

“Togetherness” in a global, digital age: the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies of Beijing, London and Rio de Janeiro and the configuration of “Olympism” as worldview



Figure 1: the “Christ the Redeemer” statue in Rio de Janeiro looming over the Olympic stadium in anticipation of the Olympic Opening Ceremony (2016 OC).

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“What’s amazing about the Olympics that moves us is the way the Olympics is a sort of festival of our planet coming together... you do have the sense that there are a couple of weeks and everyone’s petty national squabbles kind of go on hold (...) so I wondered if this could manifest togetherness”

Thomas Heatherwick, cauldron designer of the London 2012 Olympics (Mason & Rogan 2016)

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Abstract

This study analyzes the configuration of Olympism, the set of values and principles underpinning the Olympic Games, in the context of Olympic opening and closing ceremonies. I argue that the category of worldview and the field of worldview studies can offer significant contributions to the ongoing discourse on the present and future of religious studies, informed by the crisis of the category of religion. Olympism offers a case in which the interest of religious studies should not be obstructed by the problems that would coalesce with the framing of Olympism as religion. Instead I propose an approach in which Olympism can be understood as worldview and Olympic ceremonies as rituals, devoting particular attention to the applicability of ‘ritual’ in the ceremonial context and the political and socio-cultural functions and effects of the Olympic Games. My focus is on the last three editions of the Olympics up to Tokyo 2021, which means I analyze the ceremonies of Beijing 2008, London 2012 and Rio de Janeiro 2016. The overarching argument of the study relates the popularity and mediated visibility of the ceremonies as mass events of the global, digital age to the politically charged configuration of “togetherness” in an internationalist context, where the IOC (International Olympic Committee) is cooperating with the United Nations to promote an idealist conception of peace and a future utopian world society.

Keywords

Ceremony – Internationalism – IOC – Mediatization – Olympic Games – Olympism – Peace – Pierre de Coubertin – Religion – Ritual – Ritualization – Symbolism – United Nations – Worldview

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Introduction

Every four years the Summer Olympic Games set the stage for the most universally orientated and prestigious sport event of our time. 206 countries are eligible to participate in the 33 sport disciplines of the upcoming Olympics in Tokyo, Japan, which were scheduled for the summer of 2020 but postponed due to Covid-19 (Seterra 2020).

In this study I am interested in the ways in which the Olympics evoke an idealized sense of global “togetherness”, a notion that could be understood as a synonym for uncompromised social, cultural and political inclusivity. From its conception at the end of the nineteenth century, the organizers of the modern Games have gradually implemented particular values, principles and practices, subsumed under the header of “Olympism”, which are intrinsically connected today to the globally orientated standards of the United Nations (UN). The values and principles of Olympism are principally expressed and configured during Olympic opening and closing ceremonies, diligently directed rituals which are broadcast and streamed worldwide with the help of modern media technologies. This study is an effort to understand Olympism as a worldview, a term that is discursively related to the category of religion. At this point a preliminary question may occur to readers and scholars interested in the Olympic Games: why would a researcher in the field of religious studies care about the modern Olympics?

The Immanent Frame

The Games are celebrated by many as the epitome of human excellence, in which practitioners combine the best of body and spirit to win the ultimate prize. As such, contemporary audiences will to a great extent understand Olympic practice to be mainly ‘secular’ or ‘mundane’: perfected embodied performances and psychological resilience are rewarded with material gain. This perspective is so common, especially in western countries, that it usually does not evoke much questioning or alternative reasoning. An underlying aim of this study is to challenge the common sense of the ‘secular’ logic underpinning Olympic practice.

I notice the workings of the ‘secular’ logic almost every time I try to explain why a religious studies scholar like me is interested in the Olympics. A ‘secular’ logic exists because there is a

purported 'other', namely religion, at the other end of the discursive framework. For me this proves, at least to an exemplary extent, the validity of what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (b. 1931) termed "the immanent frame". In the immanent frame humanity is no longer dependent on religious logic to experience and explain all facets of existence (2007, 542). Thus, the immanent frame does not only refer to the contemporary 'status' of western society but also provides a lens through which human beings can think and reason. Taylor himself and other (preceding) scholars have already deconstructed and criticized the idea, generally known as secularization theory, that conditions of secularity have increased in western societies at the cost of religion. Taylor does this by expanding on the religious roots of secular ideology, questioning the often proclaimed rupture between pre-modern (religion) and modern (secularity). Others have provided theoretical and empirical accounts of the various ways in which old and new religiosities flourish in contemporary, presumably 'secular' settings. While I support many of these accounts, I am more interested for the purpose of this study in the second implication of the immanent frame, which is that it is by any means still existent and influential as a *discursive* basis.

The notion of the immanent frame helps to understand why audiences may think that the modern Olympics have nothing to do with religion. In fact, they may watch the competitions and ceremonies without considering religion at all. This common perspective is not limited to audiences on location or at home. Various scholars have endeavored to discursively substantiate a 'secular' (or 'non-religious') view on the Olympics. They mostly do so by emphasizing a strict rupture between the ancient Olympic Games (which were held roughly from the eighth century BCE and the fourth century CE) and the modern Olympics (initiated in 1896) and/or by delineating the modern Olympics and modern sport, which was conceptualized from the course of the nineteenth century onward as a feature of secularization. I will critically discuss both scholarly perspectives, with which I only partly agree. My objective is to demonstrate a) that the modern Olympics are discontinuous, but also *continuous* with the ancient Games, and b) that it should remain possible to discuss modern sport, and especially the Olympics, with reference to the category of religion.

Beyond "religious" versus "secular"

The category of religion is central to the ultimate issue of this study, which is much more ambiguous than the religious-secular paradigm suggests. I expressed the aim to challenge

the 'secular' logic underpinning Olympic practice, but I also called it an "underlying" aim rather than a core objective. This is because I do not want to imply that by challenging 'secular' logic I am merely shifting the binaries of the religious-secular paradigm, where everything related to the Olympics is now explained with reference to the category of religion. In fact, I aim to write a thesis from a religious studies perspective in which I do not perpetuate the religious-secular paradigm. My position stems from the gradual realization that the nature of the modern Games is much more ambiguous and hybrid than the paradigm suggests. In this sense Olympic 'theory' (Olympic values and principles) and Olympic practice cannot be framed as merely 'religious' or 'secular' and have to be unpacked and discussed in a more elusive and less bracketed framework.

The revival of the Olympic Games came with a set of values and principles subsumed under the header of Olympism. Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937), the professed founder of the modern Olympics, used this "philosophy of life" (IOC 2020, 11) to substantially connect the ancient roots of the Games to the values and principles he adhered to in his age. According to de Coubertin, Olympism is a religion (Müller 2000, 580), but this does by no means 'solve' the debate, as de Coubertin's use of religious terminology has been understood in various ways and criticized as well (Gutmann 2004 (1978), Ruprecht Jr., 1998, Jirásek 2015). The problem of 'religion' in the configuration and evaluation of Olympism can be explained partly by means of the temporal factor. As ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes has stated it, "few doubt that ancient sport was fundamentally ritualistic and thoroughly religious" (2014, 213), and the historical roots of the Olympics cannot be discussed without taking into regard that the ancient Games were purposefully devoted to Greek gods. Both terminologies and events and competitions such as the Olympics are not static, however; they transform over time, and the same counts for our understanding of them. Asking which (religious) elements of the ancient Games have remained, which elements have disappeared and which have been transformed would already paint a more complex picture of Olympism in relation to religion.

The crisis of 'religion' and worldview studies

A second and complementary factor to the different understandings of religion in the Olympic context, dependent on the moment in history, is the crisis of 'religion' as an analytical term. Since the ancient Greeks did not know 'religion' as we know it, the term has

already been transposed to its context to begin with, and while it may be (more) evident what we mean by it in reference to antiquity, these implications are easily lost in the proverbial abyss of time. It is not only true that there are substantial differences between the ancient and modern Olympics, the Olympics and Olympism have also changed and developed from their conception in the late nineteenth century unto the present day. Thus, echoing de Coubertin's statement that Olympism is a religion is not an option since there is a) a lack of consensus on de Coubertin's use of the term, b) a lack of consensus on the definition of 'religion', and c) a fierce temporal incongruence between the time when Olympism was coined and the present day. Moreover, and probably most importantly, my point was and is precisely to abandon any scheme in which my main argument can be reduced to the religious-secular paradigm and the comparable, mirror-like binary of ancient and modern.

In my continuous consideration of the crisis of 'religion' as an analytical term I encountered propositions, most notably by André Droogers & Anton van Harskamp (2014) and Ann Taves & Egil Asprem (several publications; chiefly 2018, 2020) to reconfigure religious studies under the header of worldview studies. The term 'worldview' is broader and more encompassing than religion: it may encompass ideologies, philosophies, and religions. In general, it demarcates views-on-life that can be separated from others, and thus have to be cohesive and consistent enough to do so. Despite disadvantages (are they not always inevitable?) that may come with its use, I have become convinced that the notion of worldview and the paradigm of worldview studies offer a suitable and fruitful framework through which religious studies scholars can (re)consider their disciplinary position and terminological orientation. This goes especially for views-on-life where the religious factor is not or no longer evident. Olympism easily qualifies as a worldview, and its configuration cannot be discussed without reference to religion, but any attempt to actually call the Olympism of today a religion raises problems which cannot be overcome. Does this mean that a religious studies scholar should refrain from Olympism (and comparable worldview constructions) as a subject of study? In my view we should pursue exactly these cases which are, like Olympism, 'betwixt and between'. This perspective enables me to discuss religion, culture and (geo)politics in a contemporary context without having to worry that some domains somehow belong to different disciplines. It also allows me not to focus excessively

merely on getting the definition of religion right in a context that actually accentuates rather than remediates the problem.

Ritual and media

In a study on the Olympics it might appear obvious at first to analyse actual sport practices, but the particular angle of Olympism as worldview requires (and facilitates) a slightly different focus, which is two-fold: on the one hand I look at the Olympic Charter, a formal document in which the values and principles of Olympism are inscribed, and on the other hand I analyse Olympic opening and closing ceremonies, in which Olympism is recurrently (re)configured, both in theory and in practice. One of the most significant arguments of this study, beside the discourse on worldview and religion, is that the configuration of Olympism happens in a ritual manner. I will build my argument by explaining how and why I conceive of (Olympic) ceremonies as rituals, and how particular elements and enactments within the ceremonies are ritualized so as to become part of the ritual. By doing this I also deliberately complicate the theoretical framework of the study. Religion and ritual have frequently been considered in tandem as intrinsically related terms. Furthermore, similar problems arise when scholars attempt to come up with a consensus definition. Discussing the 'ritualization' of Olympism as worldview is also an implicit way to question the fact that ritual studies scholars often conduct their work apart from efforts within religious studies, while ritual covers the various domains of human life and practice in a comparable and commensurable manner. Religious studies and ritual studies scholars alike might profit from a more fluent and entangled approach to the respective categories of their study.

For this study I am interested in the three most recent editions of the Games, which brings my questions on the configuration of Olympism as close as possible to the present day. An indispensable consideration in this is the fact that the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies are broadcast worldwide via television and internet. This process of mediation affects what we see and how we see it. With my additional background in the study of film and visual culture I intend to devote extra attention to the way in which Olympism is configured in what I term the global, digital age. This brings me to an overarching question which encompasses the various core elements of this study: How is Olympism socio-politically and culturally configured and ritualized in the global, digital age by means of universally mediatized opening and closing ceremonies?

From the ancient Olympics to contemporary ceremony

This study consists of four chapters. In the first chapter I provide some background on the ancient Games, which is then used to address the complex temporal gap between the ancient and modern Olympics. Special attention is given to scholarly endeavours to discursively abandon the category of religion in the context of ‘modern’ sport and modern western society as a whole. I continue with this discourse when I concentrate on the role of Pierre de Coubertin in the initiation of the modern Olympics and the early configuration of Olympism. De Coubertin’s views are discussed in the light of socio-political and cultural developments of the late nineteenth century. Specifically significant is de Coubertin’s inclination to detach his idealistic conception of Olympism from politics. I explain the paradox in this inclination and connect it to my own understanding of the modern Olympics as a highly political phenomenon. The contemporary partnership between the IOC (International Olympic Committee, the organizing institute) and the UN is a key issue in this context. The central paragraph of the first chapter is an exposé on the use of ‘worldview’ and the paradigm of worldview studies, which then leads to my conception of Olympism as a worldview that is ‘dynamic’ (e.g. in flux). In the second chapter I continue theoretically on my use of ritual/ritualization and mediation/mediatisation. I introduce these terms discursively and explain how I intend to use them in my analysis and in relation to worldview and ceremony. The third chapter is devoted to providing a general outline of the various segments involved in contemporary Olympic opening and closing ceremonies, with special attention for (recurring) ritual elements and enactments involved in the configuration of Olympism. The fourth chapter offers in depth-analyses of selected segments from the three most recent opening ceremonies of the Games; Beijing, China (2008), London, UK (2012) and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2016). I ask to which extent the host countries foregrounded nationalism in a ceremonial context that is supervised by a supranational institute. The overarching hypothesis, which is linked to the question how Olympism is socio-politically and culturally configured and ritualized, is that the display of nationalism by host countries is only relative to the harmonious ideal of “togetherness” and the dominant internationalist orientation of the IOC, which is necessarily shared by the host countries as well. I will already initiate my reflection on this hypothesis in chapter 1 when I discuss the socio-political context in which the modern Olympics are organized.

On methodology, methods and the use of sources

My methodological considerations flow from the study's theoretical embeddedness in the notions of worldview (chapter 1), mediation/mediatization and ritual/ritualization (chapter 2). In the first two chapters I offer extensive reflections on my use of theory and the historical and discursive backgrounds that are necessary to understand the configuration of Olympism from the late nineteenth century unto the present day. In the third chapter I use my theoretical understandings of ritual and ritualization to compartmentalize Olympic opening and closing ceremonies through a ritual lens. I identify various elements and enactments that are part of the ceremony as ritual elements and ritual enactments and discuss their meaning(s) and/or function(s) within their respective ceremonial segments. My focus here is still on *recurring* elements and enactments which are standardized and not configured by the host countries of specific Olympic editions. In the fourth chapter, then, I focus on the host country performance, a crucial segment that varies dependent on the country that organizes the current edition of the Games. The host country performances are first analysed on themselves, per edition, and followed by a set of comparative remarks and central observations. In order to sustain my focus on the configuration of Olympism as worldview, I offer a framework that sheds light on the host countries' negotiation of Olympism and (cultural and/or political) constructions of the nations.

My primary source for the notion of Olympism is the Olympic Charter, a formal document in which the values and principles of Olympism are embedded. In chapter 1 I provide more information on the Charter and explain why I use the *current* version (e.g. the one in place since 17 July 2020) of a document that is slightly adjusted on a yearly basis. My primary source materials for the analyses of ritual elements and practices in opening and closing ceremonies are the complete registrations which are provided by the IOC on the official YouTube-channel "Olympic(s)" (Olympic(s) 2021). I also use the official media guides, available via the Olympic World Library, which are standardly distributed to broadcasters in advance of the opening ceremony (Mioh 2012, 45). I consult the guides in two ways: a) since I offer my own compartmentalization of the opening and closing ceremonies in chapter 3, I read the guides to get acquainted with the way in which the segments are officially presented by the IOC; b) since my focus is on the configuration of Olympism from the creators' perspective rather than on the interpretations and experiences of audiences, I use

information and (director) statements from the guides to contextualize substantiate my (visual) analyses of the ceremonies.

My analytical perspective on the coverage is determined partly by my reflections on mediation/mediatisation and ritual/ritualization in chapter 2, and partly by my own compartmentalization of the ceremonies in chapter 3. My reflection on mediation/mediatization clarifies that I consider the IOC, which is responsible for the worldwide broadcast signal, to be an active agent in the making of the ceremonial registration, especially because I use the registrations that were published online by the IOC itself. I use screenshots as examples from the registrations to show and argue how and why the ways in which certain segments are filmed and performed are just as important as their suggested contents. My theoretical discussion of ritual and ritualization in chapter 2 co-determines the analytical focus in the next two chapters. This focus is on ritual elements (especially symbols) and ritual enactments intrinsically related to the configuration of Olympism as worldview. The compartmentalization, to conclude, helps to decide where in the thesis and in which precise analytical context I will discuss a particular segment. This means that throughout the chapters I will refer actively to the functions of various segments within the ceremony as a whole.

For this study I use registrations which have been publicly available for multiple years now (dependent on the Olympic edition). This means that I did not have to consider any need for informed consent, since my analysis of the registrations does not extend beyond the public domain. Yet I have tried to write about the performers/participants and attendants in a proper and responsible fashion. Ethical clarifications on my precise use of terminology, specifically on ideology, have been incorporated into the text.

Epilogue: preview

This study is written in precarious times: at the moment of writing, at the end of June 2021, the Tokyo Olympics are set to take place in the summer, but Covid-19 crisis conditions have by no means disappeared (see more in the epilogue of this study). In first instance, I wanted to include an analysis of the upcoming Games in this study, or even focus my work on Tokyo. I was curious how Olympism might be used to 'respond' to an exceptional crisis, especially since I had already seen a recent opening ceremony by then (Rio de Janeiro 2016) which

included ample references to and a performance on the notion of climate change. After some consideration I had to decide to limit my discussion of the Tokyo Olympics to an epilogue. In the epilogue I will not only attest the current status of the event but also reflect concisely on the current global socio-political milieu in the light of global crisis. I hope that the study may lead to intricate observations on the present and the future of the Olympic Games.

Chapter 1: Understanding the Olympics and Olympism

The aim of this chapter is to introduce and contextualize Olympism as worldview. A concise introduction to the history of the ancient Olympics is needed to discuss how the reinvented modern Games of the late nineteenth century are both continuous and discontinuous with Olympic antiquity. The ideas of Pierre de Coubertin, the initiator of the modern Olympics, display a fundamental reappropriation of ancient Greece in the light of democratic internationalism. I outline how de Coubertin's conception of Olympism cannot be detached from the further political history of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. The existence of a regularly updated Olympic Charter and the contemporary partnership of the IOC and the UN make it possible to speak of a worldview that is in flux and co-dependent on a broader set of sociopolitical and cultural relations.

Continuity and discontinuity: the ancient and modern Olympics

In 776 BCE a stadion race¹, measured over one length of the stadium, supposedly launched the phenomenon that would expand over time and become known as the Olympic Games (Guttman 2004, 22). The existence of a presumed starting point, a year fixed in linear time, may suggest some proof of origin, an invitation to further uncover bits and pieces of a determined past. Fact is that the date was only established centuries later, and that it is practically impossible to reduce the archeological evidence to a single foundation (Patay-Horváth 2015, 7-8). The many myths surrounding the ancient origins of the Games make it even more difficult to propose historical reality, as the source material is either incomplete or unreliable. Archeologist and historian András Patay-Horváth (b. 1976) explicitly presents his attempt to reconstruct the way in which the ancient Olympics originated as a hypothesis, which is based on the best observations that the available archeological evidence can support (Patay-Horváth 2015, 7).

¹ From ancient Greek: στάδιον. The suggestion that the first Games consisted solely of a single stadion race, is attested in ancient tradition and was taken over by many scholars, but it certainly did not remain uncontested. One eligible question is why visitors would travel so far to attend an event that would barely take a minute. While there may well be reason to suggest that there must have been additional contests, possibly also predating 776 BCE, the question that (in that case) remains to be answered is why this is not covered by ancient textual sources (Patay-Horváth 2015, 12).

It is probable that the geographical region of Olympia, which was far removed from the *poles*² of the Early Iron Age, was in use long before the initiation of the ancient Olympics. The region hosted a sanctuary with an oracle attested to the military counsel of the god Zeus (Patay-Horváth 2015, 29), who is often indicated as the chief god of the eventual Olympics.³ Patay-Horváth sketches a more polytheistic picture,⁴ which he connects to the well-grounded argument that Olympia was probably used as a hunting ground before the first Games were organized.⁵ In this regard, the sanctuary could have served as an initial shrine for the goddess Artemis, who was venerated as the goddess of the hunt (Patay-Horváth 2015, 59, 66). What is important here is that while some uncertainty will always remain when it comes to the hierarchy of the Greek pantheon at Olympia and the chronology of introduction, there is few doubt that the ancient Olympics originated in a context of cultic veneration.⁶ Moreover, when the Olympics were ultimately terminated in the course of the late fourth and early fifth century CE, the alleged main reason was that Christianity, being the state religion under Roman rule since 380 CE, could no longer coincide with the pagan and polytheistic orientation of the Games (Spivey 2004, 203)⁷. When the Games were ultimately revived in the late nineteenth century, the thread of the past had long been

² A polis (plural 'poles') is an ancient Greek city-state, for instance Athens (see also Patay-Horváth, 14, 60).

³ Allen Guttmann writes, for instance, that the "games at Olympia were in homage to Zeus" (Guttmann 2004, 21).

⁴ He points out, for instance, that the first Doric (e.g. a significant ancient Greek architectural style) temple was dedicated not to Zeus but to Hera, and why it is by no means evident that the sanctuary at Olympia was solely devoted to the cult of Zeus (Patay-Horváth 2015, 13-14).

⁵ Patay-Horváth highlights two ritual features that can be considered exclusive to the ancient Olympics: the crown of the wild olive tree, which was used to award the winners, and the fact that the fact that married women were excluded from competition (Patay-Horváth 2015, 63-64). It is not possible to convincingly connect the crown of the wild olive tree one on one to the cult of Zeus, whereas trees were indeed of (symbolic) significance within the cult of Artemis. The exclusion of married women, then, could be understood both in the light of Greek mythology (women in the presence of Artemis were typically required to keep their virginity) and in relation to the practices of ancient hunters-gatherers, where the separation of adult women was well attested (2015, 63-66). There is a great possibility that the gradual transition from hunting ground to athletic center had a practical (main) reason, and was related to the intensification of hunting and the loss of wild animals in the region (2015, 72).

⁶ At this point I intend to use 'cultic' in the most neutral sense I deem possible, referring to practices of worship, ritual and/or ceremony shared by a particular community (see, for instance, the different meanings enlisted in The Free Dictionary by Farlex). For a terminological discussion on the use(s) of 'cult' by archaeologists and scholars of religion, see (Christensen 2009, 13-27).

⁷ The basis for the termination of the Games lay in the edicts established by emperor Constantine the Great (d. 337 CE) in the early fourth century, but it was not until the reign of Theodosius I (379-395 CE) that the Games were formally prohibited. Archeological fieldwork suggests that local priests were reluctant to comply immediately, which means that festivities were probably carried on in some form until the interdict was renewed under Theodosius II (480-450 CE) (Spivey 2004, 203).

broken and the question would be to which extent Olympic practice and its cultic roots could be anyhow considered similar to contemporary sport practices and cultural ethics.

This brings me to a paradox that is significant to the outline and purpose of this study: the ancient and modern Olympics are both continuous and discontinuous with each other. In most sources which discuss the relation between the ancient and modern Olympics, scholars confidently contend that the modern Olympics fundamentally differ from the ancient contests. Nigel Spivey states that “Olympia past is another country”, that “‘sport’ was done differently there” and that “our own Olympic tradition began in 1896” (Spivey 2004, xix).⁸ In his now standard work *From Ritual to Record* (1978), Allen Guttmann (b.1932) emphasizes what he calls “a fundamental contrast” between ancient and modern sports, explained predominantly by modern sport’s purported detachment from “the sacred” (Guttmann 2004, 26). In this regard “the sacred” refers to the cultic practices and the pantheon attached to ancient sport, and particularly to the Olympics. While I do not disagree with these scholars that there are fundamental differences between ancient and modern sport, I also notice that they appear to use their general argument to solidify the breach between the ancient Olympics as ‘religious’ games and the modern Olympics as a key feature of modernization (of western society), bureaucratization (of sport) and ‘ultimately’ secularization. In my opinion, this shift is too rigorous, and informed at least partly by the idea that religion is ‘in decline’ and irreconcilable with the building blocks of the modern world.⁹ Spivey calls his own book a journey to the “strangeness” of Olympia, a place where “strange deities were worshipped in ways that would surely disgust us” (Spivey 2004, xv, xix). Guttmann argues that “modern sports are activities partly pursued for their own sake, partly for other ends which are equally secular” and that “the attachment to the realm of the transcendent has been severed” (Guttmann 2004, 26). The modern Olympics, however, were not (re)constructed on the basis of such a threshold. Be it artificially or not, the

⁸ It is meaningful on itself that Spivey writes ‘our own’. Not only does this mean that he identifies with the modern Games but not with the ancient, it might also make readers wonder about the implicated self-evidence of “our own”. Who are the ‘we’ encrypted here, all human beings? Is this actually self-evident in the sense that all people would identify with this modern tradition, feeling equally disconnected from “Olympia past” as “another country”?

⁹ Secularization theory has been critically discussed and deconstructed by many scholars, notably, among others, by José Casanova (various publications, see for a significant recent work Casanova 2019), Charles Taylor (2007) and Roberto Cipiriani (2017). For a convincing counter-narrative, which builds and expands on modes of ‘re-enchantment’, see Christopher Partridge (two volumes, volume I published in 2004).

heritage of the ancient Olympics was revitalized and recontextualized by the modern Olympic Movement. From the start this also included references, emitted especially by the professed founder of the modern Games, Pierre de Coubertin, to the proclaimed religious roots of the Games and the religious nature of particular Olympic ideals. Roughly considered, scholars can respond in two manners: They can accommodate the interplay between similarity (or referentiality) and difference in their work, or they can focus on the notion of difference and compile arguments to further separate the modern Olympic movement from its proclaimed ancient roots. In this study I intend to do the first.

To further clarify why these two approaches can conflict so firmly, and why I find it important to stress both discontinuity *and* continuity, I want to briefly discuss an article that is grounded in the conviction that religion is fundamentally external to sport (Jirásek 2015, 291)¹⁰. In “Religion, Spirituality and Sport: From *Religio Athletae* Toward *Spiritus Athletae*”, Ivo Jirásek aims to correct the idea that Pierre de Coubertin’s notion of the ‘*religio athletae*’¹¹ (a combination of the Latin ‘*religio*’ and ‘*athleta*’, used to denote “an individual involved in human movement activities, (...) particularly sport”; Jirásek 2015, 292) and some of his corresponding core thoughts on Olympism are religiously orientated.¹² He then mobilizes this case study to argue for a stronger discernment of ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, whereby spirituality is considered intrinsic to the realm of sport and religion is not.¹³ My main problem with Jirásek’s approach is that his argumentation is to a large extent constructed on the basis of the idea that we can attribute moral and social value to the notion of spirituality, and that this is at least partly why we should pursue a more explicit discernment between religion (to which we cannot attribute this value, according to Jirásek) and spirituality in the realm of sport. Apart from the ideas that religion and spirituality can

¹⁰ In his introduction, Jirásek underlines that sport ‘has no religious inner meaning’, but I found that formulation too confusing for the main text, as it seems to conflate sport as phenomenon and human experience. Further in the text it becomes clearer that Jirásek refers to the idea of qualities (in this regard a religious quality) considered inherent to a particular phenomenon. He argues that religion can only become a factor in sport by means of individual sportsmen’s behavior, e.g. when sportsmen consider themselves religious (Jirásek 2015, 291, 295).

¹¹ For Jirásek’s discussion of the term see (Jirásek 292-293).

¹² Jirásek defines religion via Bretislav Horyna [1994] as “the tie of the human being with God” (Jirásek 2015, 292-294).

¹³ I appreciate Jirásek’s enterprise to discern ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ more precisely, but I do not agree with the outcome and the way in which he mobilizes the difference in the case of Olympism to state that this philosophy is ‘spiritual but not religious’. The definition of spirituality that Jirásek uses is “people’s search for meaning, in relation to the big existential questions” (via H. Stifoss-Hansen [1999]; Jirásek 2015, 295). This definition will actually prove itself close to my use of the term ‘worldview’.

be (a) terminologically separated so distinctly and (b) analytically discerned in terms of 'meaningfulness', with which I firmly disagree in both cases, I also see this argument as another example of a text in which the modern Olympics, as a feature of a *modern* world, are separated from religion because religion is considered to be an absent factor in modern sport (Jirásek 2015, 291). This argument is by no means evident though, not in the least because the modern Olympics are a rare (or maybe even sole?) example of a sport event that existed in both worlds.

