

CHAPTER 11



VICISSITUDES OF LIMINALITY IN COMPLEX PERFORMANCE SYSTEMS

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In 1977, a Burg Wartenstein Symposium on ‘Cultural Frames and Reflections: Ritual, Drama, and Spectacle’ was organized by Victor Turner, Barbara Babcock and Barbara Myerhoff. Anthropologists and literary scholars associated with Turner’s explorations of a ‘comparative symbology’ that encompassed tribal, traditional and industrial societies were assembled (Turner 1974; MacAloon 1984). My contribution was entitled ‘Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies’. It offered a model of what I called ‘complex performance systems’ in which quite distinct and even oppositional genres of cultural performance are combined in ‘nested’ or ‘ramified’ fashions into higher order and more encompassing wholes, with distinct implications for social access to liminality.¹

As the title indicated, the chief empirical object of my research was (and remains today) the Olympic Movement and the Olympic Games. Already by the 1960s, when I began my work, the Olympics had developed into a truly world-historical phenomenon, and it seemed to me that there was nothing obvious in explaining this fact. Indeed, it appeared to defy certain core presuppositions of the kind of anthropology in which I was trained.² If cultural differences were as significant as claimed, how was it possible that so many ‘national cultures’ (112 in 1968, 206 today) and literally innumerable sub-national and transnational cultural formations were investing some level of attention and participation in the ‘same’ performances?

Complex Performance Systems

Following Gregory Bateson's analysis of genre as 'metacommunicative frame' (Bateson 1972), I insisted that athletic games are not rites or festivals, and that each of these is framed differently from spectacle. This permitted recognition of how in the mature Olympics these core genres are nested within one another like Chinese boxes, conceptually, ideologically, and above all performatively (Figures 11.1 and 11.2). Distinct social segments within and across cultures have quite different initial tastes, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the term (Bourdieu 1984), in various types of performance. The array of genres in a complex system like the Olympics offers multiple portals of interest and recruitment. Once attracted anywhere into such a system (on condition that it is symbolically integrated), individuals and groups are subject to being rerouted and recruited into the other genres that compose it: pay attention for the ritual, end up lured into sport; attend an Olympic sports contest in person and you (literally) cannot avoid ritual and festival. Ethnographic documentation of these phenomena was not difficult to amass.

On a macro-social level, the Olympics developed into *the* liturgy of the world-system of nation-states. Whether or not their cultural traditions have much interest or prowess in Olympic-style sport, national authorities have for decades now had no real choice as to whether to support a National Olympic Committee and send a delegation to the Summer Games. To be a nation among nations in the world *requires* marching in the Olympic opening ceremony.³ In this instance, global ritual holds coercive power over nation-states. Analogously (metonymically), the Olympic athlete is obliged to have a nationality, as well as individual ability, and a voiced commitment – they take a ritual oath – to Olympic values of common and universal humanity.⁴ I call this core symbolic code (building obviously upon Kantorowicz 1957) the 'athlete's three bodies' – Individual, National, Human (MacAloon 2019).

The ritual procession of/by nations in the Olympic opening ceremony was there from the beginning in 1896. Not coincidentally, much of the rest of the ritual complex we know today – the flame relay, the victory ceremony, and the elaborate programme of cultural representations in the opening ceremony – appeared or were consolidated in the 1930s, when the nation-state organization of the world system received a major push from the break-up of empires after the First World War, when states shouldered past civil society agencies into leading roles in staging and narrating Olympic Games, and when political, economic and ideological globalization definitively accelerated (Keys 2006). The process subsequently accelerated again (WWII, decolonization) and again (the Cold War) and again (neoliberal capitalism,

global media, the internet) until there are few if any people alive anywhere today who do not know their own local versions of the general struggle among Individuality, Nationality, and Humanity . . . or of the Olympics.

In the Olympic performance system, each identity is condensed and expressed in a powerful repertoire of symbols: the individual athlete's named and badged personal body ('credentialed' in Olympic speech), fitted with a sports physiognomy and competitive biography, discussed in terms of individual character and commitment, ideologically privileged and protected in official Olympism, initiated into the globally recognized status of 'Olympian'; the national uniforms (athletes' 'second skins'), flags, anthems and officials, ritual opening by a head-of-state, national medal counts; the five-ringed emblem (quite possibly the most globally recognized in the world), the Olympic flame, flag, anthem, medals, the IOC and the Olympic Charter. What the Olympics dramatize above all else is the struggle among these identities through the differential relations of these three symbol sets across the entire performative process. What Olympic ideology ('Olympism') proclaims and the complex Olympic performance system has evolved to evocatively demonstrate is that Individuality, Nationality, and Common Humanity can be made compatible, despite all counter-evidence of the past century, much of it consisting in abominable horror. The modern Olympic Games, of course, carry their own heavy history of counter-evidence from within the festival itself.

Of course, I am trading here in abstractions, or what I would prefer to call 'empty forms', or better 'emptied forms' – that is to say, cognitive and behavioural forms more or less deracinated from their original historical and cultural contexts. (Whose culture does the 200-metre butterfly race, the torch relay, street festival, or nationality belong to?) In the Olympic performance system, these forms are restricted in number and screen out or leave formally unmarked many other powerful social and cultural identities, thus intensifying focus on particular things. This is much more a 'hyperstructure' than a Turnerian 'anti-structure'. These more or less empty forms then make themselves available to be filled in worldwide with local meanings by local actors, whether states, communities, social strata, or individuals.⁵ We can scarcely imagine the diversities of meaning being continuously generated through this 'global' phenomenon. Merely on the level of television practice, a twenty-five-nation comparative content analysis of coverage of the 1992 Barcelona opening ceremonies revealed striking diversities, including the genres in which the opening ceremonies were preferentially framed (Moragas, Rivenburgh and Larson 1995).

