

Why a Broken Ring Matters at the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony

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The Opening Ceremony of the Sochi Olympics may go down in history as having been one of the most ambitious and accomplished Winter ceremonies of all time. The complexity and sophistication puts it on a par with the Albertville Games, which is widely regarded to have been a Winter opening without rival.

But there was one problem that became the focus of attention after the ceremony drew to a close last night. You might not have noticed it if you were watching on television, as the delay from live to broadcast meant that a rapid replacement of footage from the rehearsal could disguise what really happened in the stadium.

In the segment when the Olympic rings were being spectacularly visualised from gigantic snowflakes, one of them failed to expand and achieve its circular form. The audience was left with four Olympic rings and a smaller dot.

So what? You may say. It's only a ring. Yet, in the press conference that followed, it was apparent



The Sochi 2014 Olympic Park, photo by Andy Miah

that this was a source of frustration for the organizers, who implored reporters to focus on their achievements instead of this tiny failure. The artistic director even said that this was one of the simplest technical moments in the ceremony.

However, there is good reason why reporters will focus on it, as the presentation of the Olympic rings is the second most important symbolic moment in the ceremony, after the lighting of the cauldron.

It wasn't always like this. In years gone by, the rings would have just been erected within the stadium from the start of the show. However, in recent years, this segment has become a

moment where the hair will stand up on the back of your neck and that moment was lost, at least for those who were in the stadium, which included Vladimir Putin, who was sitting next to IOC President Thomas Bach and not far from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

So, the significance of this moment is easy to understand. After all, as much as the Games are about the athletes, they are also significantly about those rings. The entire economic foundation of the movement relies on their sale to the highest bidder. The success of the Games rises and falls on the basis of who has the right to use the rings.

Thus, the rings have come to symbolise more than just the Olympic value, so their failure to be properly visualised during the Opening Ceremony might compromise the integrity of that powerful symbol. It is equivalent to the Olympic cauldron failing to ignite. This need not mean embarrassment but it does mean that an important moment was lost for Sochi.

It would be unfair for the world to judge the artistic merit of the ceremony on the basis of this one technical fault, as the rest of the staging was flawless. Art may deserve a bit more flexibility in terms of how we evaluate success, compared to sport, where only perfection matters.

However, what took place also means that we cannot award the organizers a perfect 10 for their delivery, even if it was the best opening ceremony of all time. At least, this means that the next host city has something to strive for, beyond Sochi 2014.

Besides, the beauty of television means that it won't be difficult for the Olympic organizers to easily dodge international commentary on what happened. After all, for the majority of viewers - and for the record - it never happened.

The morning after, #RingFail is set to become a cult classic in Opening Ceremony history; a rare feat. Already, a fake t-shirt sporting the distorted Olympic rings emblem is in circulation by @mychelmiller on Twitter (see <http://mikemilldesign.tumblr.com>), which may yet make this unforeseen technical fault a defining, cool and edgy emblem of the Sochi Olympics.