Studying the philosophy of the modern Olympics on its own terms means that it does not matter in the first place whether de Coubertin's thoughts on Olympism were of a 'religious' or 'spiritual' nature, but rather where these ideas came from and to which convictions and values they attest. It means that I have to take de Coubertin's idealistic conception of the 'religio athletae' and his romantic references to antiquity seriously, while also carrying the responsibility to consider their utopian political character. It does not principally matter what I think of these ideas and whether I consider them meaningful to characterize and understand modern sport; instead the objective is to acknowledge the 'cultic venerations' of the Olympic past and to then see how current Olympic practice, converging with (or diverging from) the ideological building blocks of Olympism, canalizes a particular perspective on the world that should not automatically escape the attention of scholars of religion.

The ideological configuration of Olympism in the context of the initiation of the modern Olympics

The first edition of the modern Olympic Games took place in Athens, Greece, from 6 to 15 April 1896. At least three questions have to be answered here: Why then? Which factors contributed to the enduring revival of the Games? And which people and/or institutions made it happen?

In medieval and premodern times, the renaissance and the wake of humanism inspired scholars from several European countries to (re)produce and preserve knowledge on ancient athletics and the Olympics (Weiler 2004, 428). Before that time, the Olympics had long been ignored and forgotten, partly also because many of the actual ancient structures had been destroyed and buried by natural disasters since late antiquity (Weiler 2004, 428). It must

have been known to some local inhabitants from at least the course of the eighteenth century that actual archeological structures could be extracted from below the surface of the Olympia region, and gradually the site sparked larger European (and I would state [quasi]-colonial) explorative interest. Whereas a Benedictine monk and an English don (1766) had visited Olympia without much success (Weiler 2004, 428), two Germans ultimately reached a breakthrough. Initial work done by art theorist J.J. Winckelmann (1717-1768) was continued by classicist Ernst Curtius (1814-1896), who led a decisive expedition between 1875 and 1881, contemporary to Heinrich Schliemann's leading archeological efforts at the presumed site of ancient Troy (Spivey 2004, 239, 242-243).

The mid-European journeys to Olympia, always conducted by high class and scholarly trained citizens with the means and motives to do so, were definitely inspired by the intellectual milieu of the time. Some of the ancient Greek texts of the most renowned poets and philosophers (Homer, Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle, to name a few), which were studied with renewed interest by late medieval and (pre-)modern (neo-)classicists (mainly in Britain and France), romanticists (mainly in Germany) and European humanists, dealt not only with ancient athletics and with the Hellenist ideal of a union of mind, body and spirit (Chatziefstathiou & Henry 2007, 26), but also with a broader competitive element (*agon*¹⁴) inherent to Greek society.¹⁵ This focus on ancient Greece and its sources was gradually accommodated by educational reforms as well (Weiler 2004, 430, 433; Chatziefstathiou & Henry 2007, 28-29). German authors such as the aforementioned Curtius, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and J. Burckhardt (1818-1897) appreciated the qualities of Greek sport and physical education to such an extent that they could serve as a model for contemporary (and, indeed, modern Olympic) practice (Weiler 2004, 429-431). Eugen Weber remarks that the rise of organized sport in France, a process in which de Coubertin would play an important role, coalesced philosophically with Nietzsche's formulation of "the aspiration to go beyond laws and standards, to enlist effort and will to create superior humans, to become supremely human" (Weber 1970, 15).¹⁶ On a more institutional level, to

¹⁴ See the English word 'agony'.

¹⁵ Chatziefstathiou & Henry (2007) discuss the Eurocentric understanding of 'modernity' (a term associated to values and developments of and in the west) that is at the heart of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century humanism (and from there also internationalism or cosmopolitanism).

¹⁶ Yet de Coubertin did not actively use his writings (see Weber 1970, 15, no. 16) and Weiler remarks that the baron was skeptical of Nietzsche's concept of the 'superman' and deemed his philosophy "'as un-Greek as possible'" (Weiler 2004, 432).

conclude, an increasing number of international organizations was founded approaching the end of the nineteenth century, all sharing exalted humanistic and universal values.¹⁷ The IOC (International Olympic Committee), (co)-founded by the French baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) before the first modern Olympics (1896), would be one of them.

Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) was born from aristocratic lineage, which enabled him to culturally develop himself and enroll in prestigious education from an early age.¹⁸ His parents sent him to a school run by Jesuits, where he was instilled with an interest in Greek antiquity.¹⁹ Although his parents initially endorsed him to study law, de Coubertin was more fascinated by moral and social transformations in (French) society, and he started reflecting more and more on the relation between the individual and the group. While he did not consider the notion of ‘moral elite’ a problem, as long as it would contribute to ‘the social and moral progression of the nation’ (MacAloon 1981, 72; Weber 1970, 6), he did grow skeptical of the hereditary factors of which he himself was a product. Therefore, on the one hand, de Coubertin developed a view on individual and social progress in which every individual should take his own responsibility to evolve as a human being, unconstrained by didacticism or enforced discipline and supported by transnational republican and democratic values. On the other hand, his idealist belief in equality was certainly clouded by the aristocratic privilege that also co-determined his values and virtues.²⁰

In 1883 de Coubertin departed for England, predominantly to make inquiries into the educational system of the country, which was inspired by the political condition of self-government (MacAloon 1981, 44, 55). In the course of the nineteenth century, multiple literary Frenchmen had published influential works on the social, political, educational and

¹⁷ Dikaia Chatziefstathiou calls the organizations products of nineteenth century-liberalism, which emphasized “values of equality, fairness, justice, respect for persons, rationality, international understanding, peace, autonomy and excellence” (Chatziefstathiou 2007, 56).

¹⁸ My brief biographical introduction on de Coubertin is merely based on the first chapters of John MacAloon’s *This Great Symbol* (MacAloon 1981, 1-112) and the biographical introduction of *Olympism: Selected Writings* by professor Georges Rioux (Müller 2000, 23-48).

¹⁹ Philhellenism and, in addition, a belief in “constitutional cosmopolitanism” were (also) identified as features of Jesuit education by sociologist Emile Durkheim (MacAloon 1981, 37). MacAloon states, however, that de Coubertin appears not to have known the works of Durkheim (MacAloon 1981, 47).

²⁰ In his idealist belief de Coubertin was severely influenced by the philosophy of Frédéric Le Play (1806-1882), who wrote on the reconciliation of ‘worker and employer’ and the societal emancipation and integration of the working class (Weber 1970, 5). Le Play is also discussed at length by (MacAloon 1981, 83-93). Although he also relativizes it, Weber writes that de Coubertin’s activities were only enabled by a private fortune which took decades of spending to exhaust, and by social relations that facilitated his extraordinary initiatives (Weber 1970, 18).

cultural values of England in their time, and de Coubertin had definitely acquainted himself with some of their ideas. One key example is Hippolyte Taine's *Notes sur l'Angleterre*, published in 1871. According to MacAloon, de Coubertin almost certainly read the work before he departed for England, and if he did not, he at least knew about it when his own articles on England started to appear in 1886 (MacAloon 1981, 45). Taine's work testified of aristocratic values and a nobility that he attested to an enlightened English conception of citizenship, which was precisely what de Coubertin gradually sought to attain in the French context. Moreover, Taine had highlighted athletics and games as the 'physical side' of English education (Weber 1970, 5). Having participated in several sport disciplines (fencing, horseback riding, rowing, boxing) since his teen years (Müller 2000, 24), de Coubertin had already developed an active interest in sport before he started to connect it more substantially to education. In this regard, the English set an example because they related sport to ethical values (e.g. honor, the experience of complete liberty by unforced participation) and virtues (courage, self-reliance, the power to dare and take initiative) they deemed crucial. From there de Coubertin could conceive of sport as "the inner engine of the system", because it fulfilled at once a physical, moral and social role (MacAloon 1981, 80-81).²¹ When he returned to France, he set out to reform school sports based on the English model, focusing on the gradual emancipation and self-revelation of youth (Weber 1970, 6) and influenced particularly by the athletic education philosophy of Thomas Arnold (1795-1842)²².

Fact is that we do not know exactly when the Olympics entered the picture. De Coubertin only wrote about it in retrospect, and a precise 'aha-erlebnis', if there ever was one, has not been attested.²³ In the early 1890s he stated that the idea had been in his head for around

²¹ An influential political factor and acclaimed reason for de Coubertin's focus on sport, on its turn, is the idea that the baron shared the conviction that the French had lost the Franco-Prussian War due to a lack of physical readiness (Torres 2005, 345). In 1880, de Coubertin had entered the military academy of Saint-Cyr for a few months (discussed in MacAloon 1981, 39-41) and his writings express explicit complaints with regard to the French military and political situation (see the quote and discussion in Weiler 2004, 435-436).

²² MacAloon goes so far as to use the term 'proselytization' (considered briefly, a synonym of 'conversion'), which is striking when discussed in the context of presumed 'religious' content in de Coubertin's ideas (MacAloon 1981, 80). Arnold had been the master of "Rugby School" (1828-1841), a British independent boarding school, and imposed significant reforms on the education system of his time. An important book that inspired de Coubertin, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (Thom Hughes, 1857), took place at Rugby School in the 1830s (Spivey 2004, 244). Arnold is discussed at length in MacAloon, mainly in chapter three (MacAloon 1981, 43-82).

²³ C.R. Torres uses a primary Argentine source report from 1889 to conclude that in 1889, de Coubertin's primary focus was (still) on improving France's poor physical training system (Torres 2005, 360).

ten years, but he did not (successfully) propose a formal plan for the concrete event before the Paris International Athletic Congress of June 1894.²⁴ Yet, in any case, de Coubertin's idea did not originate in a vacuum. I already described how the intellectual milieu of the time had renewed the interest in Greek antiquity and steered archeological efforts, but de Coubertin's efforts also echoed multiple former attempts to restore the Olympics in new forms.²⁵ In the course of the nineteenth century, the Greek had suggested and staged multiple national revivals that might not have expanded to the rest of Europe, but still set out to catch the same Olympic spirit that would ultimately stretch beyond borders²⁶. Evangelis Zappas, an Albanian born businessman, was (financially) responsible for the most successful Greek revival happening at the time (MacAloon 1981, 151-152)²⁷. Moreover, the British surgeon William Penny Brookes (1809-1895) had started to organize annual athletic competitions, the so-called "Wenlock Olympian Games", as early as 1849 and had explicitly related them to the ancient Olympic model. De Coubertin was invited to visit Much Wenlock in 1889, which he did a year later, publishing enthusiastically on his findings in an article entitled "Les Jeux Olympiques à Much Wenlock" (1890).²⁸ In his 1996 book *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Survival*, historian David Young explicitly states that de Coubertin got his Olympic idea from Brookes (Young 1996, 70).²⁹

²⁴ MacAloon describes how an earlier attempt to stir the interests of his colleagues in 1893 had failed (see MacAloon 1981, 161-164). De Coubertin had also promoted his idea during a journey to the US, which he had started in the fall of 1893 (MacAloon 1981, 164-165).

²⁵ J.K. Rühl has identified 13 Olympic Games that fell in the time period before the Games initiated by de Coubertin. See the table in (Weiler 2004, 429). The instauration of the Olympics on a national(ist) scale in France was even proposed by a contemporary of de Coubertin, Paschal Grousset (1844-1909) in 1888 (Weber 1970, 12).

²⁶ The earliest initiatives (late eighteenth – early nineteenth century) are discussed in (Weiler 2004, 428-429).

²⁷ The first Olympic Games in Athens organized by Zappas took place in 1859, followed by the Olympiads II, III and IV (1870, 1875, 1889). Demetrios Vikelas, the first president of the IOC in 1894, wrote a letter to de Coubertin a few months after the first modern Olympics (1896) in which he adverted the baron to the evident *Olympic* character of Zappas' games (discussed in Weiler 2004, 439). Moreover, the international review *Cosmopolis* (1896) included both a key article by de Coubertin ("Préface des Jeux Olympiques") and an article recounting the earlier revival initiated by Zappas (MacAloon 1981, 151).

²⁸ De Coubertin may have been informed about Zappas' initiative by Brookes as well, and more fully than he publicly acknowledged (MacAloon 1981, 150-151).

²⁹ Initially de Coubertin even reflected on the Olympic Games in a negative manner, but as he (also) did so in relation to the efforts of Brookes, he was in any case consciously discussing the phenomenon (Torres 2005, 357). Young was particularly concerned with alleged references by de Coubertin to Brookes dating back to 1889, mentioned by Sam Mullins in a 1986 publication (see Torres 2005, 345). The original text initially proved itself hard to retrace (see Young 1998, 37; also MacAloon 1981, 316, no. 76), and yet a copy was available and its contents are backed another time by Torres' Argentine source (Torres 361, no. 4).

Despite these significant predecessors and inspirational encounters, however, the influence of Brookes and others was not publicly memorized and faded, while the legacy of de Coubertin remained. “Though the idea was not his alone and did not originate with him”, John MacAloon writes, “(...) no modern institution of comparable significance owes so much to a single man” (MacAloon 1981, 3). In the contemporary opening and closing ceremonies that I will analyze in this study, de Coubertin is the only historical authority that is directly mentioned and honored as the man responsible for the Games of today. The preamble of the yet to be discussed Olympic Charter opens with the statement that “Modern Olympism was conceived by Pierre de Coubertin” (IOC 2020, 10). In this sense, de Coubertin and his conception of Olympism are crucial and central to my work, not because the focus on his contribution is necessarily just and according to fact, but because his legacy is presented as such in the present.³⁰ Moreover, as Ingemar Weiler has stated, de Coubertin’s “chief contribution should primarily be seen in the fact that he emphasized certain pedagogical and philosophical views, created the ideology of Olympism, the internationalism of the Olympics (...) and helped to organize the so-called Olympic movement” (Weiler 2004, 435).

Thus the best way to introduce Olympism is to concisely outline some of de Coubertin’s most explicit exclamations on its characteristics. I have attempted to deduce a complete overview of the most significant characteristics from Pierre de Coubertin’s *Olympism: Selected Writings* (2000), a standard work which I will introduce and contextualize separately later in this chapter. Olympism, in de Coubertin’s view, is:

- A) Democratic: “Anything that is not democratic is no longer viable today”(Müller 2000, 297).
- B) International: “It (e.g. the IOC) seeks to spread athleticism throughout the world without cataloguing races; it does not limit the recruitment of its members to Europe and America” (Müller 2000, 695). The fact that de Coubertin takes Europe and

³⁰ In his publication *Droom of Daad* (2020), written for a more general intellectual public, Dutch classic historian Fik Meijer (b. 1942) firmly criticizes de Coubertin’s self-recognizing attitude. According to him, the baron should have given his precursors and inspirations (such as William Penny Brookes and Evangelis Zappas) more credit, and he also suggests that de Coubertin might have deliberately concealed the influence of (predominantly) Brookes by referring to the enterprise of reviving the Games as a more or less spontaneous revelation (Meijer 2020, 59-60). It is worth reading *This Great Symbol* at length, since all historical players mentioned by Meijer are discussed there as well, and because MacAloon is less inclined to relate the question of inspiration and influence to a personal disdain of de Coubertin’s attitude.

America as a basis indicates that his internationalist perspective is configured in relation to the west, or informed by a western interpretation of 'international'.³¹

- C) Peaceful: "Now sport can do something more for us; if we know how to let it, it will be able tomorrow to safeguard the essential good without which no durable reconstruction will be possible – social peace" (Müller 2000, 269). De Coubertin believed that the opportunity for international peace had increased due to fundamental developments in technology (predominantly communication services) and science ("the passionate research in science, congresses and exhibitions have done more for peace than any treaty or diplomatic convention") (Müller 2000, 297). Thus, for him, internationalism and peace were intrinsically connected. "These peaceful, courteous contests (e.g. the Olympics) constitute the best form of internationalism" (Müller 2000, 301).
- D) Equal: "Olympism is a destroyer of dividing walls" (Müller 2000, 548). De Coubertin's thoughts on equality stemmed to a large extent from his assessment of the political situation in his own country.³² While he did not completely defy social stratification and class structure per se (principles which were certainly present and determining in France in the second half of the nineteenth century), he condemned the social extremes of the system. According to him, the existing social conditions were abused once individuals were "locked in into social positions through artificial means" (MacAloon 1981, 72). This statement is informed by de Coubertin's own distinction between rigorous social 'dividing walls' (which he rejected), threatening the promise of self-development, and the existence of hierarchy on a moral and educational level (which he deemed righteous, in the sense that he considered inequalities in morality, character and achievement natural) (MacAloon 1981, 72; Weber 1970, 6). In this sense his intellectual position and attitude generate a paradox with regard to the uncompromised type of equality that is and has been idealized in the Olympic context. Ultimately the objective of *absolute* equality is nearly always untenable,

³¹ Chatziefstathiou & Henry expand on this (2007, 30-35, 39-41) and also briefly discuss the biological racism inherent in de Coubertin's discussion of "eastern people" (2007, 34-35, 40).

³² MacAloon writes that in the 1880s, France was undergoing a societal transformation reminiscent of the one England has gone through about fifty years earlier. Features included "the consolidation of an industrial order", "the triumph of bourgeois national culture", "the expansion of democratic political rights" and "the making of the working class" (1981, 72).

even when it is governed by good intentions. This is also why I mostly use ideal and idealized to characterize (parts of) the Olympic project.

- E) Furnished on the notion of amateurism: “An amateur is the athlete who follows sport for sports sake, and not for any pecuniary inducement” (Müller 2000, 641). This idea was challenged more and more throughout the years, not only due to the increasing professionalization of modern sport, but also because the principle of amateurism fiercely privileges elitist sportsmen who do not strictly need the revenue.³³
- F) Proposing an ideal-type of man: “the athletes (...) will have to maintain quite a delicate balance between the exuberant zeal of the mind and the daring suppleness of the body” (Müller 2000, 212). The phrase “mens fervida in corpore lacertoso” (a fervent spirit in a well-trained body), coined by the Latinist Mr. Merlet, fit this idea neatly (Müller 212, 554, 592). It must be emphasized here that de Coubertin perpetuated strict gender distinctions in his thinking until his late years. In a radio speech in 1935 he maintained that “the true Olympic hero (...) is the individual adult male” (quoted in Weiler 2004, 435). Women were not completely denied participation in sports but their efforts were deemed of a ‘secondary level’, which also meant that (according to de Coubertin) they should not join the main Olympic competitions, at most to crown the victors (Weiler 2004, 434-435)³⁴.
- G) Hellenic: “Hellenism again! We used to believe that Hellenism was a thing of the past, a dead notion, impossible to revive and inapplicable to current conditions. This is wrong. Hellenism is part of the future. Its philosophy of life is suitable for and adaptable to modern existence. That is why sport is such an essential element in modern progress” (De Coubertin quoted in Chatziefstathiou & Henry 2007, 30). The dominant idea is that Hellenism was a determining factor a) because of the (pre-)modern renaissance of classicism and b) because the Games originated in Greece. Chatziefstathiou & Henry (2007) highlight a specific quote by de Coubertin, however, which indicates that Hellenist ideals were also deliberately superimposed on Anglo-Saxon values (which de Coubertin had gained through his experiences in England) in order to ensure that the revival would actually endure (2007, 26).

³³ De Coubertin’s texts on amateurism are collected under one header in (Müller 2000, 635-658).

³⁴ De Coubertin once proposed ‘a little female Olympiad alongside the great male Olympiads’ (Weiler 2004, 434).

According to de Coubertin, a crucial difference between the ancient and modern Games was that the ancient Games “had an exclusively Hellenic character”, whereas the main orientation of the modern Games was (and would remain) internationalist (2007, 35).

Olympism as worldview: negotiating religious studies and worldview studies

How to approach Olympism terminologically? One option would be to simply accommodate what de Coubertin thought roughly two years before he died: “Olympism is not a system but a spiritual and moral attitude” (Müller 2000, 48). My consideration here is the long afterlife of the Olympic movement, continuing unto the present day, which means that a discussion on the nature of Olympism should always negotiate original propositions and Olympic practice. Is this indeed, as the yet to be discussed contemporary Olympic Charter (IOC 2020, 11) puts it, a “philosophy of life”, comparable, for instance, with humanism (Chatziefstathiou 2007, 56-57) or can (and maybe should) we also understand Olympism in a context of religion or belief?³⁵

During his lifetime, de Coubertin himself explicitly used the term ‘religion’ to describe Olympism:

“It is the religion of energy, the cultivation of intense will developed through the practice of manly sports, based on proper hygiene and public-spiritedness, surrounded with art and thought” (Müller 2000, 44).

This “religion of energy” could be understood more particularly as a “cult of the human body” (De Coubertin in 1929, quoted in Ruprecht Jr. 1998, 269), which brings back the notion of cult as I briefly discussed it in the context of the ancient Games. De Coubertin called this cult “a paganism” which was meant to celebrate a vital and embodied spiritual life (1998, 269, 286). He was aware of the way in which the term paganism was often used to (negatively) denote the worship of idols, especially from a Judeo-Christian perspective, but he countered this by stating that “every religion (...) [has had] its idolaters” (1998, 269). In this vein he found a way to convincingly connect the ancient Greek context, which is often

³⁵ This is to put aside, for a moment, the argument put forward by some that (many) “philosophies of life” (for instance humanism) can also be considered religions.

studied in direct reference to the concepts of cult and paganism, to the values and principles of his day.

Throughout his writings De Coubertin kept using 'religion' and 'paganism' interchangeably without discerning the two explicitly (Ruprecht Jr. 1998, 270, 286). Thus it is more useful to study his thinking and way of arguing than to actually account for definitions. De Coubertin drew a comparison between religious devotion (to the Greek gods) and nationalist devotion (to one's country and flag, with the significant addition that de Coubertin also added 'race' to this equation). The comparison itself could imply that for him, the nation has replaced the gods. A reading of the source material, however, indicates that Olympism is still approached as a religion, whereby religious sentiment is not *replaced* but *transformed* and expanded by democratic internationalism (passages in the following quote that I deem especially important have been put in bold):

The primary, fundamental characteristic of ancient Olympism, and of modern Olympism as well, is that **it is a religion**. By chiseling his body through exercise as a sculptor does a statue, the ancient athlete honored the gods. In doing likewise, the modern athlete honors his country, his race, and his flag. Therefore, I believe that I was right to restore, from the very beginning of modern Olympism **a religious sentiment transformed and expanded by the internationalism and democracy that are distinguishing features of our day**. Yet this is the **same religious sentiment** that led the young Hellenes, eager for the victory of their muscles, to the foot of the altars of Zeus. From this sentiment derive all the cultural expressions that constitute the ceremonies of the modern Games. ... The athletic religious concept, the *religio athletae* took root slowly in the minds of competitors, many of whom still experience it only in an unconscious way. But they will come around, gradually (Müller 2000, 580).

According to Jirásek, "the majority of scholars agree that Coubertin's *religio athletae* as part of the ideology of Olympism should not be perceived in a religious context", but rather in a moral and educational one (Jirásek 2015, 294). The main implication of this interpretation would be that de Coubertin's references to Olympism as religion and his coupling of ancient and modern Olympism by means of 'religious sentiment' have to be considered as 'flat' statements that do not refer to a 'literal' religion but rather propose religion as a figure of speech. I find this too short-sighted. In my opinion, discarding the notion of religion altogether in the context of modern sport, and especially in the context of Olympism, could be an option if there were reason to assume that a convincing, single definition of religion could encapsulate the lack of *religious* content in that is presumed by some (often to be

replaced by terminological alternatives, such as ‘secular’ or ‘spiritual’). There is no consensus definition, however, and in line with my observations on the ancient Games and the ideas of de Coubertin, including his own use of ‘religion’, I see no reason to eliminate the notion in advance. This does not mean that my aim is to find out to which extent Olympism can be considered a religion. The intent, instead, is a study in which not the extent of ‘religiousness’, but the question for the precise nature of modern Olympism occupy center stage. In that sense ‘religious’ elements can still be considered and discussed, but the content is broader and less exclusive.

I hold this view partly because it corresponds with the ambivalent, complex nature of Olympism, but also because I recognize and struggle with a discursive tension that is currently (and already for years) at the heart of religious studies.³⁶ Working within a department of philosophy and religious studies, I witness how many scholars have to work and argue intensely *merely* to defend the fact that they are studying religion, and more particularly, the persistent use of ‘religious studies’ to denote the field. The main reason is that classical definitions of religion have been criticized and deconstructed by contemporary scholarship, and that there is no consensus (yet) on an inclusive and encompassing alternative.³⁷ In another context, I could certainly contribute to the discussion, but for this study it is more significant to emphasize that I do not have a solution or a solid proposal; neither with regard to the general discussion, nor with regard to Olympism. The challenge is thus to write this study as a scholar of religion without getting stuck in (guaranteed) endless discussions on the question whether Olympism could be considered a religion.

There are more scholars who share my concern on the current impasse in the field. Some contribute by proposing new definitions, some stick to definitions that are necessarily restricted to the cultures or communities which they are studying. In this study I follow another trend, which is to discuss the future of religious studies within the much broader context of worldview studies. An important publication in this regard is the edited volume *Methods for the Study of Religious Change: From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies*

³⁶ With “the complex nature of Olympism” I refer to the fact that Olympism could be considered both transhistorical and universal and particular (in time and in place). It cannot be pinned down to a single and restricted context, which makes it practically impossible to relate it to a (purportedly) uniform definition of religion.

³⁷ For examples of critical exposés, taken mostly from a Dutch academic context but reflecting on this broader issue, see for instance Shilbrack (2013), Hanegraaff (2016), Davidsen (2020) and Rakow (2020).

(2014) by cultural anthropologist André Droogers (b. 1941) and scholar of religion Anton van Harskamp (b. 1946). The authors propose to study religion as a sub-category of the term worldview, by which they mean that religion needs to be viewed as part of a larger field in which people struggle for and with meaning (Droogers & Van Harskamp 2014, 2). Just like religion has been interpreted as a reflection of the social order (see Durkheim 1965), worldviews are a subset of culture in that they are produced through the human capacity to not only attribute meaning to particular ideas and practices, but also to ask and reflect on “big questions” (e.g. when does something exist? why do we exist? where are we going?) (Taves, Asprem & Ihm 2018, 207-208)³⁸.

The term ‘worldview’, which is derived from German (‘Weltanschauung’) and was coined in Immanuel Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of Judgment*, 1790), is not neutral. It implies the paradox of ‘world’ and ‘view’ as separated constituents, as if a worldview (a view on the world) can be established by (objective) vision that is in itself unaffected by that world. As Tim Ingold wrote, “people do not import their ideas, plans or mental representations into the world, since the very world . . . is the homeland of their thoughts” (Ingold 1995, 76). Moreover, the choice of ‘view’ implicates a union of the eye (as a tool for vision) and the mind that mirrors the privilege attributed to visual sense in western epistemology (Mellor & Schilling 1997, 6-7, 10, see also Bouwhuis 2019). It brings the credo ‘seeing is believing’ to mind, but that credo does not necessarily represent knowledge production in particular non-western-cultures, where other senses may be considered equal or even dominant (1997, 6). Thus, a particular worldview always has to be unpacked further: which understanding of ‘world’ is implied or constructed in practice? By which means and senses is the worldview communicated? Is the worldview confined to a particular cultural setting or does it carry universal appeal? One significant advantage of the use of the term is that the researcher cannot detach him-or herself from it. Reasoning from the general idea, shared by Droogers (2014, 13), that decent questions, theories and research methods may result in knowledge production, and thus in meaning making, scholars are never without a worldview; furthermore, they may also identify with another worldview (or even worldviews in plural) aside from their work. While worldview as a focus term still demands equal and careful

³⁸ In a more formal sense these questions can be divided into the categories of ontology, epistemology, axiology, praxeology and cosmology (see Taves, Asprem & Ihm 2018, 208).

consideration, it poses less problems than religion. The term is less contested, orientated more broadly and barely exclusive (it may be difficult to think of human beings who are complete outsiders to processes of meaning making, which may also occur in human practice)³⁹.

