

The Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Gamesⁱ

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The Olympic Games Opening Ceremony is the most watched event in the world with an expected 1.4 billion people tuning in to a Summer Games ceremony. Most of this audience will have had no prior coverage of the local political issues that surrounded the Games, nor will they care too much about these matters, since they are tuning in to see athletes prepare to compete in sports.

While the Winter Games attracts fewer viewers than the Summer, due in part to their being fewer countries participating, they are no less pivotal in terms of how they define an Olympic host population's emotional attachment to its Games. Thus, opening ceremonies tell powerful stories about the Olympic host's identity and values, which are consumed and interpreted by a local and global audience.

In Torino 2006, the Ferrari spinning doughnuts in the stadium and the avant-garde costumes emphasized Torino's



Vancouver 2010 torch relay in Whistler, photo by Kris Krug

design excellence and was reminiscent of the extraordinary beauty of the opening ceremony of Albertville 1994. In Beijing 2008, the choreographic feat of 2,008 dancers, the magnificence of the 'bird's nest' Olympic stadium and the fireworks spectacle that typified China's expertise with pyrotechnics, all showcased China's emergence as a global superpower.

In Vancouver tonight, the Opening Ceremony will be a turning point for how many Vancouverites feel about the last 7 years of preparation. For those who may have been negatively affected by the process, the sight of athletes entering the arena can often inspire feelings of

admiration, pride and a great sense of empathy over the athletes' imminent challenge, which can move even the hardest cynic.

These athletes have trained all their lives for this single competition and we, as their audience, have the opportunity to witness their defining moment. What they achieve will become part of our history and, particularly for those who see the sports live, the spectacle can be an experience of a lifetime.



Olympic flame lighting ceremony, Olympia, © VANOC/COVAN

Technically, the Vancouver 2010 opening ceremony began a few months before February 12th, when the Olympic flame was lit

in Ancient Olympia, Greece. From there, it was taken across the world to Canada, where the flame relay began. In recent years, the relay became an international event, moving from one country to the next.

However, after the protests that occurred on the approach to the Beijing 2008 Olympics, the IOC decided to end such extensive relays. This is unfortunate and the IOC should reconsider this decision, not least because the torch is the sole opportunity for the general public to encounter the Olympic experience.

As the opening ceremony begins, the flame works its way to the stadium, ready for one of the Games' most iconic moments: the lighting of the cauldron. This moment also has important cultural significance, both in terms of who lights the cauldron and how it is lit.

Unforgettable moments in Olympic history include the archer of Barcelona 1992 who shot a flaming arrow into the cauldron, thus igniting it (he actually overshot for safety, but the choreography read beautifully). As well, the continual pressure to surpass the spectacle of previous Games leads to quite remarkable and sometimes convoluted feats.



Beijing 2008 Opening Ceremony,
Photo from Wikipedia.

The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games was no exception, as the former Chinese gymnast, Li Ning, sprinted a victory lap across the upper part of the stadium, suspended high above the ground, before finally arriving to the cauldron. It was a moment that beautifully articulated China's technological power and its burgeoning creative industries.

The individual chosen to light the cauldron often has important symbolic value for a nation. On some occasions, a well-known global personality is chosen, such as Muhammed Ali at the 'Coca-Cola' Games of Atlanta 1996. However, often, the individual is not well known to a global audience, thus requiring that this

moment overwhelms an audience through drama alone.

As the cauldron is lit in Vancouver, the frustrations of many locals will be temporarily put on hold, as the ceremony will have weaved a narrative around some of these tensions, occasionally exposing them. Also, out of respect for the visiting nations, the desire to be a good host - and the need to have a very big party - this moment will be a collective, cathartic experience for many Vancouverites.

As dawn breaks the next day, it will be business as usual for those very same people, as both the competitors and the activists go about their work, all in the name of making Olympic history.

But, one thing is for sure - they'll all meet again at Holland Heineken House in Vancouver the following night, and each subsequent night of the Games!

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