Keys to interpret the Games: Sydney 2000 Olympics

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The Olympic Games - a laboratory for social sciences

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The Olympic Games taking place in Sydney cannot be considered, in a reductionism sense, as a "sporting event" all simply. On the contrary, those Games are the perfect example of the many new ways of globalisation in nowadays society. Globalisation in its wider sense, both in relation to world-wide reach and convergence of factors.

The Olympic Games are the sporting event gathering the greater number of participants and variety of sports categories at modern times but they have also become a phenomenon of strategic interest for many of the great sectors in society: technology, communication media, cultural and national representation, advertising, politics, tourism and so on.

It is for this reason that the interpretation of the Games could be presented to students at different educational levels as a privileged object of study to interpret our society. The more recent Olympic studies rely on the above when they refer to the Games as a laboratory for the analysis of modern society.

Mundialisation, globalisation and internationalism

(13th September, 2000)

Up to present times, there has been a great interest to interpret the historical origin of the Games. Without denying the value of this approach to ancient history, it is now suggested that the historical interest focuses on another of the basic foundational aims of de Coubertin: internationalism.

The foundation of the Modern Olympic Games in 1894 coincided with the organisation of the first great Universal Exhibitions which, in themselves, responded to the need of an industrial society to establish political and economical links at the "international" scale, inspired in the strategies of the leading industrialised states.

At present, the Olympic Games are a great scenario for the representation of "state-nations", through their National Olympic Committees (NOCs) (200 represented in Sydney 2000). But this protagonism is increasingly shared with big multinational corporations (sponsoring and managing the Games) which, through their logos and advertisements, have become omnipresent throughout the streets and venues of Sydney 2000.

This great scenario is unquestionably broader than the one allowed by the initial Universal Exhibitions which gathered no more than two dozens of nations.

Local and global?

At present times, the Olympic Games are a phenomenon both global and local. In order to visualise this apparently contradictory reality, it is enough to visit Sydney's International Broadcasting Centre (IBC). There is close to 500 television screens composing a gigantic electronic wall in the main operations centre.

In this space it can be seen the increasing relevance of unilateral (national) signals. At the same time, live and without interruptions, all the sporting activity at the Games, thousands of hours of television production.

In this new context, many contradictions become apparent, but also some opportunities, in special, the ones related to identity (and multiculturalism) that can be represented through sport.

On the 19th September, University of New South Wales (Sydney) held a symposium dedicated to Olympism and the culture of peace where those new dimensions were due to become evident.

Interpreting the ceremony: the rehearsals
(14th September, 2000)
The Sydney 2000 opening ceremony, under the direction of Ric Birch, has been based in two main thematic axis: the representation of Australian culture (welcome) and the celebration of the Olympic ritual.

The representation of Australian culture is without doubt the most spectacular component of the ceremony. Most efforts in terms of players' participation and scenic technologies have been dedicated to this component. In this sense, the Sydney ceremony can be seen as a peak in the process to utilise the opening ceremonies to "narrate" the local culture, what by the same token determine the "theatralisation" of Olympic stadia. The most important aspect of this first section of the ceremony are the contents of Australian representation where the presence and representation of Aboriginal people plays a key role, integrated within the narration of the history of Australia. This history is symbolically interpreted as the gathering of social and cultural groups arriving at the continent. There is also a constant reference to nature: water, fire, sea, air, animals, all of them mixed with a great "dreaming" of historical progress.

The comments by television presenters will be key, this time more than ever, to interpret and enjoy the ceremony.

Perhaps the long duration of this first part or component will leave in a secondary position the symbolic representation of Olympism and its history (nearly absent in the above narration). Nevertheless, at this stage, nothing definitive can be said due to the closed secrecy the organisers keep some surprises in. Fundamental components of the ritual of which there have been no indications yet are, for example, the lighting of the Olympic cauldron. This could modify the impressions given by the rehearsals so far.

The Games Legacy: impacts of the big party
(September 20th, 2000)
The analysis of the Games outcomes -its legacies- has become one of the main topics for social research on Olympism. An important number of scholars currently staying in Sydney are focusing their attention on this theme.

The analysis of the Games' impact must consider different factors such as political, economical, urban,

touristic or environmental factors, but it also must look at some of those values generally defined as "intangible", that should instead be simply defined as "cultural".

Among those factors it is relevant to dedicate special attention to the cultural effects of the festivities and celebrations that start with the torch relay and the opening ceremony, and are followed by numerous activities in small scale, either spontaneous or organised by the community. The experience, which was remarkable in Barcelona, gives place to side cultural effects in different aspects of the social structure.

Researchers taking part in a seminar on Olympism and the Culture of Peace organised last 19th September by the IOC and the Centre for Olympic Studies at University of New South Wales, dedicated some time to analyse the impact and strategic value of the joint apparition of the two Koreas during the Sydney Opening Ceremony.