Competition is not consecration, and neither of these is the same as festive enjoyment or spectacular awe. In marked contrast with other sports events, no competition takes place in the Olympics unless it is encased within and

punctuated by intensive ritual. At the same time, Olympic ritual depends on sports competition not only to help recruit its audience but also to literally embody the core ideological truths that are to be reconsecrated – namely, that productive competition requires complete collaboration and generates fellow-feeling, that patriotism can be rescued from nationalism and tamed by humanism, and that humanism can be energized by patriotism and individual achievement. The encompassing festival gives the meta-message that these truths should be matters of joy and happiness. (Spectacle offers yet a different framing, to be considered shortly.) But none of this can be recognized, I continue to argue, if the performative genres are in any way reduced or collapsed into one another, or their radical differences ignored or dismissed in favour of some general conceptual similarities, like all being somehow ludic (Turner 1974; Lewis 2013). In 1977, though I soft-peddled it at the time, this insistence put my approach partially at odds with the one my teacher and mentor Victor Turner was then choosing to pursue. This was exemplified in his 1974 article ‘Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay on Comparative Symbolology’, developed over several years in his famous Chicago seminar (to which, as Vic was generous enough to indicate in that text, I myself had contributed).

Liminal/Liminoid/Neo-Liminality

Turner was quite frank in acknowledging that ‘Liminal to Liminoid’ was motivated in no small part by criticisms that in *The Ritual Process* (Turner 1969) he had failed to adequately recognize and address differences between the symbolic forms and performances of small-scale, tribal or traditional societies and those of large, stratified, industrial or post-industrial societies, this because of his eagerness to create a ‘comparative symbolology’ distinguished from ‘symbolic anthropology’ precisely by this wider gaze (Turner 1982: 23, 52)^{6,7} ‘In my book *The Ritual Process*, I have spoken of some of these [symbolic genres of industrial society] as ‘liminal’ phenomenon. In view of what I have just said, is liminality an adequate label for this set of symbolic activities and forms?’ (ibid.: 40). His answer was now ‘No, not really’.

The symbols found in *rites of passage* in [tribal] societies, though subject to permutations and transformations of their relationships, are only involved in these *within* relatively stable, cyclical, and repetitive systems. It is to these kinds of systems that the term ‘liminality’ properly belongs. When used of processes, phenomena, and persons in large-scale societies, its use must in the main be metaphorical. That is, the word ‘liminality’, used primarily of a phase in the processual structure of a *rite de passage*, is applied to other aspects of culture – here

in societies of far greater complexity. This brings me to a watershed division in comparative symbology. Failure to distinguish between symbolic systems and genres belonging to cultures [that] have developed before and after the Industrial Revolution can lead to much confusion, both in theoretical treatment and in operational methodology. (ibid.: 30)

The symbolic and performative genres of modern and modernizing societies were now to be understood as 'liminoid' – that is, only 'liminal-like' (Turner 1982: 32). All performances, by definition, involve demarcation and distancing to some degree from quotidian space and time, and therefore all of them, whatever their social context or genre, have something of a passage or 'betwixt and between' character to them. And, of course, all are composed of tissues of symbols with exegetical, positional and operational levels of meaning (ibid.: 21). That was the '-like' part across the sociologically familiar 'Trad-Mod' divide. But with respect to the modern and contemporary genres like 'theatre, poetry, novel, ballet, film, sport, rock music, classical music, art, pop art' (ibid.: 40) – what Turner, in quite an extraordinary countermove of 'lumping' now called the 'leisure entertainment genres' and 'cultural refreshment genres' (ibid.: 22, 38) – recognition of general differences with traditional ritual should be acknowledged. But this move was in fact made in order to license a freely interpretive back and forth in practice; the distinction having being made, any genre could still be discussed *as if* it were ritual. Several of the old structural-functionalist and modernizationist assumptions were imported as well.

Liminoid phenomena 'may be collective (and when they are so, are often directly derived from liminal antecedents)' and may have 'collective effects', but 'are more characteristically individual products. . . . They are not cyclical but continuously generated' (Turner 1982: 54). 'They develop apart from the central economic and political processes, along the margins, in the interfaces and interstices of central and servicing institutions.' Unlike the fundamental conservatism of truly liminal ritual, liminoid phenomena are 'plural, fragmentary, and experimental in character' (ibid.: 54).

[They] tend to be more idiosyncratic, quirky, to be generated by specific name[d] individuals and in particular groups – 'schools', circles, and coteries – they have to compete with one another for general recognition and are thought of at first as ludic offerings placed for sale on a 'free' market – this is at least true of liminoid phenomena in nascent capitalistic and democratic-liberal societies. Their symbols are closer to the personal-psychological than to the 'objective-social' typological pole. (ibid.: 54)⁸

Liminoid phenomena are not 'practiced by and for particular groups, categories, segments, and sectors of large-scale industrial societies of all types'. The liminoid is 'felt to be freer than the liminal, a matter of choice not obliga-

tion. The *liminoid* is more like a commodity – indeed it often *is* a commodity’ (ibid.: 55).

Then, after all this effort at disjunction between the truly liminal and the modern liminoid, there comes a slightly jarring assertion (given the ‘watershed’ imagery). ‘In complex, modern societies both types exist in a sort of cultural pluralism. But the liminal – found in the activities of churches, sects and movements in the initiation rites of clubs, fraternities, masonic orders, and other secret societies, etc. – is no longer *world-wide*’ (Turner 1982: 55, emphasis added). The original 1974 version said ‘society-wide’, and I have no information as to who made this change, obviously suggestive to me. In either case, the central question remains: if ‘the rite de passage form . . . no longer suffices for total societies’ (ibid.: 52) while real liminality persists at least for segments of them, how are we then to conceive of ritual’s relations with the liminoid genres? This is the question I take up in my work and now return to, but after a further note on ‘Liminal to Liminoid’.

