

Form and content in a media event: The presentation of China in everyday (global) life

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Introduction

Insofar as Goffman's dramaturgically-derived framework still remains an influential and useful way of analysing the complexities of how the self negotiates the complexities of public performance in everyday life, it is not stretching too long a bow to note the relevance of this same dramaturgical metaphor to how nations and countries present themselves on the international stage through the medium of global screen culture (long dominated by television, film and photography but now too fractured by new media to be limited to such formerly discrete categories of production or reception).

Nations—imagined and imaginary communities par excellence - also perform on a stage—the stage of global screen culture. Whereas Anderson's emphasis on literacy and print may have explained well the formation of national identity in nation states, it is the audio-visual image which is just as dominant now in the presentation of national identity in the global context.

Arguably, this process—of the audio-visual presentation of the national 'self' on the global stage, relatively unencumbered by too many 'noises off' (such as political crises or natural disasters), reaches its apotheosis every four years, as successive cities and countries host the Summer Olympics. 2008 is China's year, and the media focus on China during the build-up to the Olympic Games in Beijing, and then during the Games themselves, is certain to be



intense. More will be said and shown, listened to and seen, about China (and Beijing) during these months than has ever been the case before, by a wider range of media than ever before, and to a wider audience.

The purpose of this paper is to use what might be considered a virtual trailer or preview for what will occur in Beijing as a way of focussing on some of the issues involved, both technologically and culturally. The virtual trailer under discussion is the seven minute 'Welcome to Beijing' performance which formed a key part of the Closing Ceremony of the Athens Olympics in 2004.

Global media is now increasingly organised around the production and consumption of international sporting spectacles, spectacles which have developed their own cyclical rhythms and relatively predictable time frames. These media events are not arbitrary, isolated incidents; they structure the production patterns of media producers and the viewing patterns of media consumers with ritualised predictability.

The ritualistic dimension of these global media events is captured by the use of the word 'ceremony' to describe the opening and closing phases of these events. And few ceremonies are the result of greater use of resources than the opening and closing ceremonies for the Summer Olympics.

The Athens 2004 media event

In August 2004, television coverage of the Athens Olympic Games broke all previous records for this global spectacle. According to research carried out for the International Olympic Committee (IOC), over 300 channels broadcast the Games to 220 countries and territories, 35,000 hours of dedicated coverage were provided (2000 hours every day), and an estimated 3.9 million people had access to this coverage, compared to 3.6 billion people



able to watch four years earlier in Sydney. More than half of the global broadcasters showed 4,000 hours of live sports competition. Globally, every individual viewer watched over twelve hours of Olympic Games coverage (IOC website).

Clearly, there are very few media events which have the global reach of the Olympic Games. While the Olympics is made up of many different forms of sporting competition, the whole event is given narrative unity and structure by the two “performances” that occur at each end—the Opening and Closing Ceremonies.

The close relationship between sport and the media is already a much studied topic (see, for example, Rowe 2004, Roche 2004, Miller 1999), and the Olympics is already a scholarly industry in its own right. There has also been sustained scholarly interest in the extent to which television not only transmits a wide range of global events (as in the role of a witness seemingly invisible to the participants in the events themselves, which have a seemingly autonomous life in their own right), but is now inextricably tied up in the construction and meaning of the event itself, to the extent that the event can be considered primarily a media event, at least in terms of audience reception, and the economics involved. The most well-known study of this topic is by Dayan and Katz, in *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, published in 1992.

Dayan and Katz construct their own taxonomy of what makes a media event different from other types of television or radio broadcasting.

Dayan and Katz note that these types of broadcast events which fit this definition are typically presented with reverence and ceremony, they are more likely to celebrate reconciliation than focus on conflict, and are thus heavily weighted towards a hegemonic function—reinforcing preconceptions rather than challenging them (Dayan and Katz



1992, p. 8). They also point out that these media events have much in common with more traditional forms of communication and narrative, noting in passing the bardic function of television analysed by Fiske many years ago:

The process of producing these events and telling their story relates to the arts of television, journalism, and narration. Study of the rhetorical devices for communicating festivity, enlisting participation, and mobilising consensus demands answers to the questions of how television manages to project ritual and ceremony in the two-dimensional space of spectacle. (Dayan and Katz 1992, pp. 17-18)

Applying the Dayan and Katz typology to the 2004 Beijing/China preview segment is not a simple task. When considered in the context of their study, it is clear that there is an unscripted element about media events such as the Opening and Closing ceremonies of spectacles like the Olympic Games. While certain rules must be adhered to, the nature of these media events is more unpredictable and less dictated by a pre-existing 'script' than the actual sporting events themselves, which are organised according to clear-cut rules and procedures.

The Beijing/China preview

As stated above, the preview segment may seem somewhat inconsequential, even trivial, but is, in fact, a highly significant instance of global communication. It is a well-resourced, carefully planned media event, designed for its media effects, not the specific needs or interests of its local audience. The sorts of questions that might be asked of such a media event include the following:

- What is the value of using such a media event for any given purpose?
- What purpose is the segment meant to serve?



