. Problem Statement

Ritual defined as a transmitter of values and guide for behavior is a patterned activity that expresses some basic social message of importance to the audience and ongoing cohesiveness of group; emphasis on symbolic nature and always reflects basic values of cultural setting in which it is performed. The spectator is conscious of the emotional experience alongside the aesthetical presentation and of the associated values and attributes such as peace, fraternity, youth, vigour, honesty, respect for rules and for humanity. The ritual space is clearly defined by substantial enclosures, lights, and security personnel, creating the context for inducing in the collective consciousness the exaltation and the feeling of being part of an exceptional moment.

The ceremonies include cultural performances and bring out the spirit of the hosting nation through its most valuable historical, cultural, and scientific symbols and personalities in a profane festive atmosphere. The study of Olympic rituals and symbols reveals the subtle energy, which unites ordinary people and sportsmen to participate in the fight for Olympic glory.

Each Olympic opening ceremony brings out the creativity and originality of the hosting people and transmits a vibrant message to the world. In 2004, the Olympic Games returned to the original cradle of the Games in Athens. In the opening ceremony, over 4,000 years of culture and civilization were condensed into a spectacular performance. At the Beijing festivity, in 2008, hundreds of millions of people (spectators and viewers) were shown a superlative and fascinating combination of high technology and millennial tradition (www.usatoday.com, 2008).
The London 2012 opening ceremony has been creative and artistic innovative, less solemn but bringing a fresh nuance of humor and including the audience in the performance. More controversies arouse over the symbolic content of the final ceremony, Olympic logo and mascots.

Some organizations and authors found occult, hidden symbols in the scenes, song lyrics, costumes and emblematic characters. The Olympic ceremonies are strictly regulated by IOC protocols and they stipulate that the central message must be universal, simple and “nothing esoteric should be in the message” (Carrard, 1995).

The Olympic Games have become a well-known event, watched by a large and diverse audience all around the world. Counting on this huge mass media impact some personalities use the opportunity to deliver in a symbolic way political messages related more or less with the sporting event. Garry Kasparov (2014) criticized Putin’s campaign to host the Olympics Winter Games in Sochi, suggesting that “is all about adding to his personal glory” and having less in common with the Russian people’s well being or desire. Moreover the chess world champion drew a parallel between Putin’s Sochi and Hitler’s Berlin Olympic Games considering both similar cases in which “a despot confuses himself with the state after too long in power”.

In our contemporary information society, sport takes its share on the Internet, which liberalises cultural, artistic, and sporting events, making them instantly accessible worldwide. Such exposure makes the Olympic phenomenon an ideal target for marketing and economic gain and transforms the most prominent athletes in advertising icons. These professional sportspeople have financial agreements with media trusts, advertising and sports management agencies, and the equipment industry. In sport the flow across the globe of goods, equipment and talents “has developed into a multi-billion dollar business in recent years and represents a transnational” network (Maguire, 2008). We are now bombarded with marketing and advertising information from the complex arena of sport and only education and common sense can help us discern what is useful and valuable in this information avalanche.

Not only the consumerism society uses the athletes’ image in advertising industry; it was and still is an instrument of propaganda as well. The 1950's were marked by the arms race and the fear of a possible nuclear war between the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The “Cold War” began and propaganda was rife. Sports were used as a vehicle for superiority of one political regime over the other. Totalitarian regimes have continued the idea of creating a new man, a Nazi concept, extended afterwards in communist ideology. This new man prioritised his physical attributes, working incessantly, but his spirit was severely censored.

Champion athletes were used for propaganda purposes as models for the supremacy of communism, and they were given international visibility in the sports
Marathon

In the Olympics, the Cold War culminates in the boycott of the 1980 and 1984 Games. The US does not participate at the event organised by Moscow, in protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A further 60 nations supported this position. In retaliation, the next Games, held in Los Angeles in 1984 are boycotted by the USSR, who expressed doubts about security measures. Fifteen other nations, anther the influence of the communist super-power supported the boycott. Romania had a different position and sent a delegation to Los Angeles, which was welcomed with sympathy at the opening ceremony. At this event, our country achieved a record of 53 medals, of which 20 were gold (www.cor.ro).

Counting on the symbolic meaning and Olympic sportsmen’s representativeness for a nation the most serious occurrence of political interference at the Olympic Games took place in 1972. Due to political conditions in the Middle East, the Israeli delegation at Munich, were attacked by an Arab commando in the Olympic village. Two athletes were killed and nine others were taken hostage and died later, when the German police attacked the terrorists. Competitions were suspended for one mourning day. Recent history confirmed that such terrorist actions targeting institutions and symbols of a country rely on the powerful impact on public opinion.

In present globalised conditions sport remains a means of asserting and preserving national identity through the values it promotes and through its symbols. Representing a state in international competitions, especially at the Olympic Games is a matter of national prestige. The athlete for whom the flag is hoisted and the national anthem is sung, is the bearer of this prestige (Pop, 2013). Therefore the statement from an Olympic charter article - "The Olympic Games are competitions between athletes in individual or teams events and not between countries" (Rule 6 - Olympic Charter) - leads me to assert that it is simply a declaration fell into desuetude, even though in the spirit of globalization.

3. Conclusions

The social rituals performed in Olympic ceremonies evolved from a sacred place and having a religious dimension in ancient times, to a profane expression in public arenas nowadays, but the values and the symbols they promote still attract billions of spectators.

The widening of the Olympics movement around the world, as well as the connection between large numbers of countries (205) more than United Nations (193), makes the IOC a model structure that operates successfully on a global scale.

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The impact of this important sporting and cultural event on the host city’s community represents a paradigm of urban anthropology and a unique model of how the entire planet can be compressed in one place for celebrating peace, youth and talent.

REFERENCE