As if himself recognizing the sometimes puzzling, jarring, even inconsistent aspects in this paper, Turner declares, perhaps frustrated himself: ‘I am frankly in the exploratory phase just now. I hope to make more precise these crude, almost medieval maps I have been unrolling of the obscure liminal and liminoid regions’ (Turner 1982: 55). I do not think he ever did that. In any case, the concept ‘liminoid’ was never widely taken up in anthropology and was almost completely ignored in the religious studies literature (where Turner was for decades the single most cited author). Moreover, neither Victor nor Edith Turner made terribly much use of it in their subsequent writings, so far as I can recall. ‘Liminal to Liminoid’ had done its job, I think Vic felt, in addressing certain criticisms of *The Ritual Process* while asserting continuity between his past work on ritual and what he now earnestly wished to get on with, the comparative symbology of creative literature and contemporary theatre. And, aside from his work with Edie Turner on pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978), that is mostly what he himself got on with.

In my 1977 paper, I dutifully noted that under Turner’s scheme, three of the four core Olympic genres – athletic game, festival and spectacle – would be classified as ‘liminoid’ (MacAloon 1984: 266). It was the last time I would ever use this term; it had no purchase for me in my project. The distribution of Turner’s general characteristics of the liminoid – voluntarism, playfulness, continuous generation, social disaggregation, commodification, individual creativity, entertainment value, etc. – varies radically from genre to genre, and I focus on these in their specificities and their particular interactions in one complex system. Moreover, my project was and is rather more modest. I am just trying to understand the Olympic Games, not to bring novels, street parties and classical music under a single theoretical regime, much less to promote the promiscuous ‘cultural studies’ that was just then arising.

In such a system as I was modelling, the core genres are intimately implicated in complementary and oppositional relations. For example, as I have mentioned, they can serve as recruitment devices for one another, pulling highly diverse actors and audiences through different genre portals into the system *as a whole*, thereby helping to account for the Olympics' truly global geography and demography of attention. Moreover, that whole is indeed highly calendrical, and its central performances are simultaneously life crisis rites and initiations for the athletes, and calendrical rites of intensification and renewal (and divination) for vast publics. These performances are certainly conducted in the name and on the representational behalf of determined social units, most obviously the nations of the world including the 'host nation', and their dramatic effects can most certainly be 'society-wide'. (In the 'watershed' article I have been commenting on, indeed through most of their published work thereafter, the Turners were curiously silent about 'national(ist) rituals' of either the state or civil society sorts.⁹)

As I have mentioned, participation in the Olympic opening ceremony has become effectively obligatory for national governments, and that obligation thereby extends out into the other genres, including sport and spectacle. To march in the procession of nations, it is required to have a National Olympic Committee, membership in a certain number of International Federations, at least a token complement of Olympic athletes, and indeed a national flag, anthem and uniform. Moreover, nation-states must facilitate some kind and degree of media coverage to assure citizens that they indeed are 'there in the world' and that their elites are thus doing their duty to national dignity. It is difficult for citizens of rich, powerful, or merely long-established nations to grasp the extreme significance of the Olympic opening ceremony to smaller, contested, emergent, newly liberated, or still oppressed 'nationalities'. It hardly matters to them if, as is most often the case, their athletes will be invisible in the ensuing sports contests.

Olympic sport is thus, in crucial respects, different from all other sport because of its embeddedness in the total performance system. Does anyone follow even the great FIFA World Cup, much less any other world championship, for its rituals? Hardly. Such ceremonial as these other 'world' sporting 'mega-events' possess at all is inevitably a token imitation of the Olympic model. Congruently on the ideological level, there is no equivalent to Olympism. What is the ideology of FIFA or the IAAF or FINA? More football, more athletics, more swimming, oh yes, along with the generic values of sport, such as fair play, anti-doping and non-discrimination. To repeat, there is no Olympic game that is not encompassed and punctuated by intensive and elaborate ritual organized around specifically Olympic symbols and ideological meanings processually arrayed, and this in turn marks and initiates the Olympic athletes in special fashion, regardless of com-

petitive record. Victory ceremonies are a further and distinctive initiation (MacAloon 2019). The opening and related sub-ceremonies (credentialing, Olympic Village entry) makes them liminars in ways not available to other athletes. To become an ‘Olympian’ is to be distinctive and distinguished among your sports peers (just ask them), to attain a globally recognized status that is non-reversible (except in the event of a failed drug test), and to be freighted with meanings well beyond sport itself, even ultimate meanings. For example, as I documented in the 1977 [1984] paper, the athletes who died in Munich in 1972 were widely characterized across the world (and still are today) in overtly religious language: they were not just ‘the murdered’ but ‘the sacrificed’.

Thus, it is as a complex performance system that liminality is (or is not) generated in the Olympics, and on an unprecedented demographic scale for regularly scheduled, peacetime events. While distinctions can and should (and will) be made among the different genres and the generation of this ‘neo-liminality’, as I called it (MacAloon 1984: 269), the point is that complex nested and ramified performance systems like the Olympic Games brought something new into modern and globalizing sociocultural worlds, surely signalling the emergence and expression of new kinds of social and cultural formations as well as new relations among liminalities. Far from restricting itself to ever smaller groups and local settings, ritual nationalized, transnationalized and globalized itself by becoming embedded in a complex, multi-genre performance system. The ‘neo’ in this neo-liminality – a term I am not wedded to – refers more to this distinctive mode and mechanism for generation and communication of liminality and less to the experience itself. For me, liminality is liminality, varying most certainly by social scale and experiential degree, and brought about differently (or not) in different performance regimes.