Ann Taves (b. 1952), a professor of religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Egil Asprem (b. 1984), associate professor in the history of religions at Stockholm University (and former postdoc in Santa Barbara), have taken up the initiative of Droogers and van Harskamp in a series of articles published roughly between 2018 and 2020 (Taves, Asprem & Ihm 2018, Taves & Asprem 2018, Taves & Asprem 2019, Taves 2020). In the text “Psychology, Meaning Making and the Study of Worldviews: Beyond Religion and Non-Religion”, co-authored by psychologist and brain scientist Elliott Ihm (University of California), the authors list three contributions that the choice for worldview may provide to the study of non-religious worldviews. As the authors state, scholars of religion have developed a growing interest in the study of what could be framed as ‘non-religion’ (e.g. atheism, agnosticism, secularism), but the divide lacks an overarching framework within which identifying features could be compared properly (Taves, Asprem & Ihm 2018, 207). Studying ‘religion’ and ‘non-religion’ under the umbrella of worldview softens the often artificially induced distinction between the two categories, engendered by the aforementioned lack of a consensus definition of religion. Worldview studies, on its turn, allows scholars to (a) stop worrying about whether a particular worldview is religious or not; (b) more smoothly combine intellectual or philosophical approaches to worldview with ethnographic study of lived practices or ways-of-life; (c) focus more on how people and groups characterize themselves; (d) explore worldview ‘dynamics’ as an interactive process embedded in social relations (Taves, Asprem & Ihm 2018, 208; Taves 2020, 144, freely paraphrased). While I wholeheartedly agree with the advantage they see in these contributions, my approach differs where they take it a step further to propose the interdisciplinary study of worldview within a cognitive and subsequently evolutionary

³⁹ In case of critiques focusing on a preoccupation with the human mind and cognitive foundations, which may lead to privileging ‘systematized’ worldviews. In fact, lived or enacted worldviews may be seen as historically prior to systematized worldviews focusing on rational development (see Taves 2020, 137, 140).

scheme.⁴⁰ In my study this cognitive scheme is not necessary, because I am chiefly interested in the ideological configuration and mediation of Olympism *without* asking the question how this worldview may originate on a psychological or mental level. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate later in this study how it is possible to unite the study of worldview as such with a research focus on human practice (e.g. by means of terms such as enactment, performance and ceremony), which further substantiates the case for research that is not automatically (co-)dependent on a cognitive methodology.⁴¹

Olympism is a worldview because its principles attribute meaning to de Coubertin's ideas on humankind, human interaction or 'togetherness' and human progress. They also indicate how sport should be practiced properly and which norms and values are attached to it. In this sense Olympism is both a formalized outlook on existence and a guideline for human practice in the realm of sport, which is, as I will explain, not detached from social and political interaction. My understanding of Olympism as worldview is supported by the fact that its principles are in effect in a particular, and yet universal context, namely that of the modern Games. Olympism is evoked and charged with meaning solely by the organizers of the Games, but its principles are in force for all humans who visit or participate (either as competitors, as coaches, or as judges) in the games and are in that sense "belonging to the Olympic movement" (IOC 2020, 12).⁴² Thus, Olympism can be discerned from other worldviews because it is named after (and firmly embedded in) an event that inscribes it with a binding and confined validity.

The 'fundamental principles of Olympism', including its accompanying rules and by-laws, are codified in an Olympic Charter since 1908.⁴³ Some of the rules had already been written by

⁴⁰ Taves, Asprem, and Ihm differentiate between 'worldview' and 'way of life'/'world-making' when they compare human beings to "other animals" and state that while all organisms have 'ways of life' and may participate in 'world-making', not all organisms have a worldview (Taves, Asprem and Ihm 2018, 208-209).

⁴¹ Taves and Asprem are well aware of the importance of human practice (Taves, Asprem & Ihm 2018, 210), but since their research is steered, to a great extent, by the objective to substantiate cognitive foundations in the study of religion, the focus of their texts is on psychological and 'mental' perspectives conceived through an evolutionary lens.

⁴² Although the Olympic Charter (which I introduce swiftly) states that the values and principles of Olympism are in force for both visitors and participants (of any kind), one could well argue that the Charter is more binding for participants, since they are generally more visible (they are "in the center of attention") and are thus considered to carry more responsibility for their attitude and actions.

⁴³ The original title of the first Charter (in French) was *Annuaire du Comité International Olympique*. The term 'Olympic Charter' was finally adopted as the standard title in 1978 (and successfully perpetuated unto the present day), although it had already been used for different versions before. A precise overview of the (French and English) Charters can be found in the Olympic World Library.

de Coubertin around 1898, when the baron was still directly involved in the organization of the Games. The codification was a logical consequence of the IOC's efforts to establish itself as the institution responsible for the organization of the Games. In this sense, Olympism is an institutionally embedded worldview that could be studied 'from script'. This does not mean, however, that it is resistant to historical change. To explain this I turn to Taves and Aspren's understanding of 'worldview dynamics', which has been inspired by Droogers (Droogers & van Harskamp 2014, 21).

Olympism and worldview dynamics: from Olympism to Olympic Charter

'Worldview dynamics' encompasses what I already mentioned as a third contribution of worldview studies: it allows scholars to study worldviews as interactive processes embedded in social relations. In this regard I want to emphasize the importance of 'power' or political influence. The political dimension, which is in principle intrinsic to any set of social relations, supports my earlier statement that worldviews are not neutral. My aim in studying the worldview dynamics of Olympism is twofold: on the one hand, I intend to register qualitatively to which extent the ideas of de Coubertin were perpetuated, transformed or disappeared in the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. In this sense, 'dynamics'⁴⁴ is a metaphor for the passing of time and an indicator of a worldview's flex- or stretchability. On the other hand, I want to demonstrate how this flex- or stretchability cannot be detached from political and ideological issues. Thus, 'dynamics' does not merely apply to a 'natural' social process (which could be studied as such by scholars of cognition or psychology) but also to concrete situations of political intermediation. My understanding of ideology and manipulation is closely tied to the terminology of worldview. Social relations are swiftly mobilized for political purposes, and I do not find it useful to theoretically consider 'the ideological' as a separate sphere somehow disconnected from daily human practice. This means that I will freely use the term to denote elements of the Olympic worldview without meaning to impose a value judgment. If I actually do so, the precise context is decisive and I will specify my approach.

The most significant question on worldview dynamics is to which extent the principles of Olympism changed and evolved within the context of the formally static, and yet changeable

⁴⁴ As Ronald Grimes argues (Grimes 2014, 179), 'dynamics' in this sense cannot be taken for granted (as 'natural' causes and effects) but are always motivated by human motivations and behavior.

Olympic Charter. An important marker is the ongoing preservation and the availability of primary sources. De Coubertin had published a lot during his lifetime, but most texts, by estimate 95 percent, had been written in French and were only available as individual documents. This was despite the fact that de Coubertin was skilled in the English language, and had contributed to multiple English publications to further profile himself as a professional journalist (Müller 2000, 19). The first collection of de Coubertin's translated texts in English, *The Olympic Idea*, was compiled by the German Carl-Diem-Institute in 1967 (see Carl-Diem-Institut 1967). It contained 64 texts directly related to the Olympics, but did not remain in print throughout the following decades. Moreover, according to de Coubertin's chief editor and researcher Norbert Müller, the collection could not satisfy the demand in the Anglo-Saxon world for more of de Coubertin's translated writings on the Olympic theme (Müller 2000, 19). In the early eighties, Geoffroy de Navacelle de Coubertin (1918-2015), baron de Coubertin's grandnephew, proposed a new plan for a collection of selected writings to the then IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch (1920-2010). The initial publication, *Textes choisis de Pierre de Coubertin*, happened in French and was published under the aegis of the IOC in 1986. The extensive French volume implicitly facilitated a refined and expanded English version (Müller 2000, 17), *Olympism: Selected Writings*, which was finished in time for the millennium and the Olympic Games of Sydney (2000). Norbert Müller, a professor at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, who had also published a bibliography of de Coubertin's writings in 1991, led the project from its early conception and provided introductions to most of the texts included in the 2000 version.

The leading support of the IOC in the process of compiling an 'ultimate' English (e.g. universally accessible) edition of de Coubertin's writings demonstrates that the baron's ideological legacy was deemed central to the persistence of the Olympic Movement. In the foreword of *Olympism*, Samaranch explicitly states that "the Olympism of today is faithful to Pierre de Coubertin's conception, building upon the foundations he laid down" (e.g. the Olympism of the 1980s, but you might see this repeated easily by current IOC president Thomas Koch; Müller 2000, 15). The principal role of the collection is what Samaranch terms 'Olympic education'. The IOC considers itself the institutional guardian of Olympism. By spreading de Coubertin's writings to, among other locations, national and international sport institutions, university libraries and research centers, further research into Olympism is

facilitated. The availability of *Olympism: Selected Writings* has most definitely attributed to the amount of academic publications discussing or focusing on the figure of Pierre de Coubertin and his ideas.

The publication of *Olympism* has by no means taken away the centrality of the Olympic Charter as the key point of reference for the IOC's vision on Olympism. While *Olympism* might focus in much more detail on the ideas of de Coubertin and the Olympic worldview than the Charter, first and foremost a formal document, could ever accomplish, the Charter is used to set all rules and conditions for the celebration of the Games, and all participants are required to comply with the values and principles of Olympism as they are codified in the version of the document that is in effect at that moment (IOC 2020, 12). It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to detect and discuss all changes that have been implemented in the text of the Olympic Charter throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century, as that would require a thesis on itself. There are two additional reasons for the decision to limit my scope in this regard. On the one hand, I am mainly interested in the codification of Olympism as it relates to practice, that is, to the actual 'visibility' of the Olympic worldview during the actual games, and also to the tension between ideological promise and political reality. The fact that a certain value or principle is codified in the Olympic Charter which is in effect during a particular edition of the Games, does not guarantee that this value or principle is by any means adhered to or expressed during the actual event(s). I will discuss and analyze this in more detail later. The objective is to bring my study of Olympic practice *as close as possible* to the present day. This is why I will analyze the three most recent editions of the Games, and it is also mainly why I have decided to use the most recent Charter (in force since 17 July 2020) as my standard reference. This may seem odd, as other versions were in effect during these three editions, but in fact, only minor changes were implemented into the section most crucial to my analysis. The introductory section on 'the fundamental principles of Olympism' demonstrates, generally speaking, which values and principles are key ideological composites of the 'Olympic' spirit in the twenty-first century (quoted directly from IOC 2020, 11-12):

Fundamental Principles of Olympism

1. Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education,

Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.

2. The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.
3. The Olympic Movement is the concerted, organised, universal and permanent action, carried out under the supreme authority of the IOC, of all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of Olympism. It covers the five continents. It reaches its peak with the bringing together of the world's athletes at the great sports festival, the Olympic Games. Its symbol is five interlaced rings.
4. The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.
5. Recognising that sport occurs within the framework of society, sports organisations within the Olympic Movement shall apply political neutrality. They have the rights and obligations of autonomy, which include freely establishing and controlling the rules of sport, determining the structure and governance of their organisations, enjoying the right of elections free from any outside influence and the responsibility for ensuring that principles of good governance be applied.
6. The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.
7. Belonging to the Olympic Movement requires compliance with the Olympic Charter and recognition by the IOC.

Between 2007 and 2020, one new principle was added and the formulation of one principle was changed.⁴⁵ Principle 5 was implemented in 2011, which means that “Fundamental Principles of Olympism” had only six entries until 2010. Moreover, up to 2014 (e.g. until 8

⁴⁵ The Charter that was in force between 7 July 2007 and 10 February 2010 was (thus) in effect during the Beijing Olympiad, the first Olympiad that I analyze in this thesis.

December 2014), principle 6 (or principle 5, before 2011) had been formulated as such (IOC 2013, 12):

“Any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement”.

No further changes were implemented in the introduction of the Charter (which also contains a three point-introduction to what the Charter is and stands for, a note on the use of gender pronouns and the use of calendar terminology, and a historical preamble) between 2007 and 2020 (IOC 2007, 9-11; IOC 2020, 9-12).

The addition of principle 5 raises a question: why was it important for the IOC, particularly in 2011, to emphasize the requirement of political neutrality? I have not been able to find a formal explanation, so I can only suggest that the IOC might feel the need to emphasize the apolitical nature of the Games, as its status as a global mass-event makes it practically impossible to detach the Olympics from contemporary geopolitics and, dependent on the host, local or regional strife.⁴⁶ I will expand on this in the next paragraphs. The changed formulation of principle 6, to conclude here, demonstrates how the IOC deemed it important to formally extend the list of possible ‘terrains’ on which discrimination is possible. The prohibition is not new, but merely strengthened, and the securing of the non-discrimination policy is more explicitly connected to a positive contrary, which initiates the new formulation: “the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter” is secured *on the condition* that discrimination does not happen.

The question of nationalism in the context of Olympism

A relevant question is to which extent the Olympic Charter already accommodates the role of the nation, not so much in terms of organization and governmental/institutional

⁴⁶ The Olympic Charter only provides an overview of changes accepted by the IOC in the light of the previous Charter. No formal explanation is embedded in the document (furthermore, for once, the overview appears to be lacking in IOC 2011), and I have not found any press release explaining this particular addition.

cooperation with the IOC, but specifically in terms of the Olympic worldview.⁴⁷ It is evident that the values and principles of Olympism are meant to have universal appeal, but are there also *codified* references to cultural particularity (e.g. the [extra] values, principles, and also practices that a host city and/or country can bring in *within* an Olympic context) that can substantially weaken or challenge that appeal? The set-up of the Charter demonstrates that it is only possible to deviate from the general principles if this is accepted by the IOC and/or if changes can be accommodated with the Olympic Charter as a whole. The seventh principle explicates that “belonging to the Olympic Movement requires compliance with the Olympic Charter and recognition by the IOC” (IOC 2020, 12). Recognition means that a nation cannot surpass the rules of the IOC and that its membership has to be accepted by the supranational institution in order to participate in the Games. The fundamental principles share a universal orientation, some textual examples being the use of (peaceful) society (instead of *societies*) (principle 2), the persistent use of ‘universal’, ‘human’ and ‘humankind’ as proposed uniform qualities and the explicit connection between the five continents by means of the Olympic symbol (principle 3). In fact, the nation is only referenced once, and that is in the enumeration of the aforementioned sixth principle, where the Charter states that participants may not be discriminated on the basis of their national origin. The most important function of nationhood within the Olympic frame is that the IOC promotes the notion of the nation in order to a) construct eligibility for participation (every team is a nation and every nation is a team) and b) facilitate competition (if there would only be a global community, the function of competition would be more relative or even non-existent). Thus, somewhat paradoxically, nationhood is subservient to the Olympic community, and yet *required* in order to generate this community in the competitive context of sport (see also Bell 2009, 232).

In my analysis I will devote much attention to the particular role of the host nations and cities, and I will also draw cross-cultural comparisons. At the same time, I want to stress in advance that these particular roles can only be fulfilled within the larger context of the IOC’s universal parameters and the rules sustained by the Olympic Charter. The modern Olympics are first and foremost a global enterprise.

⁴⁷ For the governmental perspective, see mainly the standardized chapter (4 in IOC 2020) on the National Olympic Committees (NOCs), the committees that have as their mission to “develop, promote and protect the Olympic Movement in their respective countries, in accordance with the Olympic Charter” (IOC 2020, 59).

The ideological and political trajectory of Olympism in the twentieth and early twenty-first century

The IOC's contemporary global orientation becomes a complex topic once its clear political dimension enters the discussion. In order to explain this I return to de Coubertin's conception of Olympism, and specifically his view on politics. The integrity and consistency of Olympism were already challenged during de Coubertin's lifetime, and that process (of what I have termed worldview dynamics) continued throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Yet the IOC sustains, to the present day, a deliberate policy of preserving and honoring the ideological legacy of its purported founder, despite identifiable changes in the Charter and the considerable time that has passed since de Coubertin's lifetime. This policy has generated and thickened a paradox in the IOC's attitude toward politics.

In his Olympic work, de Coubertin condemned politicians more than once and proclaimed Olympism *beyond* ideology. MacAloon writes that "from (...) [his] early days forward, de Coubertin tended to keep his political commentaries separate from his writings on sport, education and social reform. This habit surely paid dividend for the fledging Olympic movement, but it also prevented Coubertin from arriving at a satisfying social theory of sport". Above all, it laid the basis for his mature belief that sport could and ought to stand outside of political and governmental interference (MacAloon 1981, 89). This purposeful exclusion of politics should be explained as a paradox or discontinuity in de Coubertin's thought, as he explicitly promoted the 'democratic' character of the Games (which may be noble, but certainly not 'beyond ideology') but was equally and profoundly affected (and with him, the Games themselves) by the shifting social and political contexts and conflicts of the early twentieth century (MacAloon 1981, 6)⁴⁸.

The ideological basis for the paradox may lie in the somewhat confusing credo that "war is peace", or, as de Coubertin put it, that "athletics could be used to 'strengthen peace or

⁴⁸ Chatziefstathiou & Henry argue in a convincing manner that de Coubertin himself was also no stranger to political pragmatism, explaining how the baron subtly weakened the legitimacy of Greece to lay claims to the modern Games in the wake of 1896 (2007, 40).

prepare for war” (quoted in Chatziefstathiou 2007, 67). De Coubertin mobilized this vision multiple times to conjoin sport and (French) nationalist vigor (Chatziefstathiou 2007, 67), condemning antimilitarism by arguing that “to curse war is no longer the way to diminish its frequency”. He also stated that “only the strong and those who favor force are qualified to preach serenity, inaction and—if necessary— retreat” (both statements quoted in Hoberman 1995, 21). I do not pose the thesis here that ‘sport increases the possibility of war’, which nevertheless deserves serious consideration,⁴⁹ but it is a fact that the Games of 1916 were cancelled because of World War I.⁵⁰ Strikingly enough, these Games had originally been planned for Berlin, the city that would ultimately host the infamous ‘Nazi Olympics’ near the end of the interbellum. These Games provide an indispensable example of the way in which sport and politics can get irretrievably entangled.⁵¹ In his 1995 article “Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism”, John Hoberman (b. 1944) argues that this entanglement can be demonstrated by comparing the Olympic movement with other international movements of its time(s) (Hoberman 1995, 2-3). This process is complicated precisely by de Coubertin’s initial insistence, consistently perpetuated by the IOC, that the Olympic movement was ‘unique’, that is, separated from other movements and thus also from regular international politics.⁵² In this study I enhance the perspective that this view is not tenable.

Several authors have actually gone further than to use the ‘Nazi Olympics’ as a sole and ‘isolated’ example of ideological intervention, which would mean that the Games were only

⁴⁹ The thesis deserves serious consideration because the competitive model in sport mirrors the ‘competitive’ model in war and military conflict. More on the paradox of (Olympic) sport and peace in chapter 3, where I discuss the symbolic rendering of peace in Olympic ceremony. See by any means of Heather L. Reid’s article “Olympic Sport and Its Lessons for Peace” (2006).

⁵⁰ After WW I, the countries that had lost the war (Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Turkey and Hungary) were excluded from Olympic participation, which indicates how the war had immediate political consequences for countries “on the wrong side of the coin”. The measurements were in place for the Games of 1920, and in 1924 Germany remained uninvited once more.

⁵¹ The ‘Nazi Olympics’ are discussed at length by Hoberman (1995). I also recommend watching the ‘Olympia’-documentaries directed by Leni Riefenstahl (Vol. I and II, 1938).

⁵² Hoberman opens his article with an anecdote from the opening of the International Olympic Academy at Olympia (1967). One of the attendants, dr. Wildor Hollmann, a renowned German sport physician, stated that “the Olympic idea” would inevitably fall victim to the logic of development inherent to the professionalization and commercialization inherent to elite sport. Hollmann was immediately “engulfed in a storm of indignation” (Hoberman 1995, 1).

temporarily 'hijacked' for the purpose of fascist propaganda.⁵³ Hoberman explains how and why de Coubertin, who died not long after the Games (1937) but before the initiation of WW II, could conceive of the 'Nazi Olympics' as the culmination and worthy fulfillment of his life's work (Hoberman 1995, 17, 23). He states that the Olympic movement "both included and disguised nationalist and even cultic themes, (...) rooted in racialistic European mythologies [and] (...) cultic reappropriations of the European past, which could be presented as cosmopolitan projects within the European context" (Hoberman 1995, 8). In this sense de Coubertin's internationalism has to be reappropriated as a modus of racially exclusive European humanism, within which the world is understood as "one" but only through a western lens (Chatziefstathiou & Henry 2007, 35). I agree with the critical appraisals of de Coubertin's internationalism by Hoberman and Chatziefstathiou & Henry (2007), particularly because they help to understand why the 'Nazi-Olympics' were no sudden ideological break from the apparently 'harmless' ideals of Olympism but a logical result, at least partly, of the Eurocentrism that was inherent to the thinking of de Coubertin and his contemporaries. This Eurocentrism, which was the product of both the French enlightenment thinkers and the German romanticists, allowed a conception in which all European history could be traced back to Greece and subsequently Rome (2007, 31). Olympism could coalesce with Nazi ideology relatively easily because the Nazi's idealized European history and identity in a comparable way, focusing, especially in the light of sport, on the glorification of the aristocratic and physically capable male (Hoberman 1995, 17-18). Moreover, Hitler believed that the Aryan race was 'of ancient Greek stock', which helped to secure the introduction of the Olympic flame relay from Olympia to Germany (I will expand on the Olympic flame and the flame relay in chapter 3) (Maguire, Black & Darlington 2015)⁵⁴. The question, from here, is what remained of this historically particular culmination of Olympism after WW II had ended?

One purpose of Hoberman's article is to account for the continuity between what he frames "the fascist period in Europe" and "the comparable elites to be found at the top of

⁵³ In this sense, the idea would be that de Coubertin's "democratic internationalism" was restored in the wake of WW II.

⁵⁴ Page numbers are not indicated because I could online find an accepted, peer-reviewed version that did not yet contain the page numbers of the published version. I have included the published version in the bibliography.

international sports federations today” (Hoberman 1995, 6). Carl Diem, for instance, who was the general secretary of the Berlin Games, was hailed as a ‘nestor’ of postwar German sport, his longtime collaboration with the Nazi regime either ignored or (partly) unknown (Hoberman 1995, 26-28). According to Hoberman, the postwar ‘denazification’ of internationalist (European) organizations did not extend to the IOC, “which continued to accommodate its Nazi members and their sympathizers” (Hoberman 1995, 18). In the 1990s, when Hoberman published the article, this statement received an extra boost from the publication of investigative journalist Andrew Jennings’ *The Lords of the Rings* (1992, co-written by Vyvian Simson), an exposé on the IOC’s inner circle which highlighted widespread corruption alongside continuing fascist allegiance. One accomplishment of Jennings was that he linked the personal past and perpetuated political collegialities of (former) IOC president (1980-2001) Juan Antonio Samaranch (1920-2010) to the fascist regime of Francisco Franco (1936-1975) in Spain.⁵⁵

In 2000 IOC member Dick Pound (b. 1942), who eventually lost the presidential bid to succeed Samaranch (2001) to Jacques Rogge (b. 1942, IOC president from 2001-2013), argued that the IOC should limit itself to its ‘core business of sport’ and that it should refrain from partnerships with other international organizations and movements (MacAloon 2016, 776). The statement was a response to the years under Samaranch, when the IOC had been involved in several human rights-related cases, among which the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa (2016, 776). The only partnership that continued consistently since the Samaranch presidency, and was actually deepened in the twenty-first century, is the one between the IOC and the UN (United Nations). The partnership underlines my argument that to study the Olympic Movement is to study international politics. The purported political and ideological context is democratic internationalism.⁵⁶ This context is explicated and explained in a UN chronicle entry by IOC president Thomas Bach (2013-present) entitled “The Olympic Movement | The United Nations and the Pursuit of Common Ideals”. The IOC and the UN are

⁵⁵ Hoberman mentions that the publication of Jaume Boix and Arcadio Espada’s Spanish work *El deporte del poder. Vida y milagro de Juan Antonio Samaranch* had already passed relatively unnoticed a year earlier (Hoberman 1995, 4). For a concise overview of the argument, see Jennings 2011.

⁵⁶ Hoberman rightfully claims that the assumption that idealistic internationalism(s) can transform the modern world has been shaped by the Enlightenment thinking of the late eighteenth century. He adds that the UN, among other international arrangements, traces its ancestry to [this] period that has taken on the aura of a Golden Age (Hoberman 1995, 14).

partners since many decades, but as Bach states, the cooperation has deepened in recent years (Bach 2016, 15). Bach underlines the statement of ex-UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon (b. 1944, secretary general from 2007-2016) that “Olympic principles are United Nations principles” (Bach 2016, 15). The common goal expressed by both organizations is “the peaceful development of humankind” through “peaceful global interaction” (Bach 2016, 15). Sport is fundamental in this regard because it is understood as an are of human activity that has achieved universal law.⁵⁷ Moreover, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (see United Nations, n.d.), adopted by the General Assembly in 2015, mentions sport as an “important enabler” to secure peace. Bach sets out in his chronicle entry how several IOC objectives line up with the sustainable development goals documented by the UN. In a way, the IOC and the UN mirror each others agenda’s, which makes it possible to conceive of the IOC as a partnering subset of the UN operating specifically on the terrain of sport.

On a more symbolic level, the General Assembly has been adopting an Olympic Truce resolution ahead of every Olympic edition since 1994. Ahead of the 2016 games in Rio, the resolution was explicated as “building a peaceful and better world through sport and the Olympic ideal”, and it was accepted and supported by more than 180 UN member states (Bach 2016, 15). The Olympic Truce is a configured pax that ensures a reciprocal stop on hostile activities from the seventh day before the start of the Games until the seventh day following the end of the Paralympics.⁵⁸ The UN, which cooperates with the IOC to further develop the Truce project (Roche 2002, 174), explicitly traces the Truce, or ‘ekecheiria’⁵⁹, back to the eight century BCE, where it served as a “hallowed principle” of the ancient Olympics and ensured the safe passage of all athletes (United Nations, n.d., Garcia 2008, 375). The ideals and values of the UN and the IOC may be presented as if they exist in a vacuum, their historical and political roots relativize their purported uniqueness and help to further deconstruct the ‘apolitical’ objective of de Coubertin.

⁵⁷ “Regardless of where in the world we practice sport, the rules are the same” (Bach 2016, 15).

⁵⁸ Nowadays the Paralympics usually take place in the same host city during the weeks following the Summer Olympics. In 2021, the Summer Olympics take place from 23 July – 8 August, followed by the Paralympics from 24 August – 5 September.

⁵⁹ In Greek, the cessation of hostilities and the notion of truce.

The aim of this study is not to ask whether the revelatory arguments of Hoberman and Jennings from the 1990s might extend unto the present day, especially in line with the IOC's intent to. There is no single, central hypothesis that serves to 'unmask' a movement that (by any means) presents itself as a proponent of peaceful internationalism. This does not mean, however, that I will not take the suggestion of 'harmful' ideology into account.⁶⁰ The point is that I will only do so in the context of Olympic ceremony, where my purpose is to analyze the configuration of the Olympic worldview through mediated registration. In this sense the question is always how the IOC and the host country present themselves and what could be said about it, not what may be hidden from viewers' sight. In other words, I shall only account for ideological manipulation if the manipulation (which I do not necessarily consider a negative term, since it may apply to all processes of political communication – again, the context is decisive) is rendered public and visible. In my analysis I will particularly consider the notion of 'soft power', originally coined by political theorist Joseph Nye (2005) as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments", which can make sure that other people or other countries actually *want* to follow or obey (2005, 5; see also Arning 2013, 536). Thus, the fact that a message is approached positively and is also embraced as such does not mean that there are no power relations involved. In the context of the Olympics this situation even extends to the statement of de Coubertin that the Games are "*beyond* ideology". The difference between my work in the following chapters and that of Hoberman, Jennings and others is that I will deconstruct and criticize de Coubertin's statement further on the basis of the most public and visible phenomenon one may think of, namely Olympic ceremony, rather than probing the closed circles of the IOC and related organizations.