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- To what extent should the segment utilise the latest communications and performance technology?
- What images, sounds and experiences to include, and what to leave out?
- What is the segment designed to communicate to audiences around the world?
- What are some important distinctions that can be drawn between different segments of the anticipated global audience?

Focussing on this last question first, it is clear that the content of this segment must balance a complex viewing demographic. On the one hand, the material used must convey an 'accurate' cultural impression of a certain image of China to Chinese viewers who are more or less well aware of the symbolism of their own cultural heritage. On the other hand, the segment must be able to communicate some image of China to viewers from many countries around the world who may have minimal knowledge of China, or who have at best poorly developed stereotypes in their minds—whether of what China was, what it is now, or what it is becoming.

In other words, the viewing positions that must be allowed for in such productions are complex and multi-faceted. What will a Chinese viewer wish to see? What will different groups of foreign viewerships wish to see? To what extent will Chinese viewers be predisposed to imagine themselves in the roles of foreign viewers, and vice versa?

For example, the colour red features prominently (some might say, excessively) throughout the whole segment. All Chinese, and most people with any interest in or knowledge of Chinese culture, would be aware that red is considered a lucky, good colour, a very positive, propitious colour. But could the colour red be used too much in this segment? Is it overdone? Does it risk becoming an overly predictable and even counterproductive cliché? Is it possible to have too much red? From a Chinese point of view? From a Western point of view? From an African point of view?



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When this writer asked a group of communication students in Hong Kong this question, nearly all of them thought the red theme was overdone. When a group of Chinese living in Australia was asked this same question, their most common response was that it was not possible to ever have too much red!

Screen culture

Advances in screen and projection technology have had an important influence on the nature of live events, such as sporting events and other forms of spectacle. New sports arenas now include screens (both large and small) as an integral component of their facilities, and these screens have now become part of the live experience for the spectators at the event itself. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the experience of going to an event is merging with the experience of watching the event at a distance on television. It is the central role of the large screen that is producing these technical and perceptual synergies. It is not surprising that events themselves are shaped with the interest of the media audience primarily in mind; the media audience is more significant, commercially, than any, physically present, audience. An inverted synergy is taking place: the experience of being at the event is increasingly simulating the experience of watching the event on a home entertainment system.

These on-location screens serve a variety of purposes, enabling close-ups of the action, replays, insertion of other information, such as advertising and public announcements, and most importantly for the purposes of this article, their capacity to be used to facilitate a synergistic union of pre-recorded material and real time coverage of the media event itself. The audience at the event becomes an audience on the screen, watching themselves watching themselves; performers likewise become part of their own audience. This continuing development of screen technology may give the impression that nothing has



changed, except the technology, but this is to overlook important perceptual changes that accompany such technical changes.

One such recent development is the emergence of the hybrid performance or spectacle—a combination of a screened event and a non-screen event. Spectators in Athens experienced such a hybrid performance during the Beijing/China preview segment. The first half of the preview had been pre-recorded, and was broadcast on the screens installed in the stadium. Rather than watching live performers in the stadium, the Athens audience watched a pre-recorded video segment. They had been repositioned as quasi-television viewers, as if in their own living rooms.

For viewers watching around the world, however, the effect was subtly different. The screen embedded in the Olympic stadium had merged with the screen in their own environment, and any framing by the time and place of the Athens Olympics had been dissolved. For these few minutes, Athens ceased to exist, and the frame of reference was a series of ‘unmediated’ images of China and Beijing, with an emphasis on stylised sporting events (people hurdling over bicycles), iconic images of China, such as the Great Wall, and images of economic progress and development. The repeated phrase, ‘Welcome to Beijing’, was in English, not in Chinese or Greek. The message was clear about the dominant role of global English, even in the context of a language under little or no threat from English, as so many other languages around the world are.

To sum up the point being made here, this preview segment illustrates that the role of television in the construction of global media events is not one of a simple transmission device designed simply to give people who are not at the event some sense of the real occasion, but is itself now part of the nature of the global event. It is bringing about a shift in the respective roles and perceptions of both the live spectators and the globally dispersed television audience(s).



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Lev Manovich, in *The Language of New Media* (2001), distinguishes between three evolutionary stages in what he calls the genealogy of the screen: the classical screen—the screen of fixed representations, such as Renaissance painting; the dynamic screen—the screen on which an image changing over time can be displayed, such as cinema, television and video; and the digital or interactive screen—the screen on which a number of coexisting windows may be displayed, some of which are classical or dynamic images, and some can be other forms of information. The China segment reminds us that we are living in an era that is dominated by ‘screen culture’. As Manovich puts it:

For now, we clearly live in the society of the screen. Screens are everywhere – the screens of airline agents, data-entry clerks, secretaries, engineers, doctors, and pilots; the screens of ATM machines, supermarket checkouts, automobile dashboards, and, of course, the screens of computers. Rather than disappearing, the screen threatens to take over our offices and homes. Both computer and television monitors are getting bigger and flatter; eventually, they will become wall-sized... Dynamic, real-time, and interactive, a screen is still a screen... We still have not left the era of the screen. (Manovich 2001, p. 114-115)

After a few minutes of the pre-recorded segment, the China preview performance in ‘real time’, and in Athens, began. It consisted of a series of highly stylised cultural vignettes: singing/dancing performances, acrobatic gymnastics, a flag dance, a modified martial arts routine, along with elements of Chinese opera. The transition between pre-recorded event and live event took place as one scene on the stadium screens dissolved (a group of attractive young women singing and dancing a pop version of a traditional Chinese song while performing on the Great Wall itself), and attention switched to these same young women now singing the same song on the stage in the Athens stadium.