Grasping the architecture and dynamics of the Olympic system likewise helps us, I believe, to understand the failures of other crucial international organizations to develop evocative rituals of their own, most notably the United Nations system (see Note 3).

Spectacle and Liminality

The value of any model lies, of course, in what it *does*. My ensuing research career has been chiefly devoted to creating and interpreting Olympic history and ethnology through the lens of complex performance systems. Beginning with *This Great Symbol* ([1984] 2008), a history of the origins of the modern Olympic Games, I have documented and contextualized the early sources and performative assembly of the system. In subsequent work (e.g.

MacAloon 2006, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2015), I have analysed its elaboration, contestation and consequence in specific ritual settings, Olympiads, geopolitical contexts, and organizational milieus. I have tried above all to face up to the challenge posed to symbolic anthropology by other kinds of social scientists: Exactly whose symbols and performances are these, and to what interests and ends have they been deployed? How have these things differed in different cultural contexts, institutional settings and historical eras?

Three major conditions for my Olympic research altered across four decades. First of all, I was no longer on my own. Beginning in 1984 in Los Angeles (with Wenner-Gren funding, a milestone), I was able to assemble a team of anthropologists (Bruce Kapferer was a member) to study an Olympic Games as it unfolded. This method of team research, led by experts in the Olympic host culture, and joined by scholars of transnational Olympic histories and institutions, continued in Seoul 1988, Barcelona 1992, Lillehammer 1994 (where the entire Anthropology Department at Oslo University devoted two years of sustained effort to the project [Klausen 1999; MacAloon 1999]), Atlanta 1996 and Athens 2004. Meanwhile, outside of Anthropology, sport studies in general and Olympic studies in particular were blossoming, such that today there are over fifty autonomous centres for Olympic studies distributed across the world.

Second, also beginning in the early 1980s, I got backstage in the Olympic system (Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbott 2008), and was enabled to study directly (ethnographically) the elites and decision makers, and many of their geo-economic and political interlocutors: the IOC members and staff, Organizing Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs) and Olympic bid committee leaders, the largest rights-holding television broadcaster, certain commercial sponsors, and the shifting cast of world power players who now inhabit the 'Olympic Family Zones' at an Olympic Games, zones no journalist will ever penetrate (MacAloon 2011).

Third, the Olympic system itself radically changed. From the mid-1980s onwards, the Olympic Games were transformed by three interlocking developments propelled by IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch and his allies, often against strong opposition from older IOC members and other Olympic Movement leaders and publics. The final vestiges of the old amateur rules were dispensed with; the Olympics were now to invite participation by all the best athletes on the planet, regardless of whether they were paid or not. The IOC also developed its own set of worldwide commercial sponsors (the 'TOP' programme) able, in return for huge fees, to use the Olympic rings to market their products and brands anywhere in the world, a development that required a revolution in international trademark law, deep involvement by governments and legal authorities around the world, and a transformation of governance relations among the institutional com-

ponents of the Olympic system (the IOC, NOCs, IFs, OCOGs). In the context of these changes, television broadcasters, especially commercial ones, were willing to pay evermore fantastic sums for the rights, and to produce evermore extravagant coverage to justify their investments. In short, a vast Olympic Sports Industry was born (Barney, Wenn and Martyn 2002; Preuss 2004; Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbott 2008). To manage all of this, the chief organizations were themselves increasingly transformed from small and often impoverished sports bodies generally staffed by part-time volunteers, to large non-profit firms staffed by professional managers frequently recruited from the worlds of international business, consulting and mass media. Not surprisingly, corruption scandals ensued, necessitating further reforms and rationalizations, very often on the business school/corporate model of 'world's best practices' (MacAloon 2011).

Through all this, the production of compelling Olympic rituals, games and festivals continued and demographically expanded. From the standpoint of the core performances, the Olympics had become 'relatively stable, cyclical and repetitive systems', as Turner had characterized the structural backdrop of rites in traditional societies. But the overall context and conditions of the Olympic system were changed by the new developments. As a respected IOC member – a national political hero in his own country – put it to me in 1994, 'Every day more and more people are interested in making Olympic sport, and fewer and fewer in making the Olympic Movement'.¹⁰ This is, of course, the familiar and foundational Weberian question in modern social science: can a charismatic movement survive its economic and managerial rationalization? In the terms of my performance model, what does a more consolidated, powerful and encompassing spectacle frame do to and with the other performance genres in the system?

From the beginning, I have argued that spectacle must be treated as an autonomous performance genre and not merely as a general trope or cultural ethos (MacAloon 1984: 265–75).¹¹ Associating modernity with a 'privileging of the eye' and visual codes of meaning is a long-established feature of European philosophy and social thought. But sustained critiques of society become a spectacle, social life as a big show, did not await the internet and today's 'post-reality' world of 'alternative facts' and 'fake news'. In the 1960s, it made a splash from both the right (e.g. Daniel Boorstin's *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 1961) and the left (e.g. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 1967), and was provided with even more critical impetus with Jean Baudrillard's 1981 text, *Simulacra and Simulations*.