To conclude, the contemporary partnership of the UN and the IOC substantiates the argument that Olympism cannot be separated from politics and from the role that international and national (dis)agreements and partnerships play in the 'success' of the universal Olympic endeavor. This realization, which speaks against de Coubertin's initial idealistic proposal, already occurred to me before I started this project, and thus

⁶⁰ I find it too short-sighted to state that the fascist influences discussed by Hoberman, Jennings and others have (or must have) disappeared principally because the IOC puts so much effort into the promotion of clean sports (e.g. fair play, no doping, etc.) and peaceful internationalism. Just as much as I cannot simply discard this as manipulative in a negative sense, I also see no means to prove the contrary.

substantiated my intention to study Olympic practice rather than ‘promise’ without stepping away from the notion of worldview, which may appear static as first. Drooger’s conception of worldview dynamics, and the additional contributions by Taves & Asprem, allow for a much more flexible understanding of worldview, in which the configuration of ideology is equally significant as the expression of that ideology in terms of lived practice. In this thesis I hope to accommodate this understanding by moving from worldview (Olympism as coined by de Coubertin and codified in the Olympic Charter) to the *enactment* of worldview, a term that carries a double meaning; in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, ‘to enact’ specifically connotes ‘to make into law’ (which corresponds with the modern, bureaucratic codification of Olympism into the Olympic Charter), but it also signifies ‘to act out, or ‘to enact a role’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This, I argue, is precisely what happens when Olympism is acted out in the mediated and ritualized reality of opening and closing ceremonies. The second chapter will continue on this enactment.

Chapter 2: The ceremonial mediatization and ritualization of Olympism

I use two significant concepts to theorize how Olympism is configured in the context of opening and closing ceremonies. Mediatization, a derivative of mediation, helps to address the fact that the ceremonies are organized in a global, digital age. Via the category of ritual and the concept of ritualization I explain how certain ceremonial elements and practices are to various extents standardized and highlighted.

The Olympic Games in the global, digital age

For a religious studies scholar particularly interested in, among other subjects, the manifestation of 'religion' in popular culture, one important reason to study the Olympics is its scale of exposition.⁶¹ Olympic competitions are broadcast worldwide, and the fact that nearly all countries are participating makes it difficult to think of places where the Games are completely unknown or ignored (PolGeoNow 2018). John Milton-Smith even states that it is difficult to conceive of another institution with the same capacity as the Olympic Games to shape popular culture on a global scale (Milton-Smith 2002, 134).⁶² The word 'shape' is significant here. My interest in worldview draws the attention to elements of and practices within the Olympic routine which help to shape the overarching sociocultural and political outlook of the event as a whole. What better way, then, to study the configuration of Olympism than to focus on the opening and closing ceremonies, in which these elements and practices are presented and enacted?

⁶¹ For 'religion', see the terminological discussion in chapter 1. An influential standard work on the study of religion and popular culture (albeit focused on the American context) is *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Forbes & Mahan 2017 (orig. 2000)). Its introductory chapter also discusses the possible relations between 'religion' and 'popular culture'.

⁶² There is a strong commercial component to this process as well. Moragas (1992) argues that "the global scope the Games have achieved cannot be understood without considering their close relation and dependence on their media stakeholders and their ability to accelerate the production and communication of cultural value" (paraphrased in Garcia 2008, 361). This indicates that cultural value is not 'given'; it is projected and then communicated by stakeholders, and their promotion of *particular* 'value' may well be steered by underlying commercial purposes. In this study, for the sake of scope, I do not expand too much on the capitalist factor, but its influence is partly included in my consideration of (IOC) politics.

The centrality of the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies as media events

The first modern Games of 1896 featured an official opening address but there was no larger ceremonial context. After the first edition, in 1900 (Paris) and St. Louis (1904), the Olympics were organized over a period of a few months and integrated into already existing world expositions. The opening and closing ceremonies were initiated by the Olympic movement in 1906 (Lattipongpun 2010, 103, 114) and the first Olympic opening ceremony was celebrated at the Games of London in 1908 (see IOC 2016). As Wichian Lattipongpun states, the opening and closing ceremonies are among the most important elements of the modern Games, not in the least because their particularities distinguish the Games from other international sport competitions (2010, 103). The ceremonies are highlighted moments of grandeur that entertain both a formal, institutional and a creative, celebratory function. Analytical focus on the ceremonies is justified particularly in our current global, digital age, where these events are turned into massive televised shows which do much more than merely ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ the period set for competition; they are watched and conceived in a manner comparable, in terms of anticipation, to the most spectacular concerts and theater shows.⁶³

The ceremonies are especially crucial to the configuration and enactment of worldview because the sessions are used not only to introduce and honor the sportsmen, but also to showcase the norms and values of Olympism to a global public (see IOC 2020, 89)⁶⁴. While the host country may use its organizing role to express culturally particular norms and values, the ceremonies are still overseen (and its planned contents checked) by the IOC (IOC 2020, 95), which demands the compliance of every assigned host with the norms and values enlisted in the Olympic Charter (IOC 2020, 69, 73).⁶⁵

⁶³ I derive my understanding of ‘global’ (in “global, digital age”) from the concept of globalization, which is described by Gems and Pfister (2014, 52) as a “process fueled by, and resulting in, increasing cross-border flows of goods, services, money, people, information, and culture”.

⁶⁴ Bye-law to rule 48 pt.1 states that “the media coverage of the Olympic Games should spread and promote the principles and values of Olympism”. The statement itself does not highlight the ceremonies, but it becomes evident from the central role the ceremonies have gained within the broader context that these are of particular significance.

⁶⁵ 55.1 states that “the opening and closing ceremonies shall be held in compliance with the IOC Protocol Guide and other protocol-related requirements set forth in the Olympic Host Contract” (see rule 36; IOC 2020, 73). 55.2 states that “The contents and details of all scenarios, schedules and programmes of all ceremonies must be submitted to the IOC for its prior approval” (IOC 2020, 95). Specifically for the compliance of the host with the Olympic Charter, see rule 32.2 and bye-law to rule 35, pt.3.

The fact that the ceremonies are broadcast live and worldwide is of particular importance. It means, first and foremost, that the audience of the Olympics is by no means restricted to the thousands of people who actually visit the event. Television publics easily outnumber the mass publics that the event itself can accommodate, let alone the amount of people who (re)watch Olympic registrations later, for instance via the Olympic YouTube channel (IOC, Olympic(s), n.d.). Live publics may feel privileged and special because they actually witness the ceremonies and competitions happening onsite, yet the registrations ensure that anyone with an internet connection (especially now that television broadcasts are often offered via internet as well) is able to follow the Games, despite being dependent on the workings and mechanisms of mass media to do so.

On mediation and mediatization

The Olympic ceremonies are thus by any means mediated, which means that something (e.g. the content of Olympic ceremony) is communicated *via* a medium (Hjarvard 2011, 123), but I argue that they are also subjected to a process called mediatization⁶⁶. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, Stig Hjarvard (University of Copenhagen), a scholar on media and communication, began to theorize the term (Hjarvard 2008, 2011), driven by the increasing influence of media institutions, systems and representations on society. Mediatization “denotes the social and cultural process through which a field or institution to some extent becomes dependent on the logic of media” (Hjarvard 2011, 119). In mediatization theory, media have become part of the social fabric of society, and signal in that condition a gradual process of change (just like, for instance, globalization, individualization or urbanization) in which media are not only a part of society but (co-)determine the shape of it (Hjarvard 2011, 120-121).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ “Subjected to a process” means, in this sense, that the degree to which the term mediatization is applicable to the Olympic ceremonial context has increased with the passing of time.

⁶⁷ According to Hjarvard, mediatization is characterized by a two-sided development, in which media systems have become both autonomous and independent and integrated into the workings of other social institutions (Hjarvard 2011, 122). By now I would argue that is merely impossible to draw a line between independence and integration. The affects and effects of media are everywhere, and they may not only be of a sociocultural but also of a political, economic and psychological nature. The challenge for scholars involved particularly in the discourse on mediatization is to accommodate the speed with which the workings of (global) society grow more and more dependent on processes of mediation (especially in times of the current Covid-19 pandemic, which decreases immediacy and pressures distance, often resulting in more mediation), which ultimately (reciprocally) affect and even steer these workings through mediatization.

A special issue of *Culture and Religion* (2011) was devoted entirely to Hjarvard's proposal (see Lövheim & Lynch, 2011) and also provided critical appraisals (see Lövheim 2011, Morgan 2011). Throughout the following years Hjarvard continued to work on mediatization (Hjarvard 2013, 2016), cooperating with scholars such as Knut Lundby (University of Oslo) and Andreas Hepp (University of Bremen) (Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby 2015). The discourse continued with critical appraisals of both the applicability of the concept and the particular notion of the mediatization of *religion* (see Deacon & Stanyer 2014, Lunt & Livingstone 2016, Krüger 2018), which is used to indicate research on the triangular relationship between media (e.g. media institutions, media systems, media technologies, so media in the broadest sense), religion and social change (Lövheim & Lynch 2011, 112). While I agree with many of the critical observations that have been raised, especially with those on Hjarvard's understanding of the term 'religion' within the mediatization paradigm (see, for instance, Lövheim 2011) and his conception of the effects of media on religion,⁶⁸ I am inclined to separate the concept of mediatization, which I deem useful to address the contemporary workings of media, and specifically media technologies, in the global, digital age from the more particular discourse on the mediatization of religion. This means that I agree with Hjarvard's basic definition of the concept and will apply it to my case study, without feeling the need to engage completely in the discourse on the mediatization of religion. The main reason is that I already cover the question of religion via a slightly different angle, namely the discourse on worldview and religion. Thus, in what follows, my conceptual rendering of mediatization is not meant to imply a normative relation between media and religion in which the first is automatically supposed to have effects on the second. With regard to the concept itself, I agree with Birgit Meyer (2018, 334-335) that the greatest challenge is that it has to be re-evaluated continuously in the light of the diversification of media and the rise of social media. This challenge, however, is actually an encouragement to perpetuate and substantiate the concept through the lens of contemporary case studies which can relate a broader understanding of the concept to specific and temporally delineated contexts of media technology and development.

⁶⁸ In this case the main critical observation (see, for instance, Krüger 2018, 14) is that Hjarvard's research data on the social effects of media on religion cannot prove that religion(s) change(s) due to the influence of media systems and technologies.

The concept of mediatization has to be discerned from mediation in the sense that mediatization denotes a process in which no agency is implied. Mediatization is the suggestion of (long-term, socio-cultural) change through the workings of media, and again, with media I refer primarily to the ongoing improvement of existing media *technologies* and systems and the advent of new ones. Mediation, as I see it, is the sum of human practices and enactments that enables us to suggest mediatization; it entails the concrete act (e.g. agency) of communicating via a medium. Whereas one could well argue that mediation has always happened, in the sense that our body parts (e.g. hands feet), to provide an example, can also serve as media for communication, Hjarvard already locates mediation in a context of media technologies when he uses the prime example of “a blog instead of a printed newsletter” (2011, 124). In this study I adopt Hjarvard’s understanding of mediation, which means that I consider *both* terms tightly bound to the global, digital age and dependent on the logics and general availability of media technologies.

Thus, in the Olympic context, both terms are eminently applicable to Olympic opening and closing ceremonies of the twenty-first ceremony, precisely because these ceremonies are to the greatest extent (e.g. in reference to the complete history of Olympic ceremony) dependent on media technologies. In this regard, mediation indicates that the event is registered by cameras to be broadcast, which transforms the competitions and ceremonies into media content. Mediatization takes this process a step further. My argument here is that the Olympics are dependent on the logic of media technologies *particularly* when it comes to the registration of the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies. The ceremonies are taking place in grand stadiums that can accommodate human action on a large scale, offering the possibility to compartmentalize the surface and to centralize or de-centralize any ceremonial enactment. Concretely this means that the directing and camera team has to make choices. The operators can use multiple cameras, but as I do not recall having witnessed any splitscreens⁶⁹ or mosaics⁷⁰, direction has to switch perspectives continuously. While it may appear logical that the supervisor(s) in the editing room will show the center of the action, for instance during a football game where the camera focuses on the play and its players, reality is much more complex, with cameras registering both *actions* and *reactions*,

⁶⁹ Two images aside from each other, compiling one combined image.

⁷⁰ An image made up of multiple images at the same time, like a collage.

shifting perspective from the tribunes to the field (and back) and carrying optical responsibility for de-centralized action – for instance during ceremonial segments that display multiple enactments at once. An example of this will be provided in the analysis.

While mediatization essentially concerns a technological and visual process, this process is always regulated and steered (mediated, if you will) by media actors, which may be both the actors who generate and distribute the content (from camera operators to broadcast systems) and the actors who work with the content (journalists, commentators). The IOC formally states that it “takes all necessary steps in order to ensure the fullest coverage by the different media and the widest possible audience in the world for the Olympic Games” (IOC 2020, 89). This is realized via the distribution of a general global broadcast signal (see figure 2) that can be used and accommodated by national and regional broadcast systems (Larson & Rivenburgh 1991, 2/15). The Olympic Charter does not specify which factors play a role in the configuration of the signal (e.g. choices in camera focus, perspective, negotiations of internationalist and nationalist considerations). As I have already stated, however, the fact that “the media coverage of the Olympic Games should spread and promote the principles and values of Olympism” (IOC 2020, 89) indicates that the signal is not neutral and will in any case showcase Olympic content. Ceremony commentators in various countries may choose to perpetuate this internationalist focus and/or to highlight the role of either the host country or their own country’s participation. They can also do both; as far as I know, there are no examples of commentators who were forced beyond professional instructions to focus on specific content.



Figure 2: the 'Olympic broadcast signal': a still of the frame preceding the 2012 opening ceremony on the Olympic channel (2012 OC).

While this study does not concentrate on the function of commentary as such, partly because I use only one broadcast for every ceremony (e.g. the broadcast made available via the “Olympic channel”, with or without commentary⁷¹), I still want to mention the research of James F. Larson and Nancy K. Rivenburgh (1991), which clarifies why the role of commentators is always important. In their 1991 article “A Comparative Analysis of Australian, US, and British Telecasts of the Seoul Olympic Opening Ceremony”, the authors revisit media coverage of the Games of 1988 to see how broadcast systems and commentators from various countries offer different negotiations of the nation (both the host country and the land where the ceremony is aired) and the ethos of Olympic internationalism. While the same broadcast signal is provided to the countries airing the ceremony, the particular decisions of broadcasters and commentators result in various

⁷¹ The opening and closing ceremony of Beijing 2008 are provided on the “Olympic Channel” without commentary track. There is no clear reason why this is the case (while a commentary track is provided for the opening and closing ceremonies of London and Rio), a suggestion might be that this is the earliest Olympic year to date in my analysis. The opening and closing ceremonies of Athens 2004 (on the same channel) are also without a commentary track. The commentaries accompanying the ceremonies of the last two Games are always in English.

media constructions of the same event (Larson & Rivenburgh, 1/15, 11/15).⁷² Commentators receive a guide from the IOC which highlights the segments of the ceremony and provides (purported) general, neutral cultural explanations of the performances prepared by the host country (Larson & Rivenburgh 1991, 7/15; Miah 2012, 48). In this regard, the commentators certainly serve as journalists, for while they could theoretically adhere to the scripted explanations provided by the guide, the contrary is usually the case. As Larson and Rivenburgh critically set out and assess, commentators often skip parts that are of less interest to them and highlight the sections which involve their own country. Broadcasters, on their turn, can decide to show the arena entry of their own country during the “parade of the countries” and leave out segments showing other entries, for instance in favor of a commercial break. The implicit or explicit reasons for these political choices can include racial bias (Larson & Rivenburgh 1991, 7-9/15). In short, journalists and broadcasters (editors, channel and programme directors, etc.) are significant actors in the process of mediatization.

This may also partly be why the last statement in the bye-law to rule 48 (IOC 2020, 89) prohibits participants (e.g. athletes, coaches, officials, press attachés) from “acting as a journalist”. The participants are mediated to the world but they are not expected to affect or influence this process themselves. Implicitly, by perpetuating the distinction between ‘journalist’ and ‘participant’, this policy also sheds some light on the IOC’s additional prohibition of “political, religious or racial propaganda” (the fact that a definition of propaganda is not provided indicates that the IOC determines whether content is propagandist) (IOC 2020, 90). I have argued in my first chapter that it is paradoxical to accept de Coubertin’s insistence on the apolitical nature of the Games. However, if the IOC can formally attribute political commentaries and/or propaganda (which could mean, for instance, that a journalist or participant from a particular nation would [mis]use the Games to disseminate proclaimed propagandic content) to the sphere of journalism, it can indeed attempt to perpetuate the view that the Games themselves are meant to be separated from politics. If a participant makes a political statement that is of disadvantage to the IOC, the

⁷² In a similar manner, as a researcher, I will not be able to escape the fact that some ceremonial elements may appear less significant or less clear to me than others, and that I may be less qualified than, for instance, a Chinese scholar to expand on particular historical and cultural parts of the Beijing ceremonies of 2008.

IOC can refer to the rules embedded in the Charter, and if a political statement is made by a journalist, the IOC can stress that this happened outside the 'inner sphere' of the participants who agreed to the rules embedded in the Charter. Accordingly, all internal decisions concerning the coverage of the Games by the media "rest within the competence of the IOC" (IOC 2020, 89), which implies that journalists can (and may) only act on the basis of materials and access provided by the IOC.

The problem is that by mediating the Games (an act which is constantly embedded in a process of mediatization), the IOC cannot detach itself from the media process that it frames as the sole product of broadcast systems, journalists and reporters. Since the IOC has the authority to determine what to show and what to hide, it is possible to conceive of the configuration of the global broadcast signal itself as a political or propagandist act. Moreover, the fact that the IOC partly uses the ceremonies to stress the apolitical character of the Games can in itself be understood as a political statement, contributing to the global enterprise of pacifism and defending the (shared) objectives of the UN.

On ritual

From my discussion of 'religion' in chapter 1 it may be evident that I am initially careful to use the term one on one in order to characterize the nature of Olympism and Olympic ceremony. Yet, terms as 'ceremony' and especially 'worldview' are (too) frequently considered in supposedly 'mundane' or secular settings where the question would be why the position of a religious studies scholar is of any interest. Thus I do think that my own research requires terminology more closely associated with the study of religion. The terminological challenge is that I need a proper theoretical framework with(in) which I am able to discuss the suggestion of religious elements (via the ancient Olympics and the philosophy of de Coubertin) and the (symbolic) content inherent to Olympic ceremonies *without* having to claim that I am studying overarching religious content. I find this framework in the category of ritual.⁷³

In his 2014 book *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, Ritual Studies scholar Ronald Grimes (b. 1943) emphasizes that ritual does not necessarily coalesce with religion. In the same way that worldview can encompass both religion and non-religion, the category of ritual can stand for

⁷³ For a intriguing analysis of modern sport in terms of ritual, see (Birrell 1981).

both religious and non-religious ritual forms (Grimes 2014, 6). At the same time, religion is often involved in ritual and the two have been frequently considered in tandem. In the nineteenth century, several early theorists of ritual, classified under the header of the “myth-ritual schools” (Bell 2009, 3, 5), were inclined to conceive of ritual as the source of religion and culture, which implies that one can only understand the category of religion by studying ritual first. Another tendency I notice myself is that ritual is often connected to human practices whereas religion is linked to ideas and institutional systems. From the start of this study I have already attempted to counter this tendency implicitly by emphasizing how Olympism is configured both in ‘theory’ (through the Olympic Charter) and in (embodied) practice. This complementary process goes for any suggestion of religious elements and practices embedded in the Olympic context. The next step for this particular chapter is to further unpack the category of ritual in order to see why it might actually fit my study of Olympism and Olympic ceremony more neatly than the category of religion.

As ritual studies scholar Catherine Bell (1953-2008) has indicated, scholars have set up categories to discern types of ritual activities since the early days of the study of ritual,⁷⁴ but these taxonomies will vary dependent on the scholar’s specific background and orientation (Bell 2009, 91). While I agree with Bell that it must still be possible to find a fair amount of consensus on *categories* of ritual activity (Bell 2009, 91),⁷⁵ it is something different to find one general definition of ritual that may apply in all situations. If I would attempt to provide a general definition of ritual myself, I would encounter the exact same problem I anticipated with regard to the category of ‘religion’. I do find it feasible, however, to provide a work definition of ritual that is in any case apt to the context of my study, but also broad enough to suggest and invite a range of ritual activities embedded in different research settings. In this sense, I understand ritual as a distinguished set of socio-cultural practices enacted within a delineated frame of time and space. The ritual is a) distinguished, because the IOC perpetuates a specific set of practices that have to be enacted specifically in the ritual context of the ceremony, and b) bound to a delineated frame of time and space, since it does not take place at any moment (the Olympic cycle of four years for summer and winter

⁷⁴ See, for instance, the first three chapters of *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, which focuses on the history of the study of ritual (Bell 2009).

⁷⁵ Bell discerns categories of ritual activity and characteristics of ritual-like activities (Bell 2009, 91, 138-139).

Games) and its location is confined (one city, one stadium) and determined in advance.⁷⁶ The Olympic cycle generates a vast ritual context which accompanies and co-facilitates the actual ritual.

Based on this understanding of ritual, which echoes multiple categories and characteristics of ritual (or ritual-like) activity set up by Bell,⁷⁷ I conceive of Olympic opening and closing ceremonies as rituals. The delineation of Olympic ritual is evident and yet ambiguous. The challenge here is to speak of ritual in settings that may be ‘bound to a specific frame of time and space’, and yet carry *universal* instead of culturally specific appeal. While every ceremony allows a particular country (and city) to enact its own ritual segments, these segments are part of a broader Olympic context and are also presented as such, despite evident nationalist tendencies. The contemporary possibilities of mediation make sure that the ritual is witnessed worldwide, which means that one could hypothetically reject the idea that the ritual location is confined. At the same time, there is a distinction between the mediated ritual and the actual ritual on-site; the mediated registration of the ritual can be watched nearly everywhere, but one can only witness an unmediated display of the ritual (e.g. a display which is not directly affected by camera perspectives and editing choices) if one is present in the stadium and focuses on the action (and not on the large screens with live-imagery which are also present in the stadium). Thus, Olympic ritual still needs a ‘real’ and physical context ritual context (e.g. a delineated frame of time and space, aside from the fact that Olympic ceremonies are recorded and broadcast) in order to be acknowledged as such. In the modern age the Olympics are neatly tied to the calendar of the IOC and its decisions on the host countries and ceremonial locations.

On ritualization

Studying the Olympics in a ritual context allows me to complete my gradual move from worldview to worldview dynamics. In chapter 1 I have explained how the notion of

⁷⁶ I will share some thoughts on the ritual status of this “delineated frame of time and space” in chapter 3.

⁷⁷ The Olympic opening and closing ceremonies display (by any means) elements of calendrical rites (2009, 102), feasting/festivals (2009, 120) and political rituals (which I will expand on later; 2009, 128) and have *all* of the six characteristics (albeit to different degrees) that are described by Bell as attributes of ‘ritual-like activity’ (2009, 138): formalism or formalization (2009, 139), traditionalism (2009, 145), invariance (2009, 150), rule-governance (2009, 153), sacral symbolism (although one could of course debate on the implications of ‘sacral’; I will unpack the roots and current use of specific Olympic symbols in chapter 3; 2009, 155) and performance (see the closing of this chapter; 2009, 159).

worldview dynamics may already relativize the idea that worldviews are ‘static’ and separate from ever-evolving social relations. Ritual grounds this implication of change in concrete contexts of human practice, where social relations are shaped and reshaped via deliberate social practices.

Within the ritual context of the Olympics I discern ritual *enactments* and ritual *elements*. In Olympic ceremony, Olympism is configured by means of enactments (in its double connotation of “law-making” and “acting out a role”, see Merriam-Webster, n.d.) which contain several elements (“components”, “items”). For example, the Olympic flame, a ritual element, is involved in the ritual enactment of lighting a cauldron. It must always be derived from the context and one’s understanding of ritual whether the enactment can in fact be considered ritualistic. Giving a speech on a platform is not necessarily a ritualistic enactment, but if a Charter lists precisely which words are uttered at which specific moment and place, it may well be (IOC 2020, 95). In a similar manner the cauldron may also be a candle at home, and at once the context is no longer ritualistic per se. The golden standard here is that enactments and elements which are not intrinsically ‘ritualistic’ are ritualized in broader contexts of ritual.⁷⁸ I call this process *ritualization*. Thus, while the ritual is the broader formal context, ritualization denotes what is enacted and mobilized within the ritual. Grimes calls the act of ritualizing an act of “cultivating or inventing rites” (Grimes 2014, 193).⁷⁹ I would state that a ritual cannot exist if there is no process of ritualization involved.

The very use of the concept of ritualization raises the question whether or not an enactment or element can also denote ritual behavior or ritual content without being ritualized. May there be an ontology of ritual that does not necessarily involve processes of social construction? While this study cannot facilitate an extensive discussion of the many observations and arguments ritual scholars and others have provided on this big question,⁸⁰ I do think that in ritual contexts particular ritual elements may stand out more than others. I will not approach this via the question of ontology (or “intrinsic” ritual value), however, but via the suggestion of symbolic content. The broadest definition of symbol is that

⁷⁸ Examples of ways in which actions (or practices) can become ritualized are provided by Grimes (see Grimes 2014, 194).

⁷⁹ I do not use the term ‘rite’ in this study; when Grimes writes “rites, or rituals” (Grimes 2014, 193), it is evident to me that he is using the two interchangeably.

⁸⁰ Bell (2009) discusses her historiography of ritual and ritual interpretation, which also concerns the search for an ontology of ritual, in her first three chapters.

“something” (e.g. mostly a sign or a material object) stands for “something else” (e.g. an idea, a human or non-human entity, etc.). The Merriam-Webster dictionary suggests that the relation between the symbol and what is represented exists by reason of relationship, association, convention or accidental resemblance (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). My point here is that ritual elements are often symbolic, and that they are rendered recognizable and deemed significant especially by means of their symbolic value. In the Olympic context this happens especially by means of “convention”. Not all viewers and visitors of the Olympics may know the historically and culturally embedded meaning(s) of the Olympic flame, but they might still recognize the flame as a symbol belonging to the Olympic movement.⁸¹ This merely happens because the symbol is used repeatedly in the same socio-cultural context. I agree, at least in broad lines, with structuralist Edmund Leach (1910-1989) that “to understand symbolism is to explore in detail a specific ethnographic context” (quoted in Luo 2010, 773). Through ritualization the symbol is mobilized as a ritual element and linked to particular enactments (e.g. lighting the cauldron) which further anchor its function and purported meaning(s). Symbols are not necessarily ritual elements (and vice versa), and they do not strictly need ritual contexts to thrive, but the two often coalesce.

Ritual and politics

Implicitly my understanding of Olympic ceremonies as rituals indicates that I use the category of ritual more or less as a synonym of ceremony. Another way to explain it that I consider ceremony a variant of ritual. Victor Turner (1920-1983), a renowned contributor to the study of ritual, distinguished the two categories, referring to rituals as ‘transformative’ and ceremonies as ‘confirmatory’. In short, this means that he associates rituals with social *transitions* and ceremonies with social *states* (Turner 1967, 95). The distinction is comparable to the nuance between worldview (as ‘static’) and worldview dynamics (‘flexible’) that I discussed earlier. In this sense I also see the transitory and static factors in the configuration of Olympism as complementary rather than contradictory. What I find more important here, however, is the fact that Turner actually compares ritual and

⁸¹ On the Olympic Flame, see Yalouri (2010), MacAloon (2012), Maguire, Black & Darlington (2015). Scholars interested in the “recognizability” of Olympic symbolism may consider the notion of “iconic power” (broader terminology: “iconicity”) studied by, among others, Bartmánski and Alexander (2012).

ceremony one on one. It demonstrates how close the two terms actually are, even when you would agree with Turner's distinction.

