

The Olympic Games Should Happen Nowhere or Everywhereⁱ

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'The Olympics are haunted by the inconvenient fact that they have to be held somewhere. Ideally they should be held nowhere, anywhere, and everywhere always'.

From Mike Weinstein (1993), this quote is a pertinent reminder that the Olympic Games, most recently held in Salt Lake City, continues to be locked into a medium that is on the verge of disappearing. This paper cites some of the contradictions in Olympism and reveals how the digitalisation of broadcasting can alleviate some of these concerns.

The Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games – for both summer and winter – generates viewers in their billions and is argued by many as the largest scheduled media-event that has ever been and will ever be. Television culture has commanded the attention of audiences throughout the world for many years. However, Salt Lake is one of the last occasions where this will be the case. Now,

the buzz-words are the media-net, digitalisation, convergence, and home-computing.

The dot-com era may seem to be dissipating somewhat, though broadcast media have yet really to start exploiting the net. This is not surprising since band-width has made it near impossible to provide quality feeds through regular telephone lines. However, with increased connection speed and super-PCs, the opportunities are ripe for broadcasters to re-package their tv-treats and introduce a new era of screen watching.

Weinstein's perspective on the limitations of television for conveying the Olympic message is premised upon what kind of values the Olympic Movement claims to uphold. He writes,

The "Olympic Idea" is a dead idealism, whose putrefying remains are the host medium for the tumorous socio-cultural growths that make up the televisual Olympic event- scene.

Weinstein cites a number of similar reasons for making this

conclusion. From one view, it is a criticism of the local/ national/ global contradictions of the Games, which aspires to be universally appealing and apolitical, but which, by virtue of being hosted somewhere is necessarily political.

Weinstein is frustrated with the locatedness of the Games, which, he suggests, television endeavours to re-locate everywhere. Along these lines, his frustration with location is made more explicit through his contempt for the bidding process, by which host cities are decided.

It is interesting to note that Weinstein was quite prophetic here. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been brought under international criticism since the scandals of 1999 related to the Salt Lake bid process, whereby IOC members appeared to be receiving incentives to sway their voting decisions. In 1993, at the time of bidding for the 2000 Olympic Summer Games, Weinstein reflects on some of the candidates,

On the other side of virtuality a retro-fascist/pan-capitalist puke-ball war goes on for what country gets the "honor" of "hosting" the "games." This time the big contenders are two great paragons of internationalism: China and Turkey. Turkey thinks it's got the better chance (watch for the results on September 23) because China's "human-rights" record is worse than its own. Who would you rather be,

a Tibetan or a Kurd? I wonder if there'll be a Kurdish team or a Tibetan team in the 2000 Olympics. So much for the humanitarian-pacifist-moral-equivalent-of-war Olympic Idea. Choose your terrorism. Choose your retro-empire.

China's bid for the year 2000 Olympic Games was unsuccessful but the Games have subsequently been awarded to Beijing for 2008. Ironically, the 2008 bid seems to have raised no less concern about the human rights record in China. Not surprisingly, the media have focused on the controversial discussion precisely because of this questionable human rights record.



Speculations about a closed China in 2008 have been contradicted with an aspiration that the Games will open-up China, which itself speaks volumes about the social significance of the Games and how it is tied up with economic and political expectations. However, the pressing question can still be asked as to whether awarding the Games to countries

that have questionable records is some expression of condemnation. For some, the Olympic Movement's apolitical aspirations are insufficient. Internationalism gives rise to politicisation and to deny this is simply naïve.

If one considers these criticisms along with the involvement of developing countries (or lack of) in the Olympics, the basis for concluding that the Olympics is, indeed, a festival for the rich seems convincing. Certainly, there are many athletes competing in the Olympic Games from developing countries, though this is not really the point.

The Olympic Games continues to champion an occidental way of playing sport (and doing culture). Competition reigns, the values are performance based, and even most of the sports originate from Western countries. Yet, the fanatic is expected to believe that the Olympics is a social movement as Jacques Rogge, President of the International Olympic Committee, reminded viewers in the closing ceremony of Salt Lake.

These overtly political facets to the Olympics make it problematic for Weinstein to accept that the Olympics is inspiring, morally or otherwise. The territorialist nature of the Olympics is, he argues, entirely unsuitable. Indeed, after discussing some

possibilities, Weinstein even concludes that,

The Olympics really don't even belong in Olympia – they belong on the media-net: it's an embarrassment that actual, presenced bodies are needed as image resource-bases. The Olympics should all be done from the media archives.