I cannot repeat here my analysis of these diagnostics except to say that much of what they assert is absolutely relevant as background discursive and existential conditions in late capitalist societies such as our own. At the same time, when they permit synecdoche to turn to metaphor and then drift into

hyperbole – social and political life is *all* a big show, hyped fakery, celebrity worship, and alienated extravaganza – they lose their critical purchase. Better, I argue, to take spectacle as a specific performative genre; that is, to try to understand actual spectacles as specific performative events delimited in performative space and time. The Batesonian meta-message of spectacle is something like ‘all subjects inside this frame are grandiloquent (‘really awesome’!), but all merit suspicion’. The genre’s associated characteristics include: privileging of the visual and ‘unforgettable images’; dichotomization and institutionalization of the roles of spectator, scene and actors; voluntary engagement motivated largely by entertainment and sensory stimulation seeking; undifferentiated masses as objects, props, and measures of value; epic themes and grandiose metaphors; diffuse wonder, awe and sentimentality, punctuated by dramatic movements and sensory surprises; higher degrees of commodification and consumption ethics; and above all, a driving ethos of ‘bigger is always better, more is always more’ (MacAloon 1984: 243–50; MacAloon 2006; Berkaak 1999).

At the same time, the meta-message ‘this is spectacle’ carries with it moral, epistemological, even ontological doubts and cautions, scepticism as to what if anything here is really real: ‘Look but don’t be taken in’; ‘enjoy but don’t be overjoyed’; ‘it’s awesome alright, but also grandiose and manufactured’; ‘it’s doubtless trying to sell you something or to distract you from something’; ‘remember that powerful people are backstage pulling the strings’; ‘suckers are born every day, don’t be a sucker’; ‘never forget it’s just a big show . . . (though, Wow! what a great show)’.

In a complex performance system, each component frame and what historically happens to and within it, necessarily has effects on the other component genres nested within or branching off from it. There has never been much doubt about the corrosive effects of spectacle; it can change the other framing meta-messages into the interrogative: Is this ritual? Is this (really) a game? Is this festival? [Figures 11.1 and 11.2] or worse into those distinctive expressions of Western modernity: these are ‘mere symbols’, ‘mere rituals’, ‘mere games’. On the other hand, there can be functional complementarities of which I have been highlighting the recruitment effect. ‘All you have to do is watch’ paradoxically frees people to do more than just watch; that is, to be potentially drawn into the other genres of experience. For example, in cultural formations and social segments where ritual iconoclasm is already widespread and internalized,¹² the spectacle frame may be proudly reassuring in a way that is simultaneously disarming of defences (‘Oh, I’m not into ceremonies, I’m only going for my parents’; ‘It’s all hype and I hate sports, but what a scene’). The more diffuse liminality of the spectacle – despite how young anglophones talk, there is little that is ‘brilliant’ or ‘awesome’ about daily life – can serve as a gateway drug. And it has certainly been argued that

people have become more or less adept at screening out all the hype and noise, like the endless programming promos and commercials on American Olympic television, though this seems to me a less productive argument. In any case, the main point is that taking spectacle as a particular genre in a performance system opens up more substantive and complex questions about 'spectacularization'.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, many Olympic leaders and ideological partisans recognized the dangers of spectacle ('giganticism' in the Olympic lexicon), and struggled, in my language, to keep the spectacle frame from congealing. However, given the subsequent institutional transformations described above, the 'game had clearly changed'. Spectacle with its brand of liminality is now no less avoidable than ritual, sport and festival are with theirs, and the appropriation and corrosion effects of the former on the latter are ever intensifying.

Abstract model-building and deployment, such as I have continued to engage in here, are inevitable in the face of such vast and ultimately unknowable complexity as the sociocultural and historical positionings and interpretations of Olympic phenomenon throughout the entire world. But, frankly, I much prefer (and am probably more proficient at) ethnographic case studies informed by these broader theoretical issues, like relations between spectacle and ritual liminality. For example, *Bearing Light: Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement* (2014) reported my thirty-plus years of fieldwork on (in twin senses) the flame relay, and focused especially on the micro-physics of relations between agents and practices promoting the 'more is better' ethos of the spectacle and defenders of the relay's historical core of ritual intimacies.

Key players in this drama came to include commercial sponsors, especially such 'presenting partners' as Coca-Cola and Samsung, in alliance with IOC and OCOG marketing staff, and enabled by uninformed and unengaged IOC members. Sponsors were among the first 'outsiders' to fully appreciate the symbolic power and demography of attention commanded by the flame relay.¹³ In recent decades, typically five to ten times as many people turn out for an Olympic flame relay as ever see an Olympic sports event in person. This ritual has a markedly populist tone. It is free to the public, and passes through ordinary streets and communities where ordinary people actually live. The official staff look like ordinary people too (on most relays the majority are unpaid volunteers), though they may have cool uniforms and vehicles. There are lots of police, and when the flame stops, local officials may make a speech, but otherwise big wigs seem few and far between. The lucky torchbearers themselves look like, and mostly are, regular people as well. Except when they are not.

Most people think sponsors are in it to sell more soft drinks and smart phones, and that is certainly what they tell their own boards of directors and what may be true in the long run. But commercial elites have more immediate interests. Olympic ritual and sport venues are famously 'clean' of sponsor marks, and in the flame relay this means the area immediately around the torchbearer. As documented in *Bearing Light*, there is a perpetual battle now between sponsor agents trying to break their marks into this space and relay officials trying to get them to respect the rules and stay out. In response, sponsors now mount large and uniformed 'activation teams' on elaborate sponsor vehicles and floats, blaring commercial jingles and handing out branded trinkets, that head out ahead of the flame and its official caravan. There are even sponsor cheerleaders. (Cheerleaders for the Olympic flame! Dancing away even through the crowds of pro-Tibet protesters who turned out in cities around the world during the 2008 Beijing relay.) Today, if you are waiting by the side of the road to see the Olympic flame, you will first have to endure this spectacular hoopla.