An intriguing sidenote of Turner is his statement that politico-legal institutions have greater importance in ceremonial settings. This is evidently true for the decisive role of the IOC in the configuration of Olympic ceremony; the question is, however, if Turner's statement implies that he somehow considers *rituals* more distanced from politics. This apparent disconnection of ritual and politics in Turner's definition may appear to be a minor detail, but I deem it crucial to my own consideration of politics in the Olympic context. In chapter one I have explained why politics are and have been such a crucial factor in the configuration of Olympism as worldview, and yet I have not included the 'political' in my work definition of ritual. The main reason is that I was hesitant to stress a factor that is usually not considered intrinsic to the general category. Catherine Bell, for instance, discusses "political rituals" as one out of six main categories of ritual activity (Bell 2009, 94). The fact that she chooses to discern the political sphere from the other (predominantly) socio-cultural spheres of ritual activity indicates that politics are, at least to her, not intrinsic to the general category. Ronald Grimes, who is indebted to the work of Bell, shares five different definitions from reputable scholars of ritual, and none of them explicitly entails politics or ideology, except the one from Turner, in which 'politico-legal institutions' are, as discussed, mentioned in a sidenote (Grimes 2014, 189).

My suggestion is that his inclination to relate politico-legal institutions to ceremony (and not to ritual) may not only have to do with a common yet limited understanding of politics as "bound to institutional contexts", but also with the close relation between ritual studies and anthropology. An enormous amount of *ethnographic* ritual studies concentrates on practices occurring within identified social groups and delineated cultural environments. While scholars from various disciplines may agree that social relations can never be automatically detached from power relations ('the social is also political'), it is completely understandable if an ethnographer or cultural anthropologist focuses on the role of ritual practice in the configuration of social and cultural cohesion. In a similar vein, worldviews can be discussed as socio-cultural products of meaning making processes, whereby the political or ideological component can be downplayed relatively easily. For instance, I noticed when I read Taves & Asprem's several articles on worldview (Taves, Asprem & Ihm 2018, Taves & Asprem 2018,

Taves & Asprem 2019, Taves 2020) that the words ‘politics’ (or ‘political’) and ‘ideology’ (or ‘ideological’) were barely used.⁸² The main terminology for both worldview and ritual appears to be social, cultural, and possibly also cognitive/psychological (Taves, Asprem & Ihm 2018).

Let me be clear, my point is not that politics are left out or downplayed on ‘purpose’, nor do I want to imply that many scholars (particularly anthropologists) may generally feel more comfortable (and/or less pressured) in their study of purportedly non-political ritual content. In some settings the political dimension may indeed be less present or significant, and a plurality of contemporary anthropological accounts explaining and expanding on power relations attests to settings where the political dimension is evident. Yet there are situations where the relation between a social group involved in ritual practice and a scholar involved in ritual study can be destabilized once a scholar a) critically considers power relations expressed through ritual practice or b) explicitly involves his or her own political attitude or perspective (as part of the scholar’s worldview) in the communication with the social group and/or the eventual study. This already demands much less consideration if the social group or cultural environment is studied ‘from a distance’, as I do in this study. I am aware that the lack of a professional relation with a social group, which usually comes with ethical agreements and responsibilities, might make it easier to foreground the political as a dimension of ritual.

Ultimately this is mostly important because I retrieve the category of ritual from scholarly contexts which are largely dissimilar from mine, and I want to properly integrate my subject with a theoretical framework as broad and hybrid as ritual. I know few studies that actively use the category for global mass events and renderings of popular culture, such as the Olympic ceremonies. In general, I think that studies of these types of events are too often limited to media studies, theater studies or performance studies, where the link to ritual may appear less evident, especially when the term is associated too neatly with religion. Instead scholars in media, theater and performance studies might use terms such as

⁸² Based on a document search on these specific words. ‘Politics’ is mentioned one time in relation to Hobbes (e.g. Thomas Hobbes; Taves & Asprem 2018, 8). Two relatively general renderings of ‘political’ are included in (Taves & Asprem 2019; 297, 306). ‘Ideologies’ are mentioned one time when Taves discusses the contribution of Droogers (Taves 2020, 139), who does devote a specific section to the question of religion and ideology (Droogers & van Harskamp 2014, 26-29).

‘performance’ (and ‘performativity’), ‘spectacle’⁸³, or indeed ‘enactment’ and evade the notion of ritual altogether. One of the goals of this study is to bring these fields closer together by studying mediation in a ritual context. My focus on visual analysis, mediation and enactment echoes approaches more akin to the fields of media and performance studies, while my discussion of worldview and ritual ultimately anchors the study as a whole in the field of religious studies.

To conclude, I consider the concepts of mediatization (in the context of media technologies) and ritualization (in the context of ritual) particularly apt to study Olympic opening and closing ceremonies, which can be understood as rituals that are to a great extent governed by media technologies. Media technologies offer a widely accessible framework in which ritual elements and enactments can be performed and emphasized through all types of organizational and directorial choices. Thus, ritualization is facilitated and enhanced by mediatization, as the increasing role and influence of media technologies in society renders processes of ritualization more accessible and visible to broader audiences. Olympic opening and closing ceremonies are prime examples of media rituals in the global, digital age. In the third chapter I will finally turn to the ceremonies themselves, focusing first on formalized and thus recurring ritual enactments and ritual elements.

⁸³ The term ‘spectacle’ was famously used by French philosopher Guy Debord (1931-1994) in his seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle* (2002, orig. 1967), in which he provides a commentary on the status of western capitalist society and the far-reaching influence of media.

Chapter 3: The ritualized configuration of Olympism in Olympic opening and closing ceremonies

My analysis of Olympic opening and closing ceremonies focuses on the configuration of Olympism as worldview. The category of ritual provides a specific theoretic lens through which this process can be studied. In this chapter I provide a general and average outline of contemporary Olympic opening and closing ceremonies and set out which ritual elements (e.g. forms, objects, often specific symbols) and ritual enactments (e.g. concrete human practices) feature within their various segments. I initiate my analysis of the three most recent Olympic editions with a discussion of the ritual elements and enactments which recur in multiple opening and closing ceremonies and in that sense transcend ceremonial particularity.

General outline of Olympic opening and closing ceremonies

Olympic opening and closing ceremonies standardly consist of various segments, which may contain various ritual elements and enactments. Not all segments are ritualized to the same extent. In my analysis I intend to explain how and, if possible or applicable, why specific elements and enactments within these ceremonies are ritualized. While a considerable part of every ceremony consists of 'open' segments, which are entertained by the host country (and thus vary), several other segments of the opening and closing ceremonies have been part of the set-up over a longer time, containing standardized ritual and symbolic elements and enactments which are included and/or performed in the same way every Olympic edition. These elements and enactments are indispensable to any understanding of the way in which Olympism is configured in its most central and significant ritual context.

Before I can take this argument further it is necessary to provide a general outline of the most recent opening and closing ceremonies. I have based most general descriptions on the ceremonial program of the 2012 Games, as this program is the midpoint of the three editions I study. In relation to the ceremonies of 2008 and 2016, the ceremonial program has been standardized to such an extent that I had only had to check particular elements in order to include slight ceremonial changes in my outlines as well. The visual samples are derived from all three editions.

I must stress that the compartmentalization of the ceremonies is my own work. The segment overviews compiled by the creative teams behind the ceremony and the IOC can easily be retrieved from the respective media guides (see IOC 2008, 16; IOC 2012, 14; IOC 2016, 6). These overviews usually list multiple smaller segments which I consider sub-segments (for instance: the various scenes in the opening host country performance are considered as separate segments, see IOC 2008). Since I initially focus on commonalities, rather than one particular ceremony, I have chosen to make the list as concise and comprehensible as possible. In the fourth chapter, where I will zoom in on the specific performance contributions of the host countries, I will in many cases use the (sub-)segment titles chosen by the creative teams.

Opening Ceremony

1) Countdown/opening

Segment type: open

The ceremony is typically opened with a brief performance or countdown.⁸⁴ While this segment is open and thus mainly dependent on the input of the host country, the countdown may particularly allude to the broader Olympic theme by means of Olympic symbolism.

Right before and during the opening the ceremonial location, which is always a stadium or arena, is highlighted, for instance by means of aerial (drone) shots that demonstrate the location's grandeur. In 2008, the ceremonies took place at Beijing National Stadium. The London Olympic stadium hosted the ceremonies in 2012. In 2016, the location was Maracanã Stadium in Rio de Janeiro.

2) Host country performance

Segment type: open

The host country performance is usually the most creative part of the ceremony. The main performance may consist of different thematic segments and/or (inter-)connected performances of music and dance which are created and executed predominantly by artists

⁸⁴ The opening of London lasted 3 minutes and 26 seconds (Miah 2021, 46).

and performers from the host country. In 2008, 2012 and 2016 alike the creative credits were assigned to artists who usually work as film directors. In 2008, the host country performance was directed by Yimou Zhang (*Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*), in 2012 by Danny Boyle (*Trainspotting*, *Slumdog Millionaire*) and in 2016 by Fernando Meirelles (*Cidade de Deus*, *The Constant Gardener*), Daniela Thomas (*Linha de Passe*) and Andrucha Waddington (*Casa de Areia*). This is the main reason that Olympic ceremonies may appear cinematic in terms of registration; the host country performances are not filmed solely as 'sport events' but rather as high-profile entertainment shows displaying near cinematic narratives of the nations. The concept "narrative of the nation" was introduced by cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1992, 293) as "a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols and rituals that stand for the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation". While I hope to elaborate, in the next chapter, on my suggestion that there is always an interplay between the construction of the nation and the configuration of Olympism, which keeps me from understanding Olympic ceremonies in their entirety as "narratives of the nation", this broad concept definitely applies to the host country performances. It emphasizes the extent to which the host country performances are constructed to display idealized 'versions' of a (host) country that may not correspond with historical and political reality.

Music plays a crucial role in the larger context of every host country performance, but specific music performances may also be highlighted as specific segments. For instance, in 2012, performances of comedian and actor Rowan Atkinson (with the London Symphonic Orchestra) and singer Emeli Sandé were both listed and commented upon separately in the official media guide for broadcasters (Mioh 2012, 45, 51, 53-54). There may be more intermezzo's. In 2012, for instance, London chose to portray a part of the Olympic flame relay (on which I will expand later in this chapter) during the host country performance, which was closed by British singer Emeli Sandé with dancer and choreographer Akram Kahn. Different people were shown carrying the flame at various locations before (former) soccer player and celebrity David Beckham took on the object at an airport and navigated it towards the stadium in a speedboat. This also re-emphasizes that open segments may be partly used to repeat and further integrate Olympic symbolism.

3) Parade of the athletes

Segment type: closed

During the parade of the athletes, almost all participants enter the stadium in a celebratory walk-in. The different countries are recognizable by their national flags, which are always carried by one participant who is specifically appointed to do so.

The 2012 media guide states that “in the past, this has been seen as an excessively long part of the ceremony and some have called for it to be shortened, but it is the single opportunity for all athletes to partake in a common ritual” (Mioh 2012, 54; notice that the term ritual is used here as well). The irony is that some participants are traditionally absent from either the opening ceremony because they have to compete early during the Games (Mioh 2012, 54). Their presence would make the parade even longer.

4) Olympic Truce / Olympic laurel

Segment type: open/closed

In 2008 a hundred young women lead athletes and audiences in imitating flying doves by crossing their arms and waving their hands (IOC 2008, 56). In 2012 the parade of the athletes was followed by a brief performance (by the rock band Arctic Monkeys) which particularly alluded to the Olympic Truce (the importance of which I explained in the first chapter) and the peace dove (see IOC 2012, 34). In 2016 peace doves returned once more during the first presentation of the Olympic laurel, an award in honor of “outstanding individuals in culture, education, development and peace through sport” (IOC 2016). IOC president Thomas Bach commented that the laurel was introduced to “reconnect” (which implies that the connection was somehow lost, but this is not elucidated), by focusing on human development through peace and sport, with the ideals and values of the ancient Olympics. These ideals and values are then linked to the vision of Pierre de Coubertin, who intended to revive the Olympics in the spirit of the ancient Games (IOC 2016). The laurel will be awarded during every opening ceremony to come since 2016. The presentation of the laurel in Rio could be said to have standardized a ceremonial segment focusing specifically on the notion of peace (see figure 3). The winner of the laurel also gives a speech.

Anyone who is classified as such an “outstanding individual” can be elected as receiver of the laurel; in fact, although the IOC’s official announcement from 2016 (see IOC 2016) does not explicate it, the idea seems to be that an individual is eligible once he or she has (hypothetically) meant something to people from *all* nations. In this sense, the ideal of ‘peace’ is always the idea of ‘world peace’ and awarded individuals have been fruitful in promoting the ideal on a transnational, ‘Olympic’ level.



Figure 3: children running through the stadium with paper peace doves lifted in the air (2016 OC).

5) Formal opening of the Games

Segment type: closed

The most traditional and formalized part of the ceremony consists of a few brief interconnected and complementary segments, presented here in the chronological order of 2012:

- A speech by the chair of the organizing committee/NOC
- A speech by the IOC president

The IOC president asks the monarch or premier of the host country to declare the Games opened. The declaration of the head of state – “I declare open the Games of ... (name of the host) celebrating the ... (number of the Olympiad) ... Olympiad of the modern era” (IOC 2020, 95) – has been completely formalized through the Olympic Charter. I suggest that the

legitimation of this particular declaration and other speeches and addresses (the speeches of the chair of the organizing committee and the IOC president) has been limited so strictly to ensure that the platform will not be ‘hijacked’ for nationalist or other political purposes. This is implied, but not stated explicitly, by means of the emphasis that is placed on the prohibition of ‘other’ speeches or addresses (2020, 95). The protocolary prohibition shows once more, just as in chapter 2, that the IOC is tightly planning and controlling the mediation of its ceremonial content.

- The Olympic flag is carried into the stadium by purported icons of the Olympic movement who are appointed specifically for the occasion.
- The Olympic Anthem is played

The music for the Olympic Anthem was written by opera composer Spyridon Samaras (1861-1917), and the words were added by Kostis Palamus (1859-1943):

“Ancient immortal spirit, unsullied father of that which beautiful, great and true, descend, make thyself known and shine here on this earth and below these skies, witness of thy glory. Illuminate the endeavour wrought in noble contests, in the running race, the wrestling and the throwing. Place a wreath of evergreen branch, creating the body as of iron and worthy. Vales, mountains and oceans shine with thee like unto a great temple of white and porphyry. To which **all peoples** hasten to this **temple to worship thee**, Oh ancient immortal spirit” (quoted in IOC 2008, 54, emphasis is mine).

In the context of the category of ‘religion’ it is especially interesting that an (non-or de-personified) “ancient immortal spirit” is evoked in a context of worship, while there is no further reference (at least not in the Olympic ceremonial context) to the nature of this spirit and/or to practice of actual worship. In line with the discussion on the arguments of Jirásek in chapter 1 (2015, 294), the question might remain (as there is no evident answer) whether the lyrics are only “figure of speech” or “traditional artefact” or whether an actual notion of worship (directed to this “ancient immortal spirit”) is still engrained in Olympic (ceremonial) practice. In any case, the lyrics of the anthem are not highlighted in a way that would draw extra attention of audiences, which could be achieved by providing textual display(s) and/or a(n) (English) translation.

The Anthem was first played at the first modern Olympics of 1896, but after that it took until 1958 (and the Games of 1960) before the music was adopted as the standard hymn of the Olympic movement (Lattipongpun 2010, 109). In the years between, every host country commissioned its own ceremonial music.

- The flags are raised

There are three types or categories of flags involved in the Olympic ceremonial context: a) the Olympic flag; b) the flag of the host country and c) the flags of all other countries (which are typically displayed during the parade of the athletes). Various flags are visible throughout the opening and closing ceremonies, but there is an actual formal moment during which the Olympic flag and the flag of the host country are raised on a pole. In 2012 the flags were raised on a green hill that also displayed the flags of all the other participating countries (figure 4):



Figure 4: The green hill with the flags of the participating countries (2012 OC).

- The taking of the oaths⁸⁵

⁸⁵ In 2012 the 'taking of the oaths'-part was entangled with the 'lighting of the cauldron'-segment, which I will discuss next. I have listed the element here because I still consider it to belong chiefly to the formal opening, and also because the 'lighting of the cauldron'-segment takes its own special place within the ceremonial program.

Three individual participants take Olympic oaths by reading out loud scripted texts. The participants represent (respectively) the athletes, the judges and the coaches.

In 2012 the athlete taking the oath on behalf of the athletes read the following text:

“In the name of all the competitors, I promise that we shall take part in the Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules which govern them, committing ourselves to a sport without doping and without drugs, in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of our sports and the honor of our teams (transcribed from IOC 2008/2019)”

In 2008 the woman who took the oath on behalf of the athletes touched the Olympic flag why she read the text, so as to emphasize the connection between her words and the (Olympic) context (figure 5):



Figure 5: Chinese athlete Zhang Yining taking the Olympic oath on behalf of the athletes (2008 OC).

6) Lighting of the cauldron

Segment type: closed

During this segment the Olympic flame is carried into the stadium. The journey of the flame, on which I will expand later in this chapter, always ends at the cauldron, which is installed at a selected spot in the stadium.

While this is a recurring segment that is also highly formalized, both the way in which the flame is carried toward the cauldron and the way in which the cauldron is ignited may vary. The lighting of the cauldron is a literal highlight of the ceremony and the way in which this is done is often presented as a revelation or surprise in order to heighten the ‘wow’-effect. In this way the ‘lighting of the cauldron’-segment is evidently set apart as (probably) ‘the most special’ and most anticipated occasion of the opening (Mioh 2012, 55).

7) Celebration

Segment type: open

Once all formalities are done, the ceremony has an open ending in which music and/or pyrotechnic display initiate further celebration within the stadium. In 2012, The Beatles’ Paul McCartney sang ‘Hey Jude’ loud into the night. This is often where the television broadcasts wrap up and only audiences in the stadium will experience how long the festivities actually continue.

Closing Ceremony

1) Host country performance

Although the closing ceremony evidently involves an opening as well, this is highlighted and formalized to a lesser extent, which makes it safe to frame the entire first segment as the host country performance. Even more than during the opening ceremony, the focus is on celebration. Usually there are more single musical performances involved and the thematic program is less extensive and accentuated. In 2012, for instance, filmmaker Danny Boyle did not direct the closing ceremony, and despite an impressive creative set-up (featuring the ‘London Eye’, the Big Ben and the Tower Bridge) that was visible almost from the beginning, the show appeared to be focused more on presenting a chain of celebrity performances than on highlighting new thematic content.

2) Parade of the athletes

At some point during the host country performance the athletes will start to enter the stadium. In 2012 this happened after Emeli Sandé, who also performed during the opening ceremony, sang the reprise of the song with which she had also opened the closing ceremony (“Read All About It Part II”). The athletes come in much earlier than they do during

the opening ceremony, and usually the closing ceremony also lasts much shorter. The parade is organized in a different, more flexible manner. The flags of the competing countries are carried into the stadium in one long trail, since the countries have already been introduced during the opening ceremony. There are also no visual markers (as there are during the broadcast of the opening ceremony) to indicate when a particular country enters the stadium. The athletes may still join the parade in the company of their fellow countrymen, but it is easier for them to mix in with other athletes and it is more difficult to isolate particular countries. In line with the understanding, embedded in my work definition of ritual, that the ceremonies feature a *distinguished* (which partly indicates regulation/organization) set of socio-cultural practices, this 'alternative' parade of the athletes invites us to question whether the closing ceremony (*at least* this segment) is somehow 'less ritualistic' than the opening. In the 'alternative' parade of the athletes, the focus is 'merely' on their presence, which may be deregulated and chaotic, and not on the way in which the parade is usually presented (e.g. the athletes walk in the regulated units of their country). Paradoxically enough, I believe that the 'alternative' parade, despite its 'chaotic' appearance, actually becomes a distinguished part of the ritual. The 'mix' or entanglement of athletes celebrates the notion of (global) "togetherness" which is central to the Olympic Movement. The 'alternative' parade is a ritual enactment in which separation (e.g. the regulated country units) is abolished in favor of unification.

3) Victory ceremony for the men's marathon

All award ceremonies are organized in the course of the Games. The victory ceremony for the men's marathon is an exception, which can be connected to the ancient Greek roots of the marathon, both etymologically and as a discipline.⁸⁶ These roots give the marathon a special position within the Olympic programme.

4) Praise for the volunteers

⁸⁶ The word 'marathon' is derived from the legend on the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE), in which it is reported that a Greek soldier ran 42.195 kilometers (this exact distance was only standardized much later) from Marathon to Athens to tell that the Greeks had won from the Persian army. The marathon was part of the modern Olympic programme from the first edition onwards, although it took the organization until the 1920s to implement the precise distance of 42.195 kilometers.

Some volunteers are called on stage to be thanked and honored on behalf of the immense larger group of volunteers.

5) Continuation of the host country performance / celebration

More (musical and theatrical) performances follow. In 2012, bands and artists such as Muse, Oasis and George Michael took the stage.

6) Formal closing of the Games

While I have stressed that the closing ceremony is less formalized than the opening ceremony, there is still a significant formal segment that highlights the transfer of the Games from the current host country to the next one. The following elements and enactments are integrated:

- The national anthem of Greece is played

While this happens, the Greek flag is raised as well. The Greek flag and anthem represent the roots and history of the ancient Games and the initiation of the modern Games in Greece (Lattipongpun 2010, 111).

- The Olympic flag is lowered and taken from its pole

This signifies the end of the Games in its current host country. The Olympic anthem is usually played and/or sang again as well.

- The transfer of the host position

The major of the host city is joined on stage by the IOC president and the major of the next host city. The three individuals perform a specific ritual whereby they wave with a smaller version of the Olympic Flag in a specific order: the major of the host city gives the flag back to the IOC president, who then hands it over to the major of the next host city. The ritual indicates that the IOC (embodied by its president) is the owner and mediator of the flag who is able to transfer it from one host to another.

- The national anthem of the next host country is played

While this happens, the flag of the next host country is raised.

- Transfer of the host country performance

The transfer of the host position is followed by a performed segment that is now initiated by the new host country. This might mean, for instance, that an artist from the next host country will perform a song or choreography. The performance of the host country may be followed by or combined with a reprise of the host country performance of the current host country.

- A speech by the chair of the organizing committee/NOC
- A speech by the IOC president

The same individuals who are allowed to give a speech during the opening ceremony also give a speech during the closing ceremony.

- The extinction of the cauldron

After the speeches the Olympic fire burning in the cauldron is extinguished. Again this may happen in various ways, dependent on the set-up of the cauldron and its location within the stadium.

7) Celebration

The closing ceremony has a relatively open ending, similar to the opening ceremony. Once all formal enactments have succeeded, the show can continue with some final performances that usually feature artists from the current host country. The ceremony usually has an open ending, whereby the celebration in the stadium continues while the camera shifts to a bird's eye or helicopter view of the ceremonial site.

The ritualized configuration of Olympism in Olympic opening and closing ceremonies

A few particular ritual elements and enactments included in this general outline demand further consideration and explanation. For me these are the ritualized elements and enactments crucial to the configuration of Olympism. Most of the elements and enactments are a part of, or neatly connected to the 'formal' segments of the ceremonies. I propose the following selection:

- The Olympic logo (the five Olympic rings)
ritual element; opening and closing ceremony; various segments

- The Olympic Flame
ritual element; opening and closing ceremony; various segments, *mainly* segment 6
- The 'peace symbol' and the Olympic conception of peace
ritual element; opening and closing ceremony; various segments, *mainly* segment 4
(opening ceremony)
- Olympic award ceremony
ritual enactment; *mainly* closing ceremony (marathon)⁸⁷; segment 3
- The Olympic flag, other flags and the raising of the flags
ritual element/ritualized enactment; opening and closing ceremony; segment 5
(opening ceremony) and segment 6 (closing ceremony)
- The Olympic anthem and the playing of other anthems
ritual element/ritualized enactment; opening and closing ceremony; segment 5
(opening ceremony) and segment 6 (closing ceremony)
- The Olympic speech
ritualized enactment; opening and closing ceremony; segment 5 (opening ceremony)
and segment 6 (closing ceremony)

Together, these ritual elements and ritual enactments display a mix, in line with the way in which I identified the workings of worldview in chapter 1, between Olympic 'theory' (the values and principles of Olympism) and Olympic practice. The Olympic speech, for example, is an enactment in which Olympic 'theory' can be verbally expressed, and ritual elements such as the Olympic logo are used in Olympic practice to highlight selected (sub-)segments of the host country performance. I will now elaborate on my selection and explain why these ritual elements and enactments are particularly significant.

⁸⁷ The presentation of the laurel in 2016 could be considered as an award ceremony as well, but I will analyze this more extensively in this paragraph than I did when I introduced the enactment.

The Olympic logo



Figure 6: the Olympic logo graphically displayed in the air during the 2008 opening ceremony (2008 OC).

The five interlaced rings of the Olympic logo represent the five continents in the global spirit of interconnectedness. As the imagery displays (see figures 6 and 7), different color configurations can be chosen specifically for ceremonial purposes, but the color combination of the logo's standard version is blue, yellow, black, green and red against a white background. This combination was chosen as to represent and include every country in the world, since every country uses at least one of these six colors in its national flag (Lattipongpun 2010, 109, 110). Figures 6 and 7 demonstrate how the Olympic logo is always displayed prominently to be witnessed by the attendants and the world during the opening ceremony. In 2012 many volunteers were standing on the stadium field while the rings were ignited with pyrotechnics, looking up in awe to the spectacle that was unfolding right above them.



Figure 7: workers in the industrial age witness the Olympic logo in awe (2012 OC).

The Olympic Flame

Fire has been a prominent symbol since ancient times, not in the least because it is regarded as one of the basic elements of nature. Fire played a catalyzing role in the myth of Prometheus, where the mythological figure stole the (techniques of) fire from the Greek gods and gave it to humankind.⁸⁸ From the late eighteenth century onward fire symbolism gained renewed prominence in European contexts (especially in national festivals) due to the French revolution and the etymological metaphor of ‘light’ embedded in the notion of enlightenment as wisdom and knowledge production (Yalouri 2010, 2156, 2171). The Statue of Liberty with its torch of fire was a product of the nineteenth century. On the Olympic level, fire was already a ritual element during the first modern Games in 1896, and yet it was only ritualized further in the course of the twentieth century (Yalouri 2010, 2156-2157, 2176). The function of fire in the Promethean myth can provide a better understanding of what I deem a key interpretation of the symbolic value of fire in the modern context. Fire may be a (mythological) creation or invention of the (Greek) gods, in modern times it burns for the people.

⁸⁸ Prometheus is mentioned explicitly in the media guide of the 2012 opening ceremony: “The first Torchbearer was Prometheus, who stole fire from Mount Olympus and gave it as a gift to mankind” (IOC 2012, 36).

The fire of the flame is amplified in the Olympic cauldron, which burns from opening to closing day to denote the period in which the athletes are performing. The Olympic cauldron was installed during the 1928 Olympics, with the flame making its first official appearance, but the additional relay of the Olympic torch was not implemented before the 'Nazi'-Games of 1936 (Garcia 2008, 369; Lattipongpun 2010, 111). Carl Diem, whom I mentioned in chapter 1, advised the IOC in his function as host to light the flame at ancient Olympia, in front of the ruins of the temple of the Greek goddess Hera (Maguire, Black & Darlington 2015). In this regard, the relay denotes the process of carrying the flame from Olympia to the host country and ultimately to the Olympic stadium, where the torch flame is used to ignite the cauldron. Since 1936 new variations of the torch, reflecting the cultural characteristics of the host country, are designed for every Olympic occasion (IOC 2008, 58).