In my opinion, this fact is a distant effect of the "celebration" of the Games in Seoul in 1988 and the cultural conditions ("the world to Korea, Korea to the world") created by the event. This experience is a good example of the "culture of peace". The impacts on identity, self-esteem of a collectivity and reconciliation (the point of view of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia) are other important aspects that can only be interpreted from a rigorous approach to cultural anthropology.

After the Opening Ceremony
(September 16th, 2000)
The last hours preceding the opening ceremony are hours of maximum tension for all the system (media, security, organisation). Nobody walks, everybody runs; nobody looks around, everybody is focused anxiously in their main priorities.

At 1am, two hours after the ceremony, Ric Birch, the director, offered a press conference. Short after, singers and artists participating in the spectacle joined him. It was the beginning of the distension, the principal credibility proof in the Games had been successfully accomplished. The tired but satisfied expression in the protagonists' faces and the applause by a remarkable section of the press witnessed this success.

Great superproduction
The production of the ceremony counted on a investment in resources, actors, technology and artifacts without any precedent in the history of the event. The public at the stadium, enthusiastic and participative, methodical and disciplined, created a great atmosphere of massive participation that transformed the spectacle in an enormous celebration, a massive party.

This superproduction was the "means" through which it was narrated, in lyric form, following the dream of a little girl, the history of Australia. The nature -the stadium was converted in the land of the Australian continent- was not only a place for the encounter of different groups and cultures from multiple origins, but also a place for the reconciliation between the new settlers and the aborigines. The party concluded -

"eternity"- with thousands of youngsters dancing and taping rhythmically.

From the theatrical or scenic point of view, the first part of the ceremony compiled without complexes the most positive values of prior ceremonies. The people from Barcelona, who have in this regard a very sharp selective memory, have surely recognised various of the innovative and scenic characteristics of the 1992 Opening Ceremony (putting an alternative surface over the sporting field, use of artifacts in the style of "La Fura dels Baus", covering the athletes with a great flag, and so on). Nevertheless, it is important to notice that in Sydney this model reach the peak of its scenic potential. It will be very difficult to surpass the Sydney Ceremony in this regard. For Athens 2004, if the aim is to create "the best ceremony in Olympic history" another sort of model should be found.

Emotion and technology in the Olympic cauldron

After the arrow in Barcelona and the emotional sight of the torch in hands of Muhammad Ali in Atlanta, some journalists had tended to advance that Sydney would light the cauldron with a boomerang.

Instead, Sydney has opted by a completely different way: supertechnology, or rather, "superengineering". Neither manual nor virtual: the cauldron is part of the stadium structure. Therefore, the cauldron is not displayed as an addition to the stadium but rather a long journey, a water fall, and a great artifact in movement. Technology however, was less precise in this case -at least in scenic terms- than the arrow in Barcelona. The great cauldron, after immersing in the water the last torch bearer, Aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman, started a movement but then stopped and did not move during two eternal minutes prior to move again, this time definitely, towards the higher rows in the stadium. We can conclude that Sydney 2000 has modified prior models in what regards the lighting of the cauldron: the model has changed from emotive simplicity to technical and scenic spectacularity.

The athletes' parade: more traditional dresses than ever before

The athletes' parade, despite the enormous differences between how it is lived in the stadium and how it is normally displayed on television, is still a central and fundamental component of the Olympic Ceremony. It is a key component of this both local and global phenomenon.

Even without a detailed quantitative analysis, it is possible to state that in the Sydney parade there has been a very important transformation in the dressing style by participant nations. All participants, at the same time as being very far from the military pose of past times, are tending to personalize their dress with traditional motives (local references) avoiding the western model: the standard two pieces suit. Each delegation would merit an individual analysis: Spanish men and women carrying flags in their hats; Italians wearing trousers and skirts of bright and diverse colours; Japanese in a rainbow: African delegations dressed in traditional costumes and distinguishing the leader from the rest; and so on. The cultural and political analysis of television commentaries during the Ceremony regarding these symbols and representations is one of the most interesting aspects of doing content analysis of the Games media

coverage.

A very significant sign during the Sydney's parade has been the march of both Koreas under the same flag, which was carried by an athlete from North Korea and one from South Korea. This has evidenced the important legacy and Olympic memory brought by Seoul in 1988.

People in Sydney and television on the streets

(Sydney, September 21st)

I have had the opportunity (and fortune) to attend three Summer Olympic Games: the Games in Barcelona, Atlanta and Sydney. I must confess that I have been more interested in looking at the people than looking at the sporting competitions themselves. Do you want any example? The enthusiasm, always pacific, of the Indian immigrants in the hockey match between India and Australia in Sydney; the people's emotion during the torch relay in the streets of Barcelona, Atlanta and Sydney. The massive participation of the public in the different sequences of the Opening Ceremony, in special, the interaction (more or less enthusiastic) of the public with the athletes delegations during their parade in the stadium.