However, what Olympic sponsors actually care most about is cultivating and entertaining influential politicians, government officials, clients, new contacts, and favoured employees, and they soon discovered that there is no way that is more deeply appreciated than arranging for a target personage, or his/her family member, to carry the Olympic flame, especially in a personally significant or prestigious locale. Highly confidential sponsorship agreements now contain guaranteed numbers of torchbearer slots. Cash-strapped OCOGs are often tempted to supplement those IOC-approved guarantees, such that in Athens 2004, for example, over 60 per cent of torchbearers on the final Greek leg of the relay were sponsor selected. (Once informed of this, the IOC and subsequent OCOGs have claimed to have taken the problem under control.)¹⁴ OCOGs have their own promotional reasons for preferring longer and longer relays, but sponsors drive them forward, offering more and more money in return for more and more marketing and 'activation' opportunities and more torchbearer slots. A vicious cycle is created: more, more!

I wish to make two points in light of this thumbnail sketch of these struggles over a powerful symbol and ritual. The first is that there is an important if unsurprising paradigm here: in a ritual publicly emphasizing populism and the equal dignity of ordinary and diverse citizens in service of (and for many, subsequent devotion to) an Olympic symbol of harmonic collaboration among individual effort and initiation, national energy, and common humanity, there is also a not-so-hidden attempt at appropriation by elite commercial power. But, as ever, it is crucially important to be reminded that here *money is following meaning* (Sahlins 1976). The production of powerful

ritual liminalities – constituted as well by game and festival in the total performance system – is alone what attracts material interests and encourages the spectacularizers.¹⁵ Understanding of complex, multi-genre performance forms is thus exceptionally helpful in avoiding the interpretive excesses of ‘critical cultural studies’ practitioners who – typically viewing things from a very great distance – reduce everything to one component genre and then generalize to the whole phenomena: society of the spectacle, simulacra, media events, and so on. In this instance at least, without powerful experiences of ritual liminality, none of this occurs.

I can point out similar struggles and hidden dialectics across the Olympic performance system. The opening ceremonies have acquired ‘pre-shows’ where sponsor marks and messaging are allowed to appear in the otherwise ‘clean’ Olympic stadium. The same is true of festival ‘live sites’. The ‘cultural segment’ of opening ceremonies has become such a grandiose spectacular – with each production team competing to outshine the previous one and be declared the best ever (Beijing 2008!) – that the ‘protocol segment’ of official Olympic ritual struggles to stand out. Our fieldwork suggests that at some Games less than 20 per cent of tickets for opening ceremonies – the most coveted and expensive of any Olympic events – are actually made available to the general public. The rest are reserved for the ‘Olympic Family’, state dignitaries and their entourages, other invited VIPs, host nation elites, and whole ‘teams’ of sponsor guests and employees (as minutely stipulated in their contracts). But again, none of them would be there were it not for the symbolic power of ritual liminality, here in the context of Olympic ideology. If the procession of nations and the arrival of the Olympic flame and cauldron lighting carry that much more of a ritual burden these days in countering the spectacle, the latter would not exist without the former, and is in fact recruiting for it while threatening to erode it. This dialectic of performance genres and the actors and publics they carry with them can never be adequately recognized, much less analysed, by treating the whole thing as ritual (with liminal or liminoid characteristics) or as spectacle.

Spectacle also accretes to and threatens to reframe the games as well. In certain Olympic sports venues you will today find loud pop music, light shows, over-the-top announcers, and, yes, dancers and cheerleaders (in Beijing!). Ask and you will be told that the crowds have to be warmed up and kept entertained during breaks in the competition. They have paid a lot for their tickets. And then there is doping, that making of sport into pseudo-sport, as Boorstin would put it. Spectacle is implicated here too.

For their part, since they consolidated in the 1930s, victory ceremonies have been the most conservative and tamper resistant performances, in

no small part because it is very dangerous to mess with national flags and anthems, especially other people's (MacAloon 2019). Still, in the Olympic Winter Games some medal ceremonies have now been separated from the time and space of the competition venue and moved downtown to a central stage in a jammed-packed plaza so that more people can honour the victorious athletes amid light shows, celebrity appearances, pop concerts, eating and drinking, and sponsor 'activations'.

Speaking of pop concerts, organizers and closing ceremonies producers, exhausted of energy and money and unable to rehearse in the athletics stadium, now sometimes just give up and rely on pop stars eager for a *pro bono* Olympic turn. In the London 2012 closing ceremonies, it was sometimes hard to notice when the official ritual actions were even taking place. Some athletes could not get out of there fast enough.

And yet . . .

Ironically, dedicated ethnographic research on the specific powers, practices, agents and agencies of the spectacle as a particular performance genre generates a renewed respect for the continuing power and stability of the ritual and game genres composing the core Olympic system.

Popular adherence to the Olympic flame and its relay has not demonstrably weakened. (Except perhaps for the domestic portion of Beijing 2008, due to host state interference; worldwide protests on the global leg of that relay presented themselves as defences of the ritual itself as well as of the Tibetan people.) The procession of nations in the opening ceremonies is unchanged, and it remains as difficult and disturbing as ever to imagine a world without it. In the combined Winter and Summer Olympics, only 15 per cent of total victory ceremonies have been given the 'downtown' treatment (MacAloon 2019: 7–8). The symbolism of cavorting athletes and the extinction of the Olympic flame in the closing ceremonies have lost nothing of their ritual hope and pathos.

Ritual Holds Its Public Place; Spectacle Is Resisted

There are congruent dramas on the macro-level. Olympic spectacle has lately been massively resisted in the Atlantic world, generating a crisis over the near disappearance of cities willing to host Olympic Games (MacAloon 2016). Since 2011, city after city in Europe and North America has pulled out of an Olympic bid after plebiscites or polling showed the citizenry had turned against the project, regardless of how strongly the political authorities were in support. For the 2022 Winter, 2024 Summer, and 2026 Winter Games, the IOC had scarcely two bids each. In the second case, the IOC

took the unprecedented step of simultaneously awarding 2024 to Paris and 2028 to Los Angeles because it had no confidence either city would stay the course or be joined in the immediate future by other serious contenders for 2028. East Asia, where public critique of spectacularity is less common and where explicitly ritual framing is stronger – in vernacular Korean, the Olympic flame relay is *song-hwa pong-song*, ‘sacred fire reverently dedicated and delivered sacred’ – is finished, after Pyeongchang 2018, Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022 came riding to the rescue.