The relay introduced a initiatory ritual enactment (e.g. the lighting of the flame) to the Olympic ceremonial programme that is perhaps, of all ritual elements and enactments, most intrinsically connected to the ancient Games. The location of the lighting ceremony links the history of Olympia directly to modern Greece (see also Yalouri 2010, 2156-2157), where the first edition of the modern Olympic revival was organized. Although the ritual enactment is not performed and/or displayed during the opening ceremony itself, it is an official part of the ceremonial programme set specifically for the flame.⁸⁹ A registration of the lighting of the flame at Olympia for the (initial) 2020 Olympics was published by the IOC on the Olympic(s) YouTube-channel (Olympic(s) 2020). The subsequent flame relay is a means for people from many different countries to 'get in touch' with the Olympic phenomenon and witness a glimpse of the prominent Olympic symbol.⁹⁰ It also establishes a vital and explicit connection between the place where the flame is ignited and the location where the flame will burn during the Games. John MacAloon (2012) interprets the flame relay as a literal *rite de passage* (in the sense of Arnold van Gennep) in which a symbolic object has to be kept 'alive' over a long distance. Lighting and extinguishing the flame only happens on locations (Olympia, the Olympic stadium) that have been carefully ritualized. Still the actual focus of the flame relay is on 'the space between' or the journey, through which the fact that the fire

⁸⁹ For an exemplary discussion of responses to the lighting ceremony, here in the context of the 2004 Games in Athens, see (Yalouri 2010, 2167-2169).

⁹⁰ Extensive articles on the modern flame relay have been written by MacAloon (2012) and Maguire, Black and Darlington (2015). These articles also shed light on the way in which people actually respond to the flame relay and the promotion of the Olympic Games and Olympic symbolism.

endures gains extra value (MacAloon 2012, 583). In this regard, I agree with MacAloon that the modern flame relay is a ritual much more than a sport event (2012, 584).

The Olympic conception of peace and the ‘peace’-symbol

The introduction of the Olympic laurel in 2016 is an example of the way in which the notion of peace is constantly emphasized and revived in the context of Olympism and Olympic ceremony. The release of actual doves, which are generally recognized in western culture as symbols of peace (Lattipongpun 2010, 110), was an actual standard practice in Olympic opening ceremonies long before the dove symbolism in the ceremonies of 2012 and 2016. The use of actual doves was abandoned after a number of them had flown into the Olympic cauldron after being released during the 1988 opening ceremony in Seoul (2010, 110).

Professor in philosophy Heather L. Reid states that Olympic-style sport can cultivate peaceful attitudes in three ways: 1) “by carving out space and time for putting aside conflicts” (e.g. the Olympic Truce); 2) “by treating individuals as equals under the rules of the game” (e.g. fundamental principles 4 and 6; IOC 2020, 11-12); 3) “by tolerating and even celebrating differences” (e.g. fundamental principle 6; IOC 2020, 11-12) (Reid 2006, 207). The three methods outlined by Reid are clearly engrained in Olympic ceremonial practice, and I already explained in chapter 1 how the notion of peace has been embedded in the values and principles of Olympism since its early conception. Yet I have also alluded to de Coubertin’s paradoxical view that “athletics could be used to ‘strengthen peace or prepare for war’”, which alerts to treat the ideal of peace with caution. This is especially true in current times, where peace may be an explicit ideal of the UN but reality proves different, not only on a political and military (regional and national conflicts included) but also on a socio-cultural level. Thus, I argue that the continuous emphasis on ‘peace’ has to be regarded as an ideal that is related more to the symbolic framework of the Olympic Truce than to actual world affairs. Despite this nuance, fact is that the ‘peace’-ideal cannot be underestimated as a central pillar of Olympism and of ceremonial expression, not only because the ideal is symbolically emphasized, but also because it may be *the* prime example of soft power. It is evident that the ‘peace’-ideal is politicized, but its ‘natural’ universal attractiveness (in the sense that many people find it ‘logical’ or normal to long for peace) can easily conceal this fact by framing it as a social and cultural horizon.

Alongside the doves, a prominent and crucial symbol that is displayed in reference to the ideal of peace is what is used and classified today as the ‘peace’-symbol.

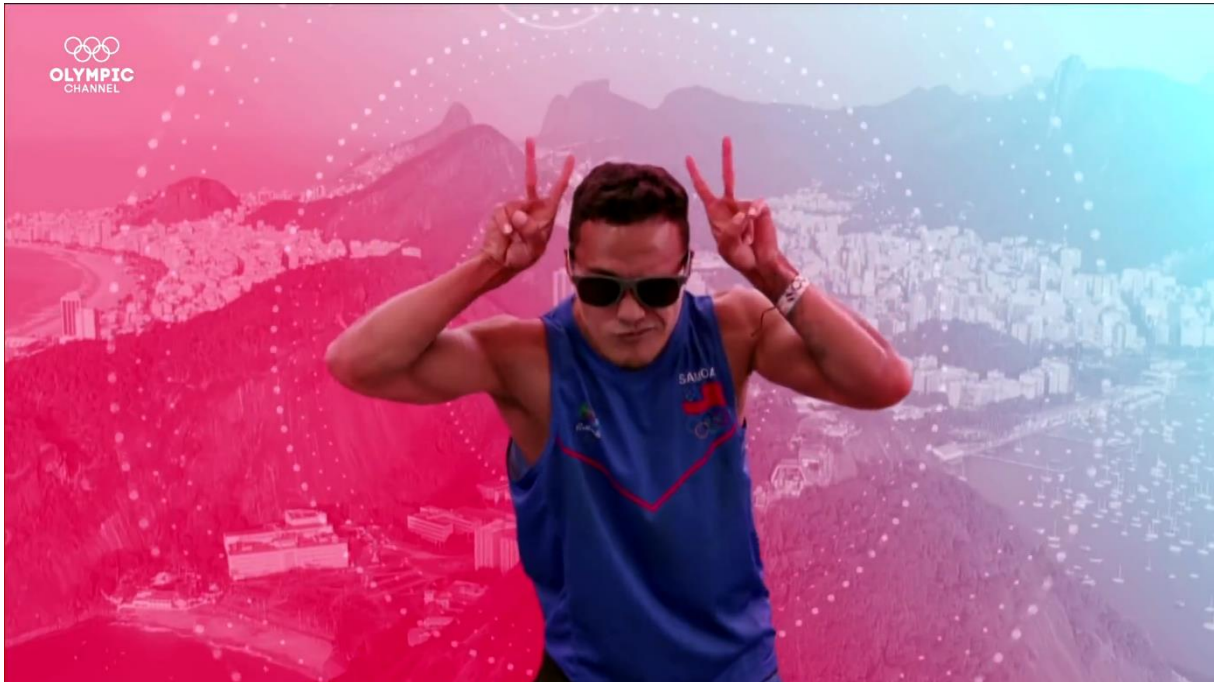


Figure 8: an athlete showing the ‘peace’-sign with both fingers in a compilation video displayed during the 2016 closing ceremony (2016 CC).

Two variations of the symbol have to be distinguished in terms of both regular contemporary and Olympic use. Most people today “say peace” by raising two fingers, which together form the letter ‘V’ (see figure 8). Saying peace and giving the hand sign has become a common expression (or even a way of greeting) in a globalized (westerly orientated) culture. Paradoxically, a more intricate variation of the ‘peace’-symbol displays the letter ‘V’ upside down. The upside down-‘V’ is combined with a vertical line bisecting a circle (Rigby 1998, 476). Andrew Rigby locates the origins of the symbol in the late 1950s, where it was indeed (re)invented as an icon of the nuclear disarmament movement (see Rigby 476-478). In fact, however, the roots of the symbol stretch much further, as the vertical line and the inverted ‘V’ denote the ancient Nordic rune-sign yr (Omniglot, n.d.), which is probably derived from a related Germanic or proto-Germanic rune sign algiz and was later incorporated into the Anglo-Saxon ‘younger futhorc’ alphabet as the sign ‘kalc-k’ or ‘calc’ (Schulte 2015, for the visual template, see Wikimedia commons)⁹¹. The two signs are

⁹¹ The meaning of the sign is ‘chalice’. The ‘V’-formation has been used since ancient times to denote femininity or the sacred feminine (the ability to give birth is attributed specifically to women, and, to provide an example with regard to the ‘sacred’ adjective that has been used frequently, a woman alone could give birth to Jesus) via the ‘womb’ or the cup/vessel (chalice) (Danesi 2009).

intrinsically related because the yr-sign is a mirror of the algiz-sign from the ‘elder futhorc’ alphabet (see Omniglot, n.d. and Schulte 2015). Multiple blog articles and website entry’s on the purported meanings of these signs can be found online, although they have to be approached with care.⁹² The most outspoken and evident interpretation that I found recurringly is that algiz was used with reference to life and birth, which indicates that the mirrored yr-sign denotes death (see, for instance, The Hidden Dominion 2017 or Medium 2020).⁹³ The Schutzstaffel (SS) copied the algiz and yr in its symbolic language before and during World War II, calling them (respectively) the ‘Lebensrune’ and the ‘Todesrune’ (Lumsden 1997, 146-147). The Todesrune was also used as a symbol for the gravestones of deceased SS officers (1997, 147). In an article on printmag.com Steven Heller calls it ironic that the “sign of peace in the 20th century was also the symbol of death in Nazi Germany” (PRINT 2017). This statement is an example of the ways in which symbols can be appropriated and reinvented in different, sometimes firmly contrasting ways, regardless of the (linguistic) contexts from which they originate. There is no way to determine exactly which appropriations and variations of the ‘peace’-symbol, other than the notion of peace itself, are either embraced or rejected by the Olympic movement. This is merely the case because the notion of peace is engrained in the Olympic use of the symbol (in its two variations) to such a great extent, and to my knowledge there are no official statements (for instance by the IOC) on the symbol’s roots and appropriations in different contexts, for instance in that of Nazi Germany.

⁹² It was particularly difficult to trace peer-reviewed literature on the *meanings* of rune signs. The sources I found tended to merely focus on linguistics. Internet articles on purported meanings are affluent, but source references are often lacking or incomplete.

⁹³ This might also clarify, at least partly, why the two variations of the ‘peace’-symbol in contemporary use display the ‘V’-formation upright *or* upside down and yet purport the same meaning. While I cannot assume blindly that the people who propose and use the ‘peace’ symbol in Olympic practice are aware of the symbol’s runic roots, one could interpret the paradox as yet another implicit example of de Coubertin’s equally paradoxical Olympic idea (as I discussed it in chapter 1) that “war is peace” (where death would be interpreted, in terms of futhorc alphabet, as war and life as peace).



Figure 9: a 'peace'-sign on stage looming in the background (2016 OC).

Via the popular Olympic appropriation of the 'peace'-symbol, in both contemporary variations, as a marker of the peace ideal, 'peace' is not only mobilized on a sociocultural and (implicitly) political level but also on a symbolic level.⁹⁴ Different variations of the 'peace'-symbol have been displayed during the opening ceremonies of 2012 (see figure 10) and 2016 (see figures 9, 11 and 12). The apparent tendency is that the 'style' of the symbol is slightly modified on the basis of the ceremony's thematic particularities. In 2012 volunteers formed the symbol physically, in a segment that was devoted to the 1960s and the music (of The Beatles and others) related to the hippie movement (entangled with the nuclear disarmament movement which I mentioned before), which prominently adopted and promoted peace and the 'peace'-symbol (figure 10).

⁹⁴ De Coubertin stated that the ideal of peace had become "a sort of religion" for the early Olympic Movement (Ruprecht Jr. 1998, 286), and while I have proposed a different approach to the study of Olympism (e.g. Olympism as worldview), it does not mean that I do not understand, or automatically disagree with, attempts to relate symbology and religion in the Olympic context. As I explained in chapter 1, my main objection lies with the *definition* of religion, but aside from that, the significance of symbology in and for the Olympic Movement is evident. Thus, I can and will not advance the statement that there is an intrinsic relation between symbology and religion, but I do have to admit that my own argumentation is built on a comparable premise: in my case symbology is central to the configuration of worldview.



Figure 10: the 'peace'-symbol during the 1960s (popular) music segment (2012 OC).

In 2016 the opening ceremony had a 'green' theme connected to the issue of climate change, on which I will expand in chapter 4.



Figure 11: the 'green' 'peace'-symbol (2016 OC).

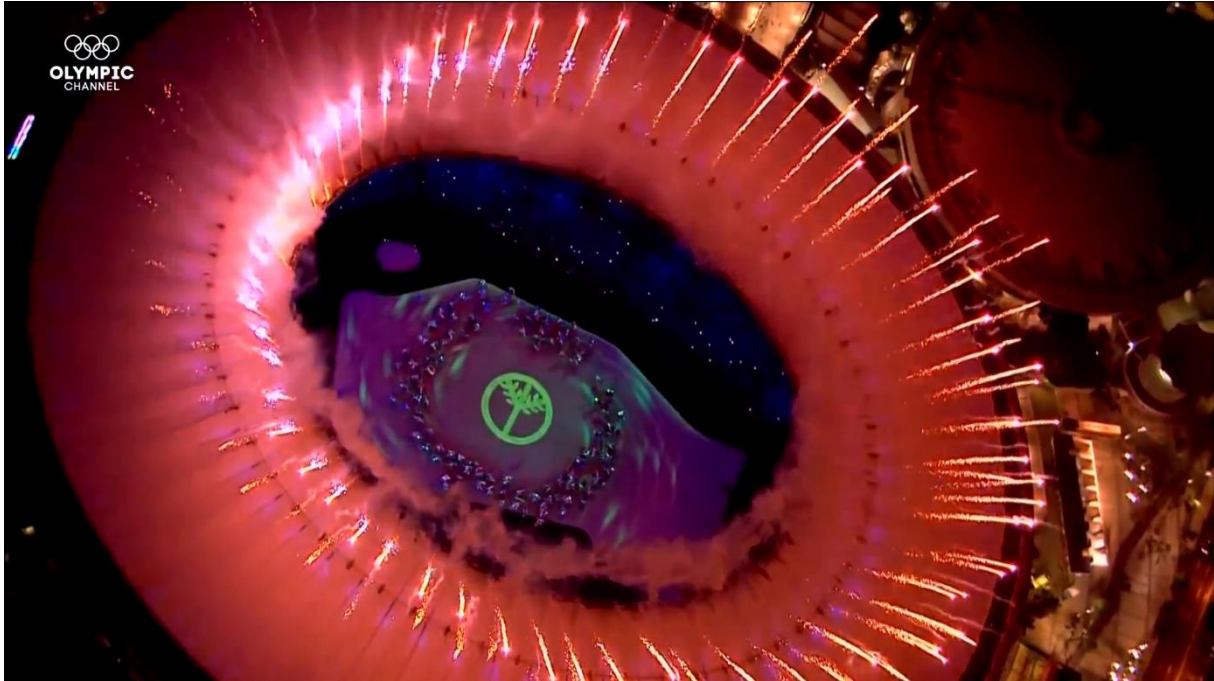


Figure 12: the 'green' 'peace'-symbol witnessed from a bird's eye view (2016 OC).

Olympic award ceremony

Before 1920, particularly in 1896, 1908 and 1912, the closing ceremony contained a victory ceremony for the winners of the past Olympics. This changed soon after 1920, when the official closing ceremony as we know it today had been enacted for the first time (Lattipongpun 2010, 110). From then on, the victory ceremonies were enacted separately, with one exception: the award ceremony for the men's marathon remained part of the closing ceremony. The ceremonial segment standardly devoted to the marathon (segment 3) provides a good case to look into the ritual function of the Olympic award ceremony.

In 2016 the medals for the men's marathon were awarded by president Thomas Bach and Sebastian Coe, the president of the IAAF (International Association of Athletic Federations).⁹⁵ A stage is set in the middle of the stadium to present the winners of the bronze, silver and gold medals (see figure 13).

⁹⁵ The IAAF is the international governing body for the sport of athletics, and thus for the marathon.



Figure 13: the stage for the marathon ceremony in 2016 (2016 CC).

The medals are presented with the athletes in the order of prestige (bronze – silver – gold) and the ‘golden’ middle of the stage is visibly heightened in proportion to the outer platforms.⁹⁶ The marathon ceremony is exemplary for the paradox of Olympism and nationhood that I already described in chapter 1. The athletes represent their countries (in the 2016 marathon the USA [bronze], Ethiopia [silver] and Kenya [gold]) and the anthem of the winning country (in 2016 the Kenyan anthem) is played after the presentation of the medals, and yet the medal is an Olympic insigne that is distinguished from a medal gained, for instance, during a world championship, precisely because the Olympic context is experienced as ‘unique’ (see also Bell 2009, 233).

Interestingly John MacAloon, who also conceives of Olympic ceremonies as rituals, states that the Olympic victory ceremony has proved itself most resistant, in comparison with other ceremonial enactments, to ritual change (MacAloon 2019, 7). The marathon ceremony may be set apart from the other victory ceremonies in terms of *momentum* (the marathon has also become the traditional closing competition of the Games, which is an additional reason why the medals cannot be procured earlier), but the way in which the ceremony is organized resonates with all the other victory ceremonies that audiences can witness during the

⁹⁶ This is actually quite a standardized way to present a victory stage; the way in which these athletes are presented and awarded is barely dissimilar from the modus operandi on world championships, many national championships etc.

Games. This is possibly what makes the award ceremonies look more formalized than, for instance, an opening or closing ceremony.

The award ceremony can be watched in terms of hierarchy (gold above silver, etc.) but also in terms of more entangled layers. If we conceive of the athletes not only as sportsmen or performers but also as symbolically imbued bodies, these bodies are able to display several identities at once: an individual human body, a national body and a transnational Olympic body. MacAloon refers to this scheme as the “Olympic athlete’s ‘three bodies’” (2019, 9). On the Olympic stage the three bodies are all performed at once, and more importantly, by all three athletes. Apart from the national anthem, which is only played for the winning country, the athletes have left the actual competition behind and join the stage together as bodies which are all equally imbued on a symbolic level. As structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) has famously proposed it, games disjoin, rituals conjoin (paraphrased in 2019, 8).

Flags and anthems

Flags must be the most recognizable, visible and symbolic renderings of the nation. A flag is not only a representation of a geographically delineated territory, but also a tool to display political and cultural self-assertion. The same could be said of anthems, which are often tied to purportedly prideful moments or periods from a country’s history. The Olympic flag (see figure 14) displays the standard version of the Olympic logo. The flag was based on a design of Pierre de Coubertin and officially presented during the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp (Lattipongpun 2010, 110).



Figure 14: Boris Johnson, mayor of London in 2012, holding the Olympic flag in front of the Olympic cauldron (2012 CC).

All flags displayed during the ceremonies have the same width-to-length-ratio, which is 2:3 (Horváth 2017, Smith 2001).⁹⁷ This means that there is no hierarchy in terms of size.

Moreover, figure 15 shows that the flags are usually raised to the same (e.g. equal) position of the pole. It is still possible, however, to suggest a hierarchy, since the Olympic flag (see again figure 15) is raised in the middle of two other flags, which (deliberately or not) mirrors the hierarchical order of the award stage (silver – gold – bronze). The center position can be explained by the fact that the Olympic flag signifies the Olympic Movement as a whole, and the Movement (formally facilitated and endorsed by the IOC) provides the overarching global context in which other countries can participate (or, in the case of the host country, organize).

One of the flags, the Greek one, is absent in its featured form during the opening ceremony, possibly because the IOC merely wants to highlight the roots and history of the Games (as I stated earlier) when the transfer of the Olympics from one country to another is announced. In this sense, the Greek flag chiefly serves as a symbolic reference to origins rather than fulfilling an additional, more specific role within the ceremonial program as a whole. The other flag, the flag of the host country, is prevalent during both ceremonies, but it is also a variable: once the Olympics are transferred to a different host country, the former host

⁹⁷ An exception is made for the flag of Nepal, which does not have a rectangular shape (Horváth 2017).

country's flag becomes a part of the 'parade' again and is no longer highlighted. This is also apparent through the fact that the flag of the host country is generally presented and displayed for the first time as a vast part of the host country performance, and not during the "formal opening of the Games"-segment, which highlights the Olympic flag.

Flags and anthems appear in a vast combination during opening and closing ceremonies. The two enactments complement each other because they bring together the visible and the audible: flags are raised while anthems are played. It is striking that the Olympic Anthem is played alongside national anthems: the anthem of the host country during the opening ceremony, the anthem of Greece and the anthem of the next host country during the closing ceremony. The official anthems of countries are inextricably tied to the nation itself, but the Olympics refute the logic of national boundaries and it is not possible to compare the Olympics and any particular country one on one. One cannot compare a whole with its parts, and yet, in the Olympic context, the paradox sustains itself. As I argued in chapter 1, the IOC allows nations to obtain the ritual elements (flags, anthems) that have helped them over time to display their positions within the larger whole. Hierarchically, the national flags and anthems do not threaten the larger whole, exactly because the Olympic flag and anthem are (respectively) raised and played as well. In Olympic symbolism, *any* country, even the host country, is suddenly only one out of many.



Figure 15: three flags (Greece, Olympic flag, China) during the 2008 closing ceremony, with the Olympic flag in the middle (2008 CC).

I am aware that by stating this I am arguing against the positions of scholars who have showed how host countries used their special role to challenge or subvert the Olympic hierarchy. I do not think, however, that the contents of the Olympic Charter (as I have showed in chapter 1) and the controlled mechanisms of opening and closing ceremonies (e.g. the fact that The IOC has to agree on the ceremonial plans of the host country) can ultimately substantiate such arguments. This goes especially for the context of the twenty-first century, where the partnership between the IOC and the UN has been strengthened. I do not mean to stop debating here. The fourth chapter will ask, through my analysis of the host country performances, how different host countries have negotiated the universal appeal of the Olympics with, if applicable, nationalist aspirations.

The Olympic speech

Whereas the speech by the chair of the organizing committee usually serves to express the pride of the host country (“being chosen and able to carry the responsibility that comes with organizing the Games”), the speech of the IOC president always foregrounds and emphasizes the values and principles of Olympism. They are concise (usually about 3-5 minutes) and contain general statements on the momentum of the Games, the role of the IOC and the nature of Olympism. It occurred to me that it is barely possible to speak of ‘surprise’ in the form of detailed remarks which could be specific to a particular Olympic edition or to the experience of a particular IOC president. This can be explained by the fact that the Olympic speech is one of the significant sub-segments of the ‘formal opening (or closing)’ of the Games (as classified in chapter 3), which makes it one of the most ritualized features of the ceremonial programme.

In 2008 and 2012 the speech was delivered by Jacques Rogge (president between 2001 and 2013); in 2016 the spot was taken by Thomas Koch. In 2008 Rogge alluded to the theme of the opening ceremony (“one world, one dream”) to proclaim that “that is what we are tonight”. He referenced de Coubertin explicitly and called the athletes role models for the youth of the world, which implicitly echoes de Coubertin’s focus on the emancipation of the younger generation as well (Weber 1970, 6). In 2012 Rogge mentioned that for the first time in history, all Olympic teams (e.g. countries) had female athletes. He called it “a major boost for gender equality” (after he said this, the broadcast swiftly cut between a couple of female participants from various nationalities present in the stadium, so as to substantiate Rogge’s

exclamation). This is a clear political statement which serves the present values and principles of Olympism (see mainly principle 6, IOC 2020), but at the same time differs fundamentally from the male-centered perspective on athleticism sustained by de Coubertin (as mentioned in chapter 1). Since Rogge also mentioned the founding role of de Coubertin in the creation of the modern Olympic Movement in his 2012 speech,⁹⁸ his explicit references to the baron in 2008 and 2012 and the ongoing preservation of de Coubertin's legacy by the IOC generate a paradoxical relation between the Olympic values and principles of past and present. The principle of gender equality could be conceived of as a principle of the present; there is a lot of political attention worldwide for issues of gender inequality and achieving gender equality is one of the 17 sustainable development goals (goal #5: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) formulated by the United Nations (see United Nations, Sdgs). In this sense it is intelligible that Rogge highlights it, especially because I have already argued that the UN and the IOC are close partners. The issue here, however, is that the IOC (represented, in 2008 and 2012, by Rogge) legitimizes Olympic values and principles precisely by referring to Olympic *past* and to the roots of the modern Olympic Movement, personified by de Coubertin. This link between past and present actually contradicts, rather than legitimizes, particular values and principles which were conceived different in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century than they are today. On the basis of my overview and discussion, provided in chapter 1, of the fundamental characteristics of Olympism conceived by de Coubertin, I argue that the present values and principles of Olympism are not fully compatible with the vision of de Coubertin, especially when it comes to issues of social equality (e.g. gender, race). This tension is by no means acknowledged by the IOC. The references to de Coubertin are explicit, but general in terms of tone and content; the IOC can honor its purported founder or renovator without mentioning or discussing the nuances or contradictions in his thinking.

In 2016 Koch called the Olympics “the answer” to being divided, since “all are equal in this Olympic world” (e.g. *world* and *worldview* becoming *Olympic world* and *Olympic worldview* in the Olympic context). He encouraged participants “to make our world a better world through sport” and to celebrate “unity in diversity” through peace and sport. During the

⁹⁸ He did so by stating that de Coubertin's impressions of British sport (as discussed in chapter 1; the reference to British sport has to be understood in the light of the host country selection for 2012) had a lasting influence on the Olympic Movement.

closing ceremony he repeated that “you (e.g. mainly the participants, but I guess the audiences as well) have shown us all the power of sport to unite the world” and that the athletes were “sending a powerful message of peace to the world”. The values and principles of Olympism emphasized through these speeches are, in line with the characteristics outlined in chapter 1, ‘international’, ‘peaceful’ and ‘equal’ (characteristics B, C and D). The IOC presidents talk from a globally orientated perspective, connecting values of peace and equality to the projected horizon of the world of tomorrow. The idea is that in the world of today, it might remain necessary to seek “unity in diversity”, as there is still so much division worldwide and one can only express the hope that problems and conflicts can be solved. The utopian context of the Olympics, however, is one of “one world, one dream”, in which the paradox of unity in diversity could be resolved into (globally) shared values and principles. This is what I mean when I argue that the opening and closing ceremonies manifest the ideal of “togetherness”.

Reprise: time and space

I want to end with a few closing notes on the ritual status of what I described in chapter 2 as a “delineated frame of time and space”. To which extent are the timing and location of the ceremonies ritualized as well? Allen Guttman writes that during the ancient Olympics, “the time of the games was as sacred (...) as the place (Guttman 2004, 22)⁹⁹. The Games were planned to coalesce with the second or third full moon after the summer solstice (2004, 22), and as I mentioned in chapter 1, play and sacrifice were as connected as stadium and altar. By now, the IOC uses the Gregorian calendar which connotes universal time, but this does not mean that it is no longer possible to attribute esoteric (which I understand here as ‘not generally known’ or ‘proposed only by some’¹⁰⁰) meaning to the Olympic calendar.¹⁰¹ In 1896 the opening of the first modern Games went together with Greek and Western European Easter (MacAloon 1981, 209; Ruprecht Jr. 1998, 286), which generally falls on the Sunday

⁹⁹ With the sacredness of “place” Guttman refers to the presence of sacrificial altars at the same site (2004, 22).

¹⁰⁰ I am aware of the various understandings of ‘esoteric’ that circulate, especially when connected to the field and study of *esotericism*. The point here is mainly to encapsulate the move from ‘generally understood’ to ‘limited to a few’. I emphasize that I reason from a western (specifically North-European) view here.

¹⁰¹ Again, my point is that it is too simplistic to reason from a western, secular perspective that these astrological associations are suddenly intrinsically meaningless merely because we have entered the ‘modern’ age now. I am much more interested in notions of entanglement in this sense than I am in separation and distinction.

after the first full moon on or after the spring (or vernal) equinox. It is plausible that this moment was chosen on purpose to let the initiation of the Modern Games coincide with a prominent holiday on the Gregorian Christian calendar. In 2008, to provide a more recent example, the opening ceremony took place on 8/8/8 (8 August 2008), reportedly because the Chinese consider 8 a lucky number. Moreover, the '8' is sometimes explained as the symbol for infinity, or even as the symbolic representation of time itself (the hourglass also has the shape of an 8). Through this symbology the ceremonial event is made special and distinguished from other events and occasions.