Perhaps the most startling aspect of the whole preview—from the point of view of an audience accustomed until recent times to ubiquitous, Chairman Mao-style garb worn by the whole population—was this first live item on stage—a group of young female performers, playing traditional musical instruments, but in a Western pop style, and dressed in a version of a traditional cheongsam clothing, but cut in such a way as to emphasise these women’s physical attractiveness and sexuality. The importance attached to this aspect of the preview can be gauged by its structural centrality, linking as it does the pre-recorded segment on the screen with the live performance in the stadium.

Imagined communities

As Tomlinson has concluded in his own study of the Opening Ceremonies of Olympic Games held between 1980 and 1992, analysis of such events confirms that the Olympic idea is no simple, pure and untainted set of values:

Indeed, from its very inception in the modern historical period, the Olympic ideal has been wracked by tensions and contradictions ... the allegedly pure Olympic ideal has always been moulded in the image of the time and place of the particular Olympiad or Games, rendering all claims to the representation or protection of some set of pure Olympic ideals unjustifiable. That is a legacy of the historical period in which the modern Olympic movement was both conceived and born – the period of the emergence and consolidation of first-world nation-states. (Tomlinson 1996, p. 598)

The mythology of the Olympics is powerful. Most of the time in the modern period, it has been able to harmonise a wide range of contradictions and tensions: between nationalism and internationalism, between individualism and collectivism, between winning at all costs



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and competing for its own sake, between an emphasis on history and continuity on the one hand, and the present and future promise of a better world on the other.

In large part, the Chinese preview in August 2004 conformed to these myths and stereotypes. China was presented as traditional but modern, old but young, female but male, group oriented but also individualist. Every society must manage a gap between an idealised view of itself and a less romantic reality, and China is no different. However, what this segment suggests is that the world has moved on from the time when development of a sense of national identity could take place somehow without the direct involvement of competing nationalisms and identities. The forms of national identity studied by Benedict Anderson (1983) belong to this earlier historical period and, as he points out, depend to a large extent on a common, shared print culture and literacy.

Under present conditions of globalisation, however, it is less possible for this sense of national identity to develop without reference to the active mediating role of perceptions of other nations and cultures. Thus, this sense of identity cannot be just some pre-existing repertoire of 'Chineseness' cleverly used to produce this preview. This preview itself is playing a role in generating, not just reproducing, this identity. That we see ourselves as others see us is truer now than it was in the past, because television productions such as this must communicate with both major audiences—the country itself, and the rest of the world.

It is interesting that the slogan that has been chosen for the Beijing Games is 'One World, One Dream'. Liu Qi, President of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, commented that this slogan:

is an embodiment of the wisdom of hundreds and thousands of people. It is a slogan that conveys the lofty ideal of people in Beijing, as well as in



China, to share the global community and civilisation and to create a bright future hand-in-hand with people from the rest of the world. (IOC website)

‘One World, One Dream’ is a worthy ideal, embodying a universalism that is synonymous with the Olympics. In the post-September 11 era, however, there are many signs that this form of ideal is under considerable strain. Commenting on the positive views of globalisation that preceded September 11, James Carey has written:

However, we can say with some assurance that the heady atmosphere of the 1990s, the vision of a world united in theory and practice... is over, just as assuredly as the guns of 1914 brought to an end an earlier phase of globalization driven by the telegraph, railroad, underwater cable, the steamship and the gold standard. (Carey 2002, pp. 289-290)

Carey goes on to discuss the role of television and other contemporary forms of communication that lead to a flowering of utopian visions in the 1990s, and the drastic shifts that have occurred since then. Whatever happens, the China that is presented in this preview segment will play an extremely important role in the current century.

In the light of the issues and questions raised in this article, the Opening Ceremony for the 2008 Beijing Olympics is a much-anticipated event. It will be significant for both technical and cultural reasons.

Technically, the convergence of broadband, mobile communications and media content is changing the nature of traditional television viewing patterns. IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) will be far more significant in 2008 than was the case in 2004, and the added features of interactivity and personalisation of access will change the nature of the viewing experience for many consumers (Cagenius, T et al. 2006)



Culturally, it will be interesting to observe the cultural performance that the Opening Ceremony in Beijing is going to be. Underneath the surface show, however, there remain hard questions to consider. What image of China to present to the world? How reliant should this image, or must this image, be on cultural stereotypes? If such stereotypes are to be avoided, how to produce an event that communicates to both local and global audiences at the same time?

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