Anti-Olympic-hosting rhetoric has everywhere focused on the same things, all indexical of spectacle: huge budgets and fears of cost overruns, grandiose development plans, ‘white elephant’ facilities too big and expensive for productive after-use, concealed elite expropriations of popular funds and energies, overpromising of economic and social impacts, and the general hyperbole of Olympic projects and discourses (Berkaak 1999) in nervous and diminished social conditions. Of course, there are additional contextual factors contributing to this crisis. The hold of sport on younger generations seems to be weakening in many cultures. Fewer citizens today, especially in Europe where the IOC is based and European members dominate, associate that organization with leadership of a charismatic social movement rather than of a big industry. But the overall anti-spectacle message is perfectly clear. Bigger is not better; more is not always more. Nowhere in any of this discourse can one find the slightest suggestion that Olympic ritual is the problem, that eliminating the ceremonies could lower costs, shrink venues, or contain crowds. Far from it.

Liminality Is Power

From the standpoint of Olympism as a human rights movement, the ultimate stakes and developing activist agenda were made especially apparent in Beijing 2022, and ritual liminality was a direct and immediate focus. Was that power turned by the publicly silent Olympic authorities, notably Thomas Bach’s IOC, into complicity with genocide, celebrating a ‘country’ (regime) hosting an Olympic Games while over a million of its Turkic Muslim citizens were being held in concentration camps? In the Beijing opening ceremony, the ritual marriage of a female Uyghur and a Han male as Olympic cauldron lighters embodied the absolute audacity of the Xi Jinping regime in expropriating the liminality of egalitarian humanitas of the Olympic flame ritual, not just in defence of, but in fact in determined dramatization, normalization and celebration of its own ethnocidal state policies (MacAloon and August 2022).

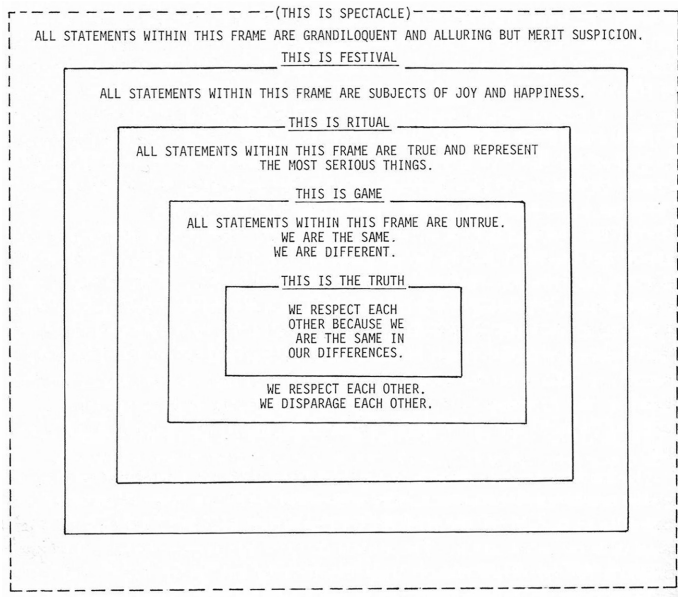


Figure 11.1. The Olympic performance system: orthodox form.
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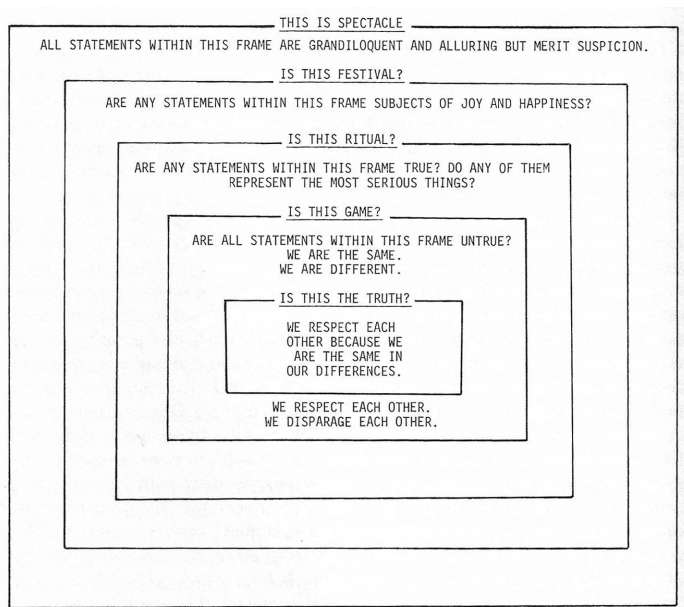


Figure 11.2. The Olympic performance system: a transformation.
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NOTES