Salt Lake is, perhaps, one of the clearest examples where territorialism has been challenged in the Olympics. The Games were the first major event held in the US since the September 11th terrorist attacks and provided an opportunity for the US to make a statement of some kind in response. However, this opportune moment to re-vitalise the 'humanitarianism' of Olympism was somewhat lost in a bid to promote Americanism and show the stiff-upper-lippedness of an injured America.

A key demonstration of this was the use of the US flag that was recovered from the destroyed World Trade Center. This symbolic flag, remembered by many around the world for having been placed among the rubble of the tower, was held by US citizens during the Opening ceremony of the Salt Lake Games. For many of these people, it was a touching moment, indeed, a desirable expectation. For some spectators, uncomfortable with the US response to 9/11, it was an affirmation of its egocentric mentality. For others, who have

no problem with supporting Team USA, it was simply a needle in the coffin of Olympism precisely because of its political implications.

Interestingly, the IOC rejected the proposal to allow the flag to be carried by the competing athletes on their entry into the stadium. However, the IOC only has control over the official elements of the ceremony, such as the flag carrying or athlete's parade. It was the Salt Lake Organising Committee that was able to make the decision that the flag would be carried during the cultural component of the ceremony.

[for some, the use of the WTC US flag at the Salt Lake City opening ceremony] was simply a needle in the coffin of Olympism precisely because of its political implications

One might feel relieved at the IOC's rejection of the use of the flag - remembering that it is the Olympic governance rather than the US that is at issue here. However, the double-edged reality about the ceremony is that a host city (which often transpires to project a host country) has the ability and desire to put out messages about itself.

This chance for self-expression is often transformed into political-expression. The opportunity is too great and there are far too many media recording the event to remain apolitical in one's message.

The Olympic Games in Salt Lake City did not have any live broadcasting through any website. The first official occasion where this will take place will be at the Beijing Olympic Summer Games in 2008. Until then, broadcasters are holding their start lines waiting for the gun. The expectation is that such a move will be an economic success though, like much that takes place through the web, it will also be an inevitable inconvenience. You have to have a website to be in the game. For the people, it can be argued that the experience could change radically and offer a more holistic experience of the Games.

Indeed, the broadcast of the Olympic Games is a particularly good indication of corporate televisual limits. The Olympic Games is a multi-faceted festival combining diverse aspects of sport, dance, poetry, writing, visual arts, and other forms of cultural expression. As well, it lends itself to business conferencing and a host of tourist related enterprise, all of which happen concurrently. The single-line feed of a television broadcast

thus, is terribly narrowing for the viewer.

If today we are able to select camera angles when watching a football game, interactive television could allow the selecting of various live aspects of a festival such as the Olympic Games. If you want to watch the skiing, then you can tune into that. If you want to listen to the poetry readings, then click into that event. If you want to browse some of the art exhibitions, then take a guided tour through the virtual exhibition gallery.

Neo-traditionalists will argue that television is not simply a medium through which life is presented. Rather, it is also the packaging of that event into digestible and comprehensible pieces. For this reason, one must be cautious in claiming that the television is moribund.

This need not be such a problem for the media-net. Replicating television commentary would be relatively straightforward, as the infrastructure already exists. So, the virtual gallery tour can have an audio or textual feed accompanying it, as one would receive in the actual gallery. Walking through the gallery can also be a spatial experience, using technology to navigate one's way through a replica of the gallery itself.

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Digitalisation can allow Olympism to flourish precisely because it takes the Games out of a physical space. For the immediate future, they will still be held in a specific city. However, the Olympics will be felt through the media-net, which has the opportunity to multi-culturalise the feed. Choose your language, choose your event; you can even buy tickets to receive the live feed.

This is not supposed to be a substitute for travelling. Rather, it is a way of realising that travelling is insufficient. Being there doesn't allow one to witness the event, unless you have around \$3000 to spare. It is comparable to many major league sports games, where it becomes simply too expensive to afford going to the matches. Particularly during a World tournament, most tourists could only afford to see one or two events.

At the Olympics in Salt Lake, tickets for Opening and Closing ceremonies were reaching \$900. For some of the sports events, street sellers were asking up to

\$350. These figures are not dissimilar to the face value of some tickets.

The Games for the people can be found online, through their every-day technology. In 2008, it cannot be expected that there will be free viewing for Olympic events. However, viewers might expect to pay an affordable amount to interact with many more elements of the festival than would be possible when attending it in person or watching television.

Reference

Weinstein, M.A. (1993, January 1) "Turkish (Retro-Fascist) Olympics." *CTHEORY* [online] <http://www.ctheory.net/>

ⁱ Paper originally published as: Miah, A. and Garcia, B. (2002, April) The Olympic Games Should Happen Nowhere or Everywhere, *Spark Online*, 31.0, [online]: <http://www.spark-online.com/issue31/miah-garcia.html>