The location of the ceremony is perfectly fit for ritual enactment because the boundaries of the ritual space are set and evident. Even if audiences do not think of the ritual as ritual, they recognize the circular center of the stadium as the locus for all action. Things may happen outside the stadium (the Olympic flame approaching from beyond, firework display), but these things will always be connected to the action taking place in the stadium. In the digital age, broadcasters can display the ritual 'beyond' and switch back to the stadium in no time, and within the stadium, large screens mirror the action in real-time and show audiovisual segments which are not actually performed.

In this chapter I have discerned the closed segments of the ceremonial program from the open segments, and focused on processes of ritualization occurring within the closed segments. Broadly speaking, these closed segments of the ceremony are enacted similarly in the ceremonies that I will analyze in further detail in the next chapter (Beijing, London, Rio). At first glance the notion of 'closed segments' may appear to support Turner's point, as discussed earlier, that ceremonies have a confirmatory (or static) character which is contrary to rituals. In Olympic ceremonies, however, there is always a process of negotiation going on between the modern Olympic tradition, which is predominantly perpetuated through closed segments, and the shifting specificities of Olympic editions, which are facilitated by the open segments and the different cultural and political orientations of the host countries.

Moreover, as I have demonstrated with regard to the Olympic Charter, specific elements of the modern Olympic tradition can also change over time and this may become visible specifically during the ceremonies, where the Olympic worldview is presented to a global public. The next and final chapter concentrates on the ceremonial particularities of and

differences between the three editions of the Games, focusing specifically on the host country performances of the opening ceremonies.

Chapter 4: Particularities and differences: the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies of Beijing, London and Rio de Janeiro

I discuss and analyze the particularities of the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies of Beijing (2008), London (2012) and Rio (2016). The focus is on the host country performances which I classified in chapter 3 as one of the standardized ceremonial segments. The analysis will highlight thematic (in terms of content and ideas) and visual (in terms of registration/mediation/mediatization) differences between the different host countries, located on different continents (Asia; Europe; South-America), and demonstrate to which extent the cultural and political orientation of the host country can co-determine the (academic) reception of a particular Olympic edition. I also continue my study of the configuration of Olympism as worldview. To relate this overarching project to the particularities of Olympic editions I propose three different ways in which a host country can negotiate the display of Olympism with culturally and/or nationally demarcated content. The basis for this scheme is the interplay between Olympism and what I have called in chapter 3 the “narrative of the nation”.

Possibilities in the configuration of Olympism

In Olympic practice the configuration of Olympism can happen in various ways, dependent, in part, of the ceremonial segment that is in display at that moment. I suggest that there are three possibilities:

- 1) Olympism is configured through one of the closed segments of the ceremony, which have been standardized by the IOC.
- 2) Olympism is configured through one of the open segments of the ceremony, in the sense that the host country principally alludes to the values, principles and/or symbols of Olympism in segments which are directed by a creative team from the host country. This process of configuration may be in conjunction with the expression of values, principles and/or symbols related to the “narrative of the nation”.
- 3) The creative team is focusing on the expression of values, principles and/or symbols related to the “narrative of the nation” to such an extent that Olympism appears to be downplayed or even rejected.

The third chapter dealt with possibility one, and demonstrated how Olympism is, in any case, *always* configured *particularly* through closed segments. I also stated already that while the orientation of each ceremony as a whole may be on Olympism, there is always a process of negotiation going on between modern Olympic values and principles and the different political and cultural orientations of host countries. This process of negotiation applies to possibility two. Possibility three highlights a slightly different possibility which I did not really touch upon yet, and some explanation is required. In chapter one I explained how the section on the 'fundamental principles of Olympism' in the Olympic Charter barely accommodated the role of the nation, and I also argued that any participating country has to be subservient to the IOC (and, in a broader political context, the UN) and the Olympic values and principles in order to compete. This concerns Olympic formality, however, and in Olympic practice, more tension may arise between the universal orientation of Olympism and the particular pretensions of the host country. While the ideal of the IOC is certainly to organize harmonious ceremonies, in line with the fundamental principles of Olympism, the political reality of the twenty-first century may be more complex and abrasive. Nationalist, geopolitical and exclusive cultural pretensions are entertained to varying degrees, dependent on the host country.

Whereas I have used the third chapter to structure a broader argument on the ritualized configuration of Olympism, this chapter starts to approach the ceremonies of 2008, 2012 and 2016 on themselves. The aim here is to ask how the configuration of Olympism was related to the particular (ritual) enactments and the political and cultural orientations of every host country. This means that I will focus, in each case, on the host country performance of the opening ceremony, as this is the open segment in which the host country has the greatest opportunity to present and profile itself. My analysis of each host country performance consists of two levels. The basis of every analysis is (A) a description of the host country performance and its various (sub-)segments, combined with analytical remarks on the basis of the official (IOC-approved) media guide (and, in 2012, also on the basis of a documentary filmed in cooperation with the London creative team); B) an analytical commentary on the host country performance, consisting of observations proposed by academics and/or my own interpretations of particular (ritual) enactments and/or elements. Whenever A and B are amalgamated, I will indicate clearly when an

observation or interpretation is not proposed (at least not explicitly) by the home country but rather by an academic or by myself.

In the analysis I intend to accommodate an overarching negotiation on Olympism and national (or nationalist) orientation (configured through “narratives of the nation”), asking one particular broader question: is it possible to signal a broader development or trend in the ways in which Olympic and national orientations have related to each other between 2008 and 2016? At this moment it is still an open question whether Olympic practice will lean more towards possibility two (‘conjunction’) or possibility three (‘conflict’). In order to come to an overarching question I include comparative reflections (one between Beijing and London after the analysis of London, and one on all three Olympic editions after the analysis of Rio) which put particular Olympic editions and ceremonies in perspective.

Beijing



Figure 16: the fou drum performance (2008 OC).

The 2008 host country performance opens with the rhythm of drums. 2008 players (representing the year ‘2008’) beat the fou (see figure 16), an ancient Chinese percussion instrument made of clay or bronze (IOC 2008, 19). After the drumming session allusions to Chinese history and Chinese invention are combined with the introduction of the Olympic logo, presented as the five “dream rings” (IOC 2008, 24). Pyrotechnics are often used in Olympic ceremonies for mere celebratory display, without any ‘extra’ meaning attached to

them, but at this ceremonial moment, firework explosions are used to project 29 giant footprints in the air, symbolizing the 29 editions of the Olympic Games (so far) *and* the Chinese invention of gunpowder during the Song Dynasty (960-1276 CE; IOC 2008, 23). The “footprints of history” moment and the introduction of the “dream rings” are entangled, as the footprints form clusters of *falling* stars which generate the Olympic rings in the center of the stadium (see figure 6 in chapter 3).

A short film on the process of making a Chinese scroll painting from paper forms the prelude of a long host country performance concentrated on various types of art: scroll painting, writing, opera, dance and (popular) music (IOC 2008, 27-38). The painting scroll which opens the performance is used to project inventions (for instance papermaking) and highlights (for instance the famous painting “A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains”) from Chinese history and culture, focusing particularly on the grandeur of Chinese technique. The display of art happens in an impeccable and precise manner, and all artistry is Chinese artistry. Thus the host country performance displays the craft of the nation (see also Lawson 2011). More thematically the first half of the ceremony focuses on Chinese performers moving in harmony. The theme is expressed by the large aerial display of the Chinese sign ‘He’ (‘harmony’). Just as in the drumming performance, hundreds of Chinese partakers perform an intricate set of human movements with blocks of movable type (see figure 17), representing the ancient Chinese script and its rich history (IOC 2008, 32). There is a military component to the precision of the performers’ movements that is explicated when traditional Chinese opera and another percussion scene coalesce with the organized presentation of a phalanx of terracotta soldiers (soldiers preserved in clay), referring to the actual archeological discovery of a terracotta army in 1974 (IOC 2008, 35). The first reference to the relation between China and the West is a fact with the display of the famous Silk Road route on the painting scroll. The sub-segment concentrates on Chinese efforts to prosper in the exchange of commodities, for instance by showing the fleet of navigator Zheng He (1371-1433 CE), who created the Silk Route over sea (IOC 2008, 37). The sub-segment ends with a performer holding a compass, which is said to be of the “great inventions of ancient China” (2008, 37).

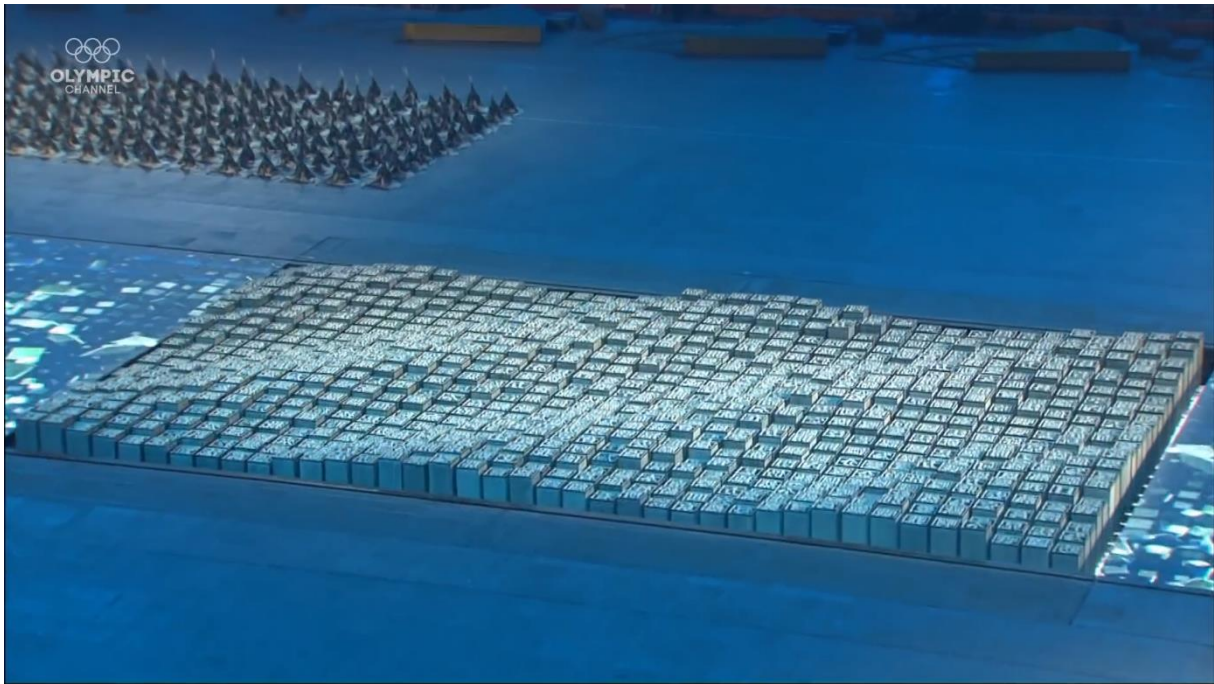


Figure 17: human movements with blocks of movable type (2008 OC).

The continuous use of the painting scroll helps to accentuate its function as a timeline, embodying chronological progress while the imagery and artistry (paintings, signs, symbols, material inventions) move from Chinese past to the ceremonial present and ultimately from present to future. Geremie Barmé (2009) has criticized the way in which the nineteenth and twentieth century, roughly from the 1840s opium war onward, are rather completely left out of this chronological path, which he calls a ‘flattened’ narrative due to the creative team’s choice not to display fragments of political struggle and the violation of human rights, especially during the Maoist era but also in the Olympic present (2009, 64, 79, 82). Lee & Yoon (2017, 960) write that “rapid transformation, economic growth, political turbulence and contemporary life in modern China were all ignored”. The rather fierce transition from ‘ancient’ to ‘future’ China is also apparent in the media guide, although a (political) commentary is not provided. In sub-segment 15, entitled ‘Music’, the synopsis still speaks of paintings reproducing the prosperity of *ancient* China (IOC 2008, 38), whereas sub-segment 16, entitled ‘Starlight’, states that (...) “the ancient painting extends in the new age, indicating today’s more harmonious life” and that “the ancient paintings extend in the endless starlight, indicating a more splendid age of today” (2008, 39). Color plays a crucial role in the transition as the color tone shifts from black and white to bright colors (see figure 18). This is even indicated specifically in the media guide (2008, 39).

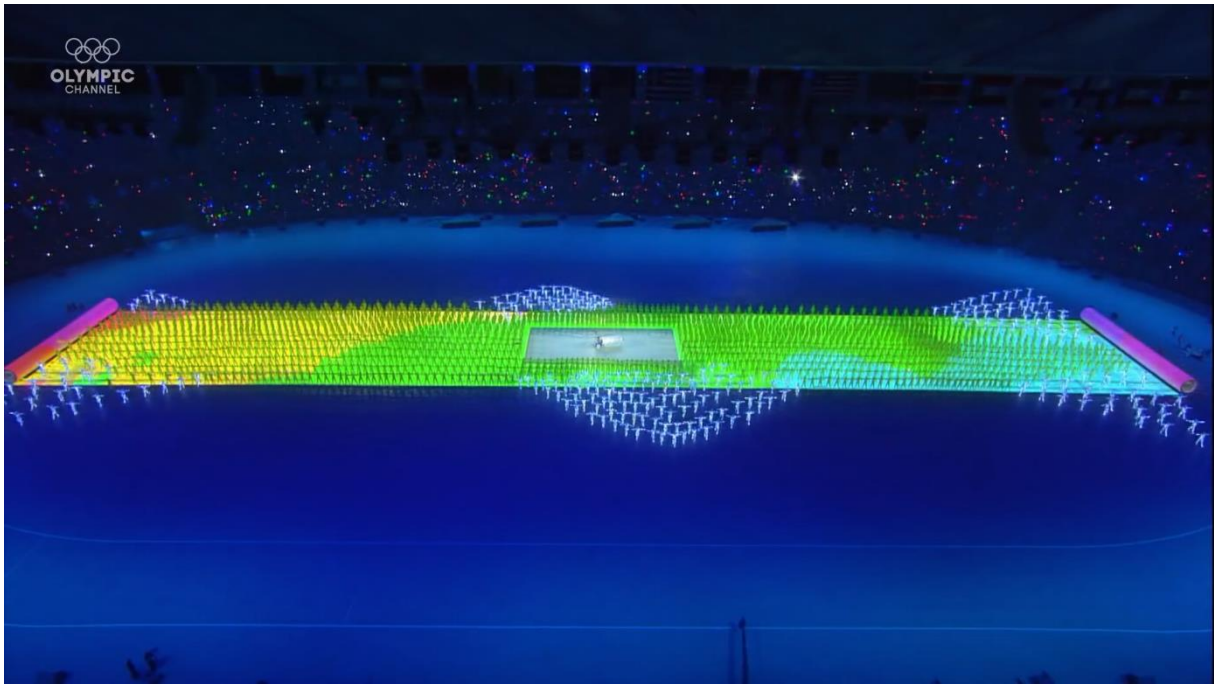


Figure 18: the shift to bright colors (2008 OC).

Two thematic notions which are intrinsically connected are *harmony* and *unity*. The first half of the ceremony shows how harmony can be displayed through artistry and group performance. The second half of the show, which is both initiated with and demarcated by the transition from ancient China to the ‘new age’, proposes unity as the natural result of harmony.¹⁰² To manifest this the ancient Chinese concept of ‘Taji’ is performed. According to the media guide, Chinese people used Taji in ancient times to refer to the chaotic state of the world before the separation of heaven and earth (IOC 2008, 41). This separation, which generated order out of disorder, is exemplary of the separation of *all things* in balanced dualities, symbolized by the yin-yang principle.¹⁰³ The paradoxical idea is that all dualities are united in Taji, so that the ultimate understanding of the concept is not separation but “togetherness”. Because Taji encompasses both man and nature, we can conceive of the integration of the concept as an extension of the purportedly harmonious artistry of man into the idealized unity of man and nature. With the importance of nature also comes the need of environmental protection. Ancient paintings of Chinese nature are colored green by

¹⁰² The media guide states that the level of unity of man and nature is “reached” once there is harmony between man and nature (IOC 2008, 41).

¹⁰³ Together with five elements of nature (metal, wood, water, fire and earth) the duality of yin and yang is understood to constitute all things and processes in the world. (2008, 41).

a group of children in order to symbolize the special significance of Taji for the younger generation. The unity of man and nature has to be preserved.

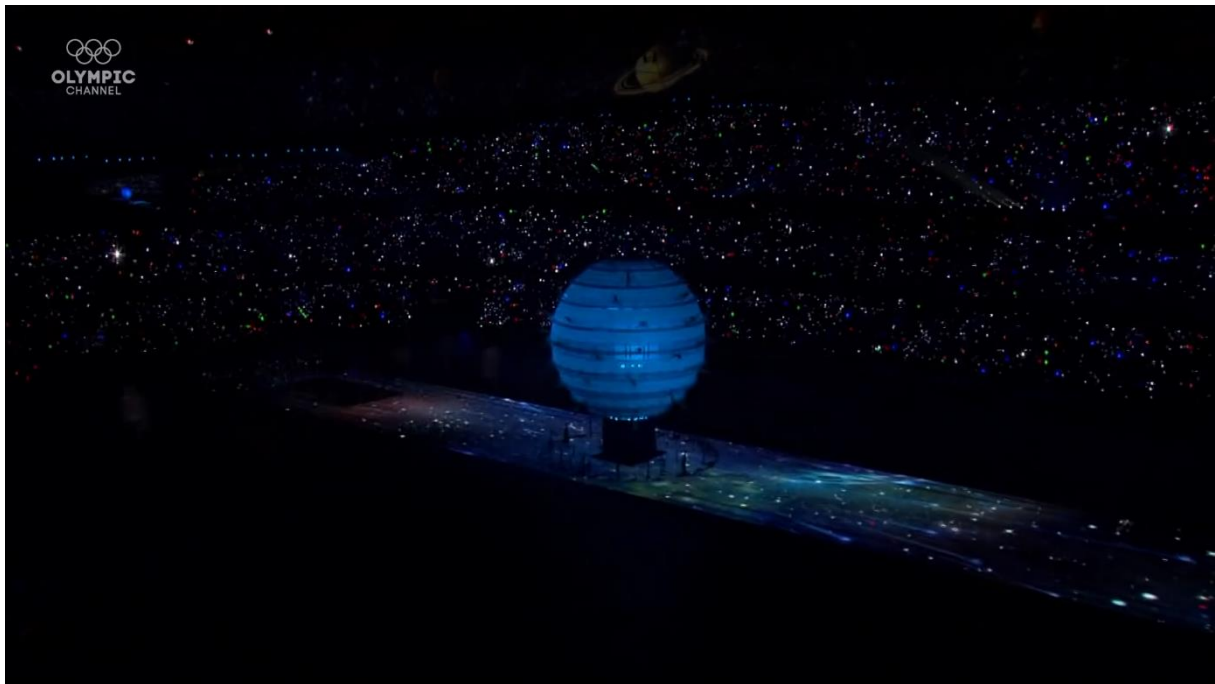


Figure 19: the globe-model with the planet Saturn looming in the top background (2008 OC).

The center piece of the futuristic “Dream”-section, completing the transition from past to (present and) future, is a large blue-colored globe model (see figure 19), which is elevated from below ground level to gradually ascend to the Beijing sky (IOC 2008, 43). Thousands of children enter the stadium field surrounding the globe in the center while the theme song of the “One World, One Dream” ceremony, “You and Me”, is performed. The lyrics allude to a utopia which necessarily extends beyond the Chinese nation, as it celebrates the “togetherness” of people from all over the world, projected and emphasized as a future objective (“dream”) as the current state of togetherness is only the result of a special Olympic occasion. I accentuate parts of the lyrics:

Beijing Theme Song "You and Me"

You and me

From **one world**

Heart to heart

We are one **family**

For dreams we travel

Thousands of miles

We meet in Beijing

Come together

The joy we **share**

You and me

From one world

Forever we are one family

The globe is the material object symbolizing the “one world”, while the people in the stadium embody the family, which is meant to include everyone who (*my addition*) adheres to Olympic values and principles. “We meet in Beijing” is the only indication in the song that China is still the center of this global utopia. The line can be understood in two ways: a) Beijing is the center of the world (in terms of making a political statement), or b) Beijing is only the center of the world *for now*, as the host country role will be passed on to another country after the games. This consideration is important, because many academics and others have written and commented in the wake of the opening ceremony that China had been presenting itself as a political and economic power state above, more than among the nations (see Askew 2009, Luo 2010, Lee & Yoon 2017). I cannot wholeheartedly agree with these types of arguments, which tend to downplay or even forget, in their study of nationalism and “constructions” or “reinventions” of the nation state, that the IOC context to a large degree requires submission to larger Olympic (and therefore globally and supranationally orientated) values and principles. I explained this in chapter 1 and 2 and also emphasized that the IOC oversees the organization of the Olympic ceremonies. In this sense, it is telling that the imposing grandeur of Chinese history and culture gradually evolves into the projection of a global utopia. Nationalism and pride are central to the host country performance, but this does not mean that China counteracts the values and principles of Olympism. In fact, the paradox of the Olympics is (and has always been) that nation states exist (and are allowed to exist) within a greater paradigm, thus facilitating a layered identity that comprises both the nation and the world as a whole. The main question, in this projected futuristic context, is not whether China is “defying” Olympism, as the country is actually embracing Olympism in a climactic projection of utopia, but rather whether “one

world” means that nations, including China, would actually cease to exist in terms of general political and cultural perception. It is not entirely evident if China is a) proposing itself as the nation *leading* the “one world” or b) whether the “one world” can only exist *without* nation states as we conceive of them in the modern world. This is left ambiguous in the ceremonial context.

The question gained extra symbolic value in the closing ceremony of the Games, where a center piece reminiscent of the globe in framing and texture was used to continue on the “One World, One Dream”-theme of the opening ceremony (see figure 20). The media guide calls the center piece the “Memory Tower” (IOC 2016, 44), which is a rather general description for what looks like Pieter Bruegel’s iconic oil painting of the Tower of Babel (ca. 1565, see Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, n.d.). The symbolic value of Babel would neatly match the projection of Olympic utopia in the opening ceremony, as the narrative is that of all people gathering at one place on earth to build a collective dream (see Genesis 11, KJV, and Bouwhuis 2018). It struck me to see that the symbology was not explicated by the creative team while the comparison occurred to me immediately when I first witnessed the center piece. The disjunction between the media guide description and my interpretation of the symbology calls the attention to the fact that the IOC and the creative team responsible for the ceremonies may always decide which meanings they want to propose. If they do not highlight something which may *look* evident (in this case, the “Memory Tower” as the “Tower of Babel”), the question whether the interpretation is invalid or deliberately downplayed or left out by the makers is bound to remain. In extremis, any interpretation of a ceremonial element or enactment could be called valid somehow, as audiences all over the world will watch the shows differently (and only some of them will care about media guides). In this study, however, my intention is and has been to outline as convincingly as possible how the IOC and the creative team(s) designed the host country performance, preferring some particular meanings over others through the way in which they presented their shows and commented on them in the official media guides.



Figure 20: the "Memory Tower" or the "Tower of Babel" (2008 CC).

London

The opening ceremony of London 2012 generates a chronological narrative in which the cultural history of the UK is compartmentalized into various thematic segments. After the countdown, a swift and dynamic camera sequence leading from the source of the river Thames to the entrance of the Olympic stadium, the lifting of the Olympic rings (attached to balloons) into space and the ringing of a specially commissioned Olympic bell by cycling champion Bradley Wiggins (Tour de France 2012, various Olympic medals for the British (track) cycling team), the host country performance was initiated with the idyllic "Green and Pleasant Land" that displayed British agriculture before the advent of industrialization. What is especially interesting here is that Boyle does not claim historical factuality but rather constructs an "allusion to collective memory", stating (through the media guide) that "this is the countryside we all believe existed once" (Mioh 2012, 48). Thus, from the start, the cultural constructedness of the ceremony is acknowledged rather than veiled.



Figure 21: villagers dancing around a maypole (2012 OC).

The “Green and Pleasant Land”-segment displays various little stories at once, varying between a cricket game and a group of villagers dancing around a symbolic maypole (see figure 21).¹⁰⁴ The center piece of the segment is a green hill (background figure 21, see also figure 4 in chapter 3) that mystically represents Jerusalem, as explained by Boyle in the media guide:

Woven through it all, there runs a golden thread of purpose – the idea of Jerusalem – of a better world that can be built through the prosperity of industry, through the caring nation that built the welfare state, through the joyous energy of popular culture, through the dream of universal communication....We can build Jerusalem.

And it will be for everyone (IOC 2012, 11)

In my interpretation, a hill is chosen a) in the light of the idea expressed by Matthew 5: 14 (KJV), “a city that is set on a hill cannot be hid” (which means, in its most ‘mundane’ sense, that hills automatically attract the attention in a larger environment) and b) because the actual city of Jerusalem is located on a tableland. Boyle can take the freedom to project Jerusalem in a UK context precisely because he is constructing a fantasy rather than reality,

¹⁰⁴ The maypole is a recurring feature in fertility rites closely tied to the momentum of May Day (1 May). The overarching context is that of European folklore and cultural festivals (Britannica, n.d.). The 2012 media guide does not contain any elaboration (e.g. it only contains an image of the villagers dancing around the maypole) on the display of the maypole, which makes it more difficult to detect why this symbolic element was selected (Mioh 2012, 47). The creative team appears to link the purported origins of Britain to the fertility rites of select European cultural festivals, in which the maypole repeatedly fulfilled a symbolic function.

interweaving actual tropes from British collective memory with the broader notion of global utopia that matches the Olympic ideal. The visual projection of 'Jerusalem' is accompanied by the eponymous song, performed by Dockhead Choir, which has taken its lyrics from the 1804 poem 'Milton' (referring to the author of *Paradise Lost*, a core piece of seventeenth century romanticism) by William Blake¹⁰⁵. The "Green and Pleasant Land" merges into the age of industrialization when the so-called 'Brunels' (a family name representing the civil engineers/industrial workers) arrive on the scene and the industry pipes are displayed on the playing field (see figure 22). A leading figure in this sequence is the British stage and film actor Kenneth Branagh, who plays Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806-1859), an engineer who is considered to have played a determining role in the British industrial revolution.¹⁰⁶ The "Pandemonium"-segment, named after the capital city of hell in *Paradise Lost* (see IOC 2012, 23; the name of the sub-segment implicates a comparison between hell and the grey steam pipes and 'hellish' work conditions of industrialization, *my suggestion*) has a symbolic Olympic climax when the industrial workers cooperate to forge five rings (with one giant ring as a center piece, see figure 7 in chapter 3) that represent the Olympic logo. By combining the industrial revolution and the Olympic rings, Boyle implicates that the UK has taken on the role of unifying the world around the Olympics (Mioh 2012, 49).

¹⁰⁵ This poem is also the source of the phrase 'chariots of fire' (IOC 2012, 20). *Chariots of Fire* is a film from 1981 (dir. Hugh Hudson) which is, according to the media guide, "one of the films to best capture the Olympic spirit" (2012, 20). A scene from the film was re-enacted with the iconic fictional character of Mr. Bean (Rowan Atkinson) in the main role. The music from the film, composed by Vangelis, was live performed by the London Symphony Orchestra with a comic sketch by Atkinson.

¹⁰⁶ Brunel was a British engineer who "built steamships, bridges, tunnels and who revolutionized public transport by creating the world's first major railway". According to the media guide, he embodies the inventiveness and entrepreneurial spirit of Britain (IOC 2012, 21).



Figure 22: the industry pipes during the “Pandemonium”-segment (2012 OC).