1. Regrettably, in that first pass at building the model, I used the terms ‘nested’ and ‘ramified’ more or less interchangeably. In subsequent work I have been more careful to distinguish core genres of performance that are nested in Chinese boxes fashion in the system (as further discussed below) from those that remain branches off that core, for example the Olympic Arts Festival, Olympic Scientific Congresses, Olympic pin-trading, Olympic memorabilia and philatelic shows, Sponsor Villages, a variety of civic and commercial exhibitions and performances, religious evangelizing, political counter-programming, etc. These ramification genres may be very important to their immediate participants and add density to the overall Olympic phenomenon, but many in-person attendees and most television viewers have little notion they even exist, and they are certainly not inevitable, much less required, parts of the ‘Olympic experience’. Moreover, while generally under official IOC or OCOG ‘patronage’, they are typically put on and managed by other authorities, civic, academic or commercial. Also, they regularly come and go.
2. Actually, I was not officially trained in the discipline. No department of Anthropology in those days would accept a PhD student intending a dissertation on the Olympics. My doctoral degree was from Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought, where fortuitously Victor Turner arrived the same year as me.
3. It also requires membership in the United Nations, but fewer countries are represented there today than in the Games. Not incidentally, the UN has never managed to develop evocative much less compelling ceremonial, which is one of the main reasons UNESCO, in league with a group of national sports ministers, plotted in the 1970s to take over the Olympics from the International Olympic Committee.
4. In this article, I identified ‘Olympism’ as an exemplary form of what Turner called ‘ideological communitas’ (1984: 266), but equated it not with denial or erasure of differences but with recognition that we humans are all the same *in our differences* (Figures 11.1–11.2). Thus, this ideological communitas differs from a common Turnerian depiction (Turner 1982: 51). It is not ‘the astructural model of human interconnectness’ but a hyperstructural one that seems no less capable of being ‘ideally

- coterminous with . . . the human species'. This was not a reformulation that particularly pleased my mentor (MacAloon and August 2022).
5. My conception of 'empty forms' is closely related to Roland Robertson's of 'glocalization' (Robertson 2012), but I place a great deal more stress on deracination as an active sociohistorical and political process absolutely necessary for any eventual uptake of these forms in diverse local contexts. (For further discussion of hyper-structure vs. anti-structure, see MacAloon and August 2022.)
 6. My citations to 'Liminal to Liminoid' will be to the 1982 version incorporated into *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play*. References in this version have been cleaned up, and it is better copy-edited as well as more accessible than the original. Differences in the two texts will be noted.
 7. This criticism was widespread (see Lewis 2013) and reached its most pointed moment when Clifford Geertz once remarked that Turnerian ritual process analysis was 'a form for all seasons'. Another major scepticism among anthropologists from that period was whether 'communitas' as Turner characterized it was ever really a 'native experience'. I do not address the issue in this chapter (but see Keeler, this volume), only remarking here that it always struck me as unfortunate that Turner never became more consciously aware of Marx's depiction of 'species-being' in the *1844 Manuscripts* (MacAloon and August 2022).
 8. Turner takes pains to point out that liminoid symbology and performance occur in state socialist societies too (Turner 1982: 53).
 9. In private and in seminar, the Turners were anything but quiet on national and nation-state rituals of every kind. I have no clear answer as to their reticence in publication, though I have had some hunches. As a fellow conscientious objector with Vic (though under different laws and in a different war and with far less dangerous alternative service), and one who frequently compared with Vic and Edie the tactics and symbolism of the anti-nuclear movement, in which they had been energetic participants, with the use of religious ritual symbols by the anti-Vietnam War Catholic left in 1960s United States, I have wondered if a general hostility to state violence or rather some theoretical impediment was most responsible.
 10. German Rieckehoff Sampayo, then the *independentista* Olympic chief of Puerto Rico, where the proponents of US statehood have never been able to win a referendum in the endless and all-important constitutional debates, because Puerto Rico would thereby lose its Olympic team, the only venue where Puerto Rico is represented as a nation among nations (MacAloon 1988; see also Sotomayor 2016).
 11. Not everyone has been fully convinced (Lewis 2013: 55).
 12. In 'Liminal to Liminoid', Turner felt compelled to summarize Weber's Protestant ethic thesis.
 13. Today it is more popularly known as 'the torch relay', despite the fact that rarely is the torch passed hand to hand; it is the flame that is transmitted down the line of thousands of individuals connecting Ancient Olympia with each new Olympic host city. Why this change in speech? Probably the commodification of the torch has played a role – beginning in 1996, torchbearers have often been invited to purchase their torches, and a lively market in torches exists on the internet and at Olympic memorabilia conventions – whereas the flame itself is ritually extinguished at the end of each Games and cannot be commodified.
 14. Among other conflicted practices has been the insertion of giant media platform trucks just in front of the torchbearer in order to serve and promote local broadcast

and print media reporting all along the relay. The practice has also been justified as making possible a wonderful photograph for each torchbearer (often at a price, and through another sponsor's website). But the practice completely disrupts the sight lines of roadside audiences and torchbearer families, who can no longer see the Olympic flame coming or going: the image privileged over the experience.

15. At least some of those same elite broadcast executives, marketers, and operations managers whose actions are most implicated in various Olympic spectacularizations with their potential erosions of ritual liminality don't actually want the latter to happen at all. Some are even shocked at the suggestion. A number of those whom I've gotten to know very well over the years through extended conversations and close observations of them in action – a senior broadcast executive who was for decades the most powerful Olympic figure in my country, the chief architect of contemporary Olympic marketing, two senior executives controlling Olympic accounts at a TOP sponsor – turn out to be Olympic true believers, as passionate adepts of the liminal properties and experiences of the Olympic Games as anyone I've ever met. By comparing my extended interviews with them in *Bearing Light*, readers can judge for themselves who is more devoted to the Olympic flame, Athanassios Kritsinelis, the long-time 'high priest' of flame-lighting at Olympia and the Greek relays and mentor to flame relay organizers around the world, or Steven McCarthy whose company has contracted to manage several relays, who pioneered many 'world's best practices,' and who accepts as necessary and achievable the task of protecting the integrity of the flame while 'growing the relay' and getting commercial sponsors their rightful due. To suggest of persons like this that their positions in a capitalist regime are sufficient to explain their actions and motivations is unacceptable and even cowardly.

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