In Sydney, for instance, the way Australians celebrate victory and accept defeat - it is interesting to analyse this aspect from the point of view of a culture of peace- contrasts with the symbolic agressivity lying in the ways of celebrating victory by some supporters coming from Europe, who are very irrespetuous with the defeated.

From a cultural analysis point of view, it is interesting to analyse the day-to-day behaviour of Sydneysiders during the Games period and, in special, the attitudes and behaviours of the volunteers (close to 40,000 in Sydney). Many of them have the mission to control the entries and exits of the Olympic venues. In Sydney, this function is done without servilism nor authoritarism.

A consistent analysis of citizen participation would require deeper ethnographic analysis, but at first view, it is remarkable the citizen participation happening outside the sporting venues. An important experience in this sense, besides the entertainment program taking place in a range of Sydney parks and squares - LiveSites is the collective reception of the Olympic TV coverage (Channel 7) displayed by big screens placed in those same parks and squares. At Circular Quay (in the Sydney harbour) thousands of people lying or seating on the floor watch and cheer the victory of the Australian athletes in a community environment that has nothing to do with the individual television reception at home. Eric Rothenbuler, in his analysis of Los Angeles '84 Games, suggested already that the Olympic Games determine diverse community and festive ways of reception. In Sydney, this community experience is extended, as it happens in different African communities, to the streets and bars that announce the community telecast of the Games.

At my arrival in Sydney, on September the 10th, I was strongly conditioned by my experience in the preparation of the Games on the Internet. I was thinking of analysing the Games of the "Information

Society". Once in Sydney, I have faced an information technology (about which I will write some other day) that tries to avoid what failed in Atlanta results coverage and goes back to the safe informative formula used in Barcelona'92 (the AMIC program). But most of all, I have met a society that is reticent to the substitution of community experiences by virtual reality, even if only by using television and the Games in order to create, as one possible can, a personal way to celebrate the Games in community.

Sponsorship, public relations and Olympic image
(September 22nd, 2000)
One of the previous sections referred to the multiple popular culture activities taking place in the Olympic city during Games time. In a very different dimension -incommunicated by the privilege brought by accreditation and reserved spaces- the big corporations sponsoring the Games are developing a parallel program of parties and public relations.

Olympic VIPs are not exclusively representatives of the royalty and heads of state but also the magnates of multinational organisations. People such as Bill Gates (Microsoft), Louis Gerstner (IBM), Jim Kelly (UPS), Douglas Daft (Coca-Cola), Jack Greenberg (McDonald's) and so on have been seen and photographed in Sydney.

The great commercial brands have understood that their sponsorship action plan cannot consist of an association between their logos and Olympic images alone but rather that their actions must be extended to a global strategy which profits from all the opportunities for notoriety brought by the Games.

Bruce Horovitz wrote for USA Today (September 21st, 2000) that the eleven major Olympic sponsors, besides spending around $50 million in sponsorship, spend an additional sum of $150 million in TV advertising and public relations during Games time.

In the Olympic period, the Sydney Opera House has been over saturated with Olympic invitations. Sydney nightlife is a compound of special guests parties. An enormous luxury ship, the "Crystal Harmony" is now a remarkable sight at Circular Quay in Sydney Harbour. The ship is reserved in full to IBM guests, major or potential clients of the brand who are being briefed on the possibility to apply the IBM technology developed for the Games to other information systems, either in big scale or small.

Up to date, standard marketing studies have analysed the positive effects that an association with the Olympic values can bring to the prestige and promotion of major commercial brands. However, Olympic studies have not yet developed consistent research to analyse opposite side of this relationship: the influence that multinational corporations -the global economy- can have on Olympism. Photographs taken in Sydney public spaces evidence a dominant presence of sponsors imagery over the purely Olympic images and local images.

In fact, it is difficult to find Olympic banners and flags without commercial "additives". Most Olympic rings on display are accompanied by commercial brands or integrated in commercial ads. In a similar sense, the

symbols of the sponsors relegate to a secondary position the images and flags of participant nations.

The above points are new challenges for the communication and image policy of the Olympic Movement. Nevertheless, at present, the movement seems to be more concerned with the risks of "ambush marketing" and the protection of the sponsors rights, than the protection of its own image, and autonomous image independent of commercial associations. An often signalled exception is the strict policy regarding the look of Olympic venues, which are clean of any sort of commercial advertising. However, this exception only applies to the venue attendants "in situ" because the Olympic image of the sporting competitions receives again the influence of sponsorship and commercialism on television. As a whole, Olympic sponsorship, another example of globalisation, only seems cost-effective if all fields are covered - sponsorship, advertising, public relations- in favour of commercial strategies very well defined.