After an intermezzo focused on James Bond actor Daniel Craig escorting Queen Elizabeth to the Olympic stadium (thus merging popular culture with the actual presence of the monarch as the head of state), the host country performance continued with a segment focused on the celebrated emergence of the NHS (National Health Service, founded in 1948), which perpetuated the call to (ongoingly) unify British care through the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Boyle gave the NHS-segment a dark twist by contouring the entry of nurses and countless hospital beds with the dream-like experience of the children sleeping *in* the beds. A cameo of J.K. Rowling (b. 1965), the renowned writer of the Harry Potter series, and one girl reading bedtime stories beneath the sheets, coalesces with the introduction of ‘villainy’ characters (such as Cruella de Vil, from *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, and Voldemort, from Harry Potter) from children’s literature, all selected from works written by British authors. The twist is that the nurses start to act as if they are possessed (preventing them for providing any ‘care’), an impression that is strengthened by the choice of music. British instrumentalist Mike Oldfield (b. 1953) musically *and* thematically introduces the segment with a live performance of ‘Tubular Bells’, a piece of music that was used in the 1970s for the horror film *The Exorcist* (1973, dir. William Friedkin), in which a young girl is possessed by a demon. Boyle has affirmed that he expects audiences to recognize ‘Tubular Bells’ from *The Exorcist*, thus using the recognizability of the theme to raise and strengthen the anticipation of a dark twist (Mason & Rogan 2016).

The last extensive host country performance segment is called “Frankie & June say ... thanks Tim”. Boyle presents a timeline comparable to the chronological progress of the Beijing opening ceremony, but whereas 2008 transitioned from the glorification of ancient Chinese culture, 2012 culminated more gradually into a celebration of the present digital age, with the British scientist Tim Berners-Lee (b. 1955) as its core figure. The main characters of the segments are two British teenagers who fall in love on the beats of popular music and are able to unite by means of digital technology (e.g. the mobile phone), thanking Tim Berners-Lee for giving the internet “to everyone”. The synopsis of the segment reads as follows:

“The story starts in an ordinary house – the kind of house in which most British people live. Our fictional family – played by non-professional volunteers, chosen from among our volunteers – is ready for Saturday night. Mum and Dad will stay home and watch TV, teenage son will play video games but the teenage girl – June – is getting ready to go out dancing. On the tube she glimpses a young man. It’s love at first sight. But he’s on a different train! She drops her phone! He picks it up. He chases her through a series of nightclubs that play music from the 1960s, ‘70s, ‘90s and today... but can he catch her? Will true love triumph?” (quoted from IOC 2012, 30)

The filmic and near-mosaic approach of the opening ceremony, combining multiple small performances at once into one grand spectacle, demanded a keen registration strategy. Director Danny Boyle developed a pre-visualization of the ceremony that contained (“impossible”) shots from irregular angles and enactments proceeding in various corners of the stadium. To secure this dynamic process Boyle used an own crew instead of the team that would usually be equipped to register the ceremony.¹⁰⁷ The crew needed many different cameras and an intricate control panel, not only to register everything but also to carefully select what could be shown and what had to be left out. The documentary provides an example of what can actually go wrong during such a complex editing process. During the ceremony, the camera perspective should have shifted from Kenneth Branagh, who was standing in the carcass of a large zoetrope construction (a pre-film animation device from the nineteenth century), to a group of suffragettes (women standing up for voting rights)

¹⁰⁷ The main difference is that the approach of Boyle’s team could now be as ‘filmic’ as possible, whereas the ceremony would usually be registered by a team of sports cameramen that are used to placing their cameras in more static positions for the course of a game. Boyle asserts that a “sophisticated visual vocabulary” was needed to celebrate the modern, digital age we are in (Mason & Rogan 2016).

elsewhere in the stadium. Because the zoetrope was expected to give fire, but did not due to technical failure, however, the multicamera supervisor waited in vain and missed the shot of the suffragettes (Mason & Rogan 2016). The role of directorial decisions, registration strategies and unplanned ‘failures’ such as these are crucial because they highlight, as I argued in chapter 2, how the mediation of ceremonial content (which contributes to the larger process of mediatization) affects what we see and how we see it, and thus what we can study and judge. In this case the opening ceremony becomes a cinematic narrative which entangles multiple stories at once into a coherent whole. While I do not use theoretical notions concentrated on the position of the spectator, for instance “affect theory” (see, for instance, Bain-Selbo 2019), it is hard *not* to be affected by the way in which the ceremonies generate a spectacle for a mass public, which includes yourself.

The deliberate aim to affect (national and international) audiences is also expressed by Boyle. In *One Night in 2012* he states that “another word we had was belief (...) we wanted to create something that people could believe in”. He asserts that belief is generally absent, which is followed by a reference of ceremony producer Tracy Seaward to riots that happened in the UK the year before the 2012 Olympics.¹⁰⁸ This particular observation on the (asserted) general absence of belief is significant. It allows the hypothesis that special occasions such as the Olympics are used to generate and project a belief that may not be automatically present in daily life. Seaward’s reference to national political strife (a reference that resonates even more in 2021 in the light of Brexit) implicates that conflict, rather than harmony, is experienced by most people as a normal state of affairs. Thus, the opening ceremony can stand out, exactly because everything happens in a harmonious and celebratory fashion.

The fact that the 2012 opening ceremony appeared to be a massive cultural celebration rather than a display of political and/or economical might does not mean, however, that there is no ideological subtext to the spectacle. Frank Cottrell-Boyce, the writer of the opening ceremony, states in *One Night in 2012* that “we have an enormous amount of soft power, because the culture that we create is fantastic” (Mason & Rogan 2016). By using the term ‘soft power’, be it conscious or not, Cottrell-Boyce echoes Joseph Nye’s understanding

¹⁰⁸ Seaward refers to the so-called “London Riots”, which happened between 6 and 11 August 2011.

of “the power of attractive display”. When the volunteers in the “Thanks Tim”-section leave the stadium field, they are complimented (e.g. through in-ears) by their supervisor who states that “our love revolution has done its job” (Mason & Rogan 2016). This “love revolution”, which is not explicated in the media guide or somewhere else, but caught my attention while watching the documentary,¹⁰⁹ appears to center around the idea that the opening ceremony must express and celebrate, through all its segments, the notion of ‘love’ (reminiscent of the overarching notion of ‘peace’ as I discussed it in chapter 3). The 2012 opening ceremony was “a love song to [a cultural construction of – my words] the United Kingdom” (Mason & Rogan 2016) that presented its values and principles in full harmony with Olympism. One particular performance within the host country performance of the closing ceremony did the same, and deserves a particular mention. About halfway through the ceremony a children’s choir from Liverpool, the birth place of John Lennon (1940-1980), the ex-lead singer of pop group The Beatles, crouched down on a pyramid stage (see figure 22) to perform Lennon’s hit “Imagine” (1971).



Figure 23: a choir of children performing “Imagine” during the 2012 closing ceremony (2012 CC).

¹⁰⁹ I consider this remark (or compliment, actually) important because it signifies a moment of communication between a large group of volunteers and their supervisor. It means that at this particular moment, right after a ceremonial sub-segment, *this* was what the supervisor wanted to say to the volunteers, which renders it significant.

The lyrics of the song express the hope in a future society in which many purported problems and contradictions of the modern age are resolved:

“Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us, only sky

Imagine all the people

Livin' for today

Ah

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And **no religion**,¹¹⁰ too

Imagine all the people

Livin' life in peace

You

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And **the world will be as one**

Imagine no possessions

I wonder if you can

¹¹⁰ I do not continue on this important phrase of the lyrics in the main text, as it would also require a longer exposé on the ideas and beliefs of Lennon in particular. Yet, I still wanted to address the phrase concisely, since it is striking in the light of de Coubertin's statement that “Olympism is a religion”. Lennon's exclusion of religion, whatever his own exact definition of the category may have been, indicates that ‘religion’ will not be used to terminologically denote the utopia that he is projecting and anticipating through his song. Thus, contrary to the vision of de Coubertin, he desires the exclusion, rather than the inclusion of religion. As the song is only *performed* in the closing ceremony without intrinsic additional commentary (this also goes for the media guide, see IOC 2016, 24), there is no basis, however to argue that the IOC and/or the creative team endorse the vision (e.g. the vision of Lennon) that religion should take no part in the utopia of Olympism. In fact, the values and principles of Olympism (IOC 2020, 12) state that religion should have no role in excluding people from the Olympic Movement, not that religion itself should be eradicated or that athletes are not allowed to identify themselves as religious individuals.

No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people

Sharing all the world

You

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will live as one"

The song lyrics resonate with the values and principles of Olympism, in the sense that a) the ideal of worldwide peace is expressed explicitly and b) the song embodies the notion of "One World, One Dream", which was the theme of the 2008 opening ceremony, as a future utopia to be shared by all people. It is particularly significant that the song is performed by a children's choir. A known expression is that "the youth has the future". The stage presence of the youngest generation helps to emphasize the "Imagine"-ideal as an ideal for a future society, e.g. a society consisting of these children when *they* are grown-up.

Beijing and London

The 2012 ceremonial programme was not discussed for any purported political subtext in the same fashion as China. In fact, *One Night in 2012* clarifies that conservative Party politician Jeremy Hunt (b. 1966) even addressed an initial critique to Danny Boyle (e.g. before the ceremony had actually taken place) for "not being political enough", as he included a silent moment of remembrance (e.g. for the people who died in the two world wars, IOC 2012, 23) but did not highlight the role of the UK in "defeating fascism" (Mason & Rogan 2016). The main reason for this lack of political interpretations is not only that the 2012 ceremonies did not explicitly focus on politics, but also, and I think even more importantly, that at the time, the UK was generally not considered a country with any

imperialistic motives (entirely leaving out any discussion on Brexit in the 2012 context)¹¹¹, contrary to China, which also focused on culture but was heavily discussed in media and academic sources in the context of its political and economic aspirations. Many were not able (or did not want to) watch the 2008 Olympics and Olympic ceremonies in a vacuum, as if they were not connected to the political and economic position of the country at that moment. In this sense it is extra significant that both Beijing and London projected their Olympic utopia (“One World, One Dream”, or “Imagine”) into the future, which provided the projections with a (especially in 2008) dreamlike character, despite the seriousness of the ideal.

The members of the 2012 creative team were very much aware of what had been performed and displayed in 2008, but they deliberately chose to do it differently. Director Danny Boyle referred to China’s opening ceremony as the “authorial voice” of a “military economy” (Mason & Rogan 2016), which could be understood both in a positive (the strict and precise nature of the performance is perceived as an ultimate quality) and negative (the implication of military aggression and/or imperialism) sense. He adds that it is impossible to top the 2008 ceremony, but that they (e.g. all members of the 2012 creative team) do not have to. While *One Night in 2012* shows various fragments of rehearsals in which volunteers are trained to perform just as strict and precise as the performers in 2008, the eventual opening ceremony has barely or not been compared to the host country performance of 2008 on the level of cultural and political meaning. My suggestion is that this is the case not only because London chose a (multi-)cultural celebration of British pride over “the authorial voice” of a “military economy”, thus detaching culture from politics to a far greater extent, but also because there was no reason for audiences and media platforms to consider the political nature of the ceremony. Audiences from all over the world *expected* a military-type grandeur from China, and they got it, which could then stimulate reflections in the light of nationalism and (political and/or economic) expansion. We should be careful, however, not to conflate the regulated presence of constructions of the nation in Olympic ceremonial contexts with actual pretensions to defy the supervising role of the IOC and therefore the

¹¹¹ There were ample political critiques on the opening ceremony, which frequently centered around the idea that Boyle had provided a ‘Marxist’ or ‘left-wing’-interpretation of (British) history (Baker 2015, 415-416). Boyle denied this, stating that the values espoused by the opening ceremony had “more to do with the fact that we can be a modern, progressive country, and as such (...) can be an inspiring beacon for people everywhere” (quoted in 2015, 416).

values and principles of Olympism. In this regard, considering the scheme of possibilities I introduced at the start of this chapter, the configuration of Olympism was *at most* slightly downplayed (in the first half of the opening ceremony), but never rejected and ultimately fully endorsed (in the second half of the opening ceremony) in 2008. In 2012 both the closed and the open segments endorsed Olympism, and the display of British pride did not downplay or 'reject' Olympic values and principles. Thus, whereas Beijing presented a Olympic utopia but was not "believed" by everyone due to its nationalist and imperialist political and economic aspirations, London succeeded in presenting British culture as Olympic culture, closing the gap between its construction of the nation and its endorsement of Olympism.

Rio de Janeiro

The media guide of the 2016 opening ceremony opens with a message from the creators which makes abundantly clear what the theme of the ceremony is:

"Promoting **world peace** is the basis of the Olympic spirit. **Today** there is an **urgent need** to also promote **peace with the planet**. **Climate change and the depletion of natural resources** need our attention and the Olympic Opening Ceremony is a wonderful opportunity to shed light on this subject. Brazil, with the largest forest and the largest reserve of biodiversity on the planet, is the right place for this message to be spread. It is not enough to stop harming the planet, it is time to begin **healing** it. This will be our **Olympic message: Earthlings, let's replant, let's save the planet!**" (IOC 2016, 7, bold type is my emphasis)



Figure 24: the 'Green' version of the Olympic logo; "Green should take over all five continents" (2016 OC, IOC 2016, 33).

The 'green' theme of climate change is the red thread of the ceremony, transposed into clear visual motives (see figure 24, see also figures 11 and 12 in chapter 3) which connect Rio 2016 to the values and principles of Olympism. The care of nature and planet earth is not embedded so explicitly in the Olympic Charter, but this 'gap' is bridged relatively easily by slightly modifying world peace into "peace with the planet". In 2008 the concept of Taji was already used to express 'harmony with nature', but in that ceremony, climate change and the depletion of natural resources were not addressed as an urgent crisis, which has to do, in any case, with the fact that the attention (or the critique on a purported *lack of* attention) of politicians, media conglomerates and NGO's for the subject has increased even more during the past decade than it already did roughly in the two decades before that (see Schmidt, Ivanova and Schäfer 2013).¹¹² In this study I limit myself to the way in which the issue was addressed during the ceremony. This happened not only through pointing out the issue but also, as the message from the creators already indicates, through a more positively orientated focus on "healing" and 'saving the planet through replanting' (2016, 7).

Just as in 2008 the ceremony opened with a performance of drums, this time in the 'batucada'-style (a subgenre of samba) of the host country. Designs of geometric art (see

¹¹² Since the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (January 2019-) even more attention has been given to the status of Brazil in relation to climate change, as Bolsonaro has been criticized severely due to his purported failures and refusal to deal with the issue of climate change (see Cohen 2019, Raftopoulos & Morley 2020).

2016, 10-11) are displayed from an aerial perspective, and the same goes for what the media guide calls “**reinventing** the iconic peace sign” (bold type is my emphasis). The reinvented symbol reveals a tree which embodies the motive of growth and replanting (see figure 11 in chapter 3).¹¹³ According to the media guide, the symbol was proposed by the Brazilian cartoonist Ziraldo in his 1988 book *Marcas nada Patentes* to indicate the category of ‘ecology’ (2016, 11).

After the “welcome”-segment an immense projection screen (2016, 15) is used to initiate the host country performance and to celebrate “the birth of life” in the territory of Pindorama, the name of contemporary Brazil in the language of the native Tupi and Guarani. These ethnic groups used to inhabit the forests before the Portuguese travelled to Brazil in the “age of discovery”. The media guide displays an almost cynical awareness of the colonial factor in this narrative as it states that “four million Indigenous inhabited the region until the “invasion of Pindorama”, or as we say, the “discovery of Brazil” by the Portuguese” (see figure 25 ; 2016, 114).¹¹⁴



Figure 25: the arrival of the Portuguese on colonial ships (2016 OC).

¹¹³ The country name ‘Brazil’ is also derived from a tree, namely the ‘Pau Brazil’ (2016, 17).

¹¹⁴ The ancient struggle of the original ethnic inhabitants is linked to actuality by exclaiming that “today, the Indians still struggle for the right to live in peace in their forests” (IOC 2016, 14).

The tension of building a civilization is that it comes with the sacrifice of nature. A graphic display of various migratory movements (2016, 17) among which the involuntary transatlantic slave trade is not forgotten, gradually merges into the depiction of metropolis (architecture and skyline, infrastructure, transport, see figure 26). The chronological narrative of Brazil, which follows the chronological set-up of previous ceremonies, blends into a celebration of music as the “voice(s) of the favelas” (2016, 22) bring in various styles of music and dance popular in (or popularized by) the host country, highlighting ethnic and cultural diversity through an amalgam of carefully choreographed performances.¹¹⁵



Figure 26: the gradual construction of ‘Metropolis’ and the distribution of goods (2016 OC).

The creative team has saved its more alarming Olympic message for last, presumably because a) this aligns with the chronological narrative, as the issue is understood to be most actual (one might add that a message ‘saved for last’ will resonate longer), and b) because the subject can be used to bridge “the story of Brazil” and “the story of our planet”. The media guide explicitly states that “here the show stops talking about Brazil and begins talking about our planet” (IOC 2016, 28). Various graphic map models display the concentration of carbon dioxide, the rise in temperatures, the melting of polar ice caps and

¹¹⁵ The creative team also uses music to transform the political and socio-economical debate on poor and rich into a proclamation of hope on behalf of the poorer segments of society, stating (in the media guide) that “it is from the poorest, the most underprivileged neighborhoods, that the rhythm, songs and dances moving the planet originate” (IOC 2016, 22).

the rise of sea levels (2016, 28-29). A positive twist is provided, as I already indicated, by a balancing focus on the tools, predominantly trees (and seeds), that the ecosystem provides to replant and restore (2016, 30). A young boy finds a gushing seedling while two film and theater actresses (Fernanda Montenegro from Brazil and Judi Dench from the UK) read their interpretation of a classic Brazilian poem by Carlos Drummond de Andrade, "A Flor e a Náusea":

"a flower has sprouted in the street (...)

a flower, still pale, has fooled the police... it's breaking through the asphalt"

The proclaimed hope of restoration is put into practice as the host country performance merges into the parade of the athletes. The athletes receive cartridges of soil which they can insert into large silver towers that serve as vessels for the trees. After the 2016 Olympics the (11.000) planted seeds are transferred to a park in Rio de Janeiro (2016, 32). This accentuates the ultimate promise of the creative team that "Brazil's ceremony will focus on the future" (IOC 2016, 7).

Reprise: Beijing, London and Rio de Janeiro

The "You and Me"- theme song from Beijing 2008 and the "Imagine"-performance of the children's choir in 2012 probably come closest to expressing the ultimate ideal of Olympism. While the 2008 ceremonial programme displayed a greater tension between Olympism and the grandeur of China, the overarching theme of the opening ceremony, "one world, one dream", is no different from the utopia projected by the "Imagine"-text four years later. Similar is also the presence of the children, representing the youngest and thus future generation, as proponents of the Olympic utopia. This is established especially through the choice of children choirs and children solo voices. In 2016 children promoted the dove and the message of peace during the first presentation of the Olympic laurel.

By means of the climate change theme and the 'green ideal', the 2016 ceremonies displayed the need to unite, not only in times of prosper but also (or even especially) in times of global crisis. This is why I argue that "togetherness" is the eventual core notion of the ceremonial programmes of Beijing, London and Rio de Janeiro. The differences between the three nations and their ceremonial choices are evident, but in the end, these differences are always subservient to the values and principles of Olympism. In this regard the ideal is to

overcome differences to be able to proclaim “togetherness”. Host countries can only express their national pride if they agree to have their part in the IOC’s overarching global project.

In my analysis of the ceremonies I have worked from the argument that the host country performances are mediated rituals, which contain ritual elements and ritual enactments connected to the configuration of Olympism. Yet the way in which standardized ritual elements of Olympism are assimilated into the host country performances can only be artificially distinguished from Olympic practice in the ‘closed’ segments. In combination, the open and closed segments facilitate a ritualization of “togetherness” within which host countries can paint a picture of themselves, as long as they adhere to the values and principles of Olympism and conjure its intricate visual vocabulary of ritual elements and enactments. Ultimately, the ‘open’ and ‘closed’ segments can be regarded as a coherent whole.

At the beginning of this chapter I asked whether it would be possible to signal a broader development or trend in the ways in which Olympic and national orientations have related to each other between 2008 and 2016. This is definitely the case. Between 2008 and 2016, the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies featured three separate “narratives of the nations” within the overarching frame of Olympism. Although all of these narratives were compliant with the values and principles of Olympism, the degree to which they were compliant depended on the creative, directorial choices underpinning the host country performance. The ceremonies of London and Rio were strikingly similar in the sense that their “narratives of the nation” were displayed and performed without downplaying, challenging or rejecting the values and principles of Olympism. In terms of the scheme which I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, only Beijing could be arguably linked to option 3, in the sense that the 2008 host country performance was used to sound “the authorial voice of a military economy” (Mason & Rogan 2016). The nationalism and exceptionalism (e.g. in this context, the idea that China is ‘special’ and stands apart from other countries) communicated through the Beijing ceremonial programme of Beijing may initially appear to form a ‘negative’ exception on the ceremonies of London and Rio due to the more accentuated political tension between global solidarity and national pride. Yet, both the climax of the host country performance in the Beijing opening ceremony and the host country performance of the Beijing closing ceremony expressed the “one world, one

dream"-theme which is a core ideal of Olympism. The prominence of this theme (and the values and principles connected to it) within the ceremonial programme as a whole indicates that even the most pronounced "narrative of the nation" can be made commensurable (at least publicly) with the values and principles of Olympism.

To conclude, Olympism is configured as worldview in the ceremonial context despite variations and differences between host countries and host country performances. This fact demonstrates the workings of what I termed 'worldview dynamics' in chapter 1. As a worldview, Olympism is part of an interactive process embedded in social relations and influenced by political factors. These relations and factors affect the way in which the worldview is configured and may even destabilize or change (at least partly) some of its purported core elements or core practices. Yet, as I stated earlier, worldviews usually display a flex-or stretchability, which means that the notions of change and transformation and the influence of external factors (e.g. the particularity political, social and cultural circumstances) does not automatically threaten its existence. Its host country may change every four years, the Olympic Movement and the values and principles of Olympism are still going strong, and if the whole world invests in it, more is yet to come.

Conclusion

In the global, digital age, universally mediatized opening and closing ceremonies serve to socio-politically and culturally configure Olympism as the ideological and practical basis of the Games. This is accomplished by means of particular ritual elements and enactments intrinsically related to Olympism, which together form the various segments of the ceremonies. Some of these segments have been standardized over time, while others are variable and depended on the host country. In general, the ceremonies are designed so as to display and celebrate the values and principles of Olympism in harmonious concordance with particular “narratives of the nation”.

I started this study by outlining the binary of “secular” and “religious” logic which tends to underpin a hypothetical lot of reflections on the presumed nature of the modern Olympic Games. If I could pick only one guaranteed achievement on behalf of the overarching argument I built in the wake, I hope to have convinced readers that the Games can only be characterized in a more ambiguous and hybrid manner. This has been the core aim of my case for the study of Olympism as worldview.

The opening and closing ceremonies of the three most recent Olympic editions have served as a lens through which I could study the relation between Olympic theory and Olympic practice. The values and principles of Olympism are not only embedded in the Olympic Charter but also enacted in standardized ceremonial segments and variable host country performances. While the IOC explicitly expresses the intention to display Olympism by means of the Olympic ceremonies, the role of the host country demanded a more intricate look at the interplay between globally and nationally/culturally delineated enterprises. I have used the analysis of the ceremonies to indicate and discuss differences between the ways in which host countries profiled themselves, both culturally and politically, by means of the host country performances. It may be telling, however, that I ultimately ended up changing the (initially proposed) study title from *Togetherness and difference in a global, digital age* into *Togetherness in a global, digital, age*. Despite the differences between ceremonies and the particular cultural and political orientations of the host countries, all ceremonies substantiated the case for global togetherness, unity and response to crisis and

division. This can be explained by pointing towards the authoritative supervising role of the IOC in the organization of Olympic ceremony and the facilitation of Olympic participation in the first place.

I divided my study into four chapters in order to accommodate a) the broader (historical) context of the ancient and modern Olympics (chapter 1), b) my theoretical framework (chapter 1 and 2) and c) my two complementary perspectives Olympic ceremony, namely my attention for the ceremonial set-up as a whole (chapter 3) and my particular analytical focus on host country performances (chapter 4). In chapter 1, I expanded on the relation between the ancient and modern Olympics and related the academic discourse on the subject to the “secular” versus “religious”-paradigm. My intention was to demonstrate how difficult it is to take a proper stance in the discourse due to the complex issue of properly defining “religion”. I brought in the term worldview and the paradigm of worldview studies in part because it facilitates a broader discursive and analytical context without imposing the need to directly abandon the category of “religion” and the field of religious studies altogether. This is especially significant because I realized I could not compile a proper argument in which I would term Olympism a religion, whereas it was evident to me from the start that this view-on-life neatly fitted the category of worldview.

On a disciplinary level this study is a project to explore the theoretical and methodological boundaries of religious studies in a stimulating, non-subversive fashion. I hope that its findings may support future research, not only on the configuration of Olympism during future editions of the Games but specifically on the relation between worldview (and worldview studies) and religion (and religious studies). I am convinced there must be more and similar case studies in which the conception of a coherent set of ideas and practices as ‘worldview’ may help to approach and reconsider the discourse on defining ‘religion’ and the advent of worldview studies.

The notion of worldview dynamics helped me to understand and argue how worldviews are not necessarily static but rather transform over time. I used this argument to ground my study of Olympism particularly in changing historical and political circumstances, which I felt were a bit lacking in the field of worldview studies as I had delineated it so far. Worldview dynamics also helped to anticipate how a purported worldview would by no means be fully dependent on the realm of ideas. I gradually moved from a discussion of the formalized

Olympic Charter (in chapter 1) to a study of ceremony (in the remaining chapters), partly to demonstrate how the configuration of worldview could be regarded as an ongoing dialogue between 'theory' and practice. My argument here has been that worldviews are flexible; they can 'survive' under various circumstances which may challenge their configuration without threatening their existence.

In chapter 2 I introduced two theoretical notions, that of mediation/mediatization (as conceptualized by Hjarvard) and ritual/ritualization (in discussion with and relation to Bell, Grimes and Turner), which I deemed especially applicable to the study of Olympic ceremony. My aim was, in each case, to explain why I used the notions and how I planned to use them, but also to discuss earlier discursive contributions and relate these to my own research. The choice for the notion of mediation/mediatization naturally sprang from my awareness that Olympic opening and closing ceremonies cannot be detached from the global, digital age in which they are broadcast live and worldwide. The general idea that our perception and understanding of ceremony is heavily affected by the way in which the ceremonial content is presented and registered also informed the eventual analysis of the host country performances. In this analysis I intended to consider the role of visual, especially technical choices by the responsible director(s) and the broader creative team, which are all related to the concept of mediatization. The notion of ritual was crucial to continue discussing the suggestion of religious elements and the display of symbolic content belonging to Olympism without resorting again to the category of religion. The notion of performance, which I used in this study in a more general and less theoretical sense, and the notion of human practice and embodied behavior, which are both engrained in the category of ceremony, directed me toward the category of ritual, which has often been applied to instances of human practice and performed behavior - *especially* when human practice is somehow regulated, as it is evidently the case in the context of Olympic ceremony. From there I argued why I conceive of Olympic ceremonies as rituals, and I introduced a taxonomy, inspired by the work of Bell and Grimes, in which ritual elements are distinguished from ritual enactments. This taxonomy is subtly connected to the distinction between 'theory' and practice and the move from worldview to worldview dynamics which I discussed earlier. With the use of this particular distinction I explained how particular ritual elements and enactments are carefully ritualized in the Olympic context, and I also discussed the (possible) relation(s) between

ritual elements and symbols, since symbols are so dominant in the visual configuration of Olympism.

The two remaining chapters were devoted to the analysis of Olympic ceremony. I conducted the analysis through the lens of ritual and ritualization, but I did not want to enter the pitfall of arguing repeatedly why a particular ceremonial element or enactment could be considered a *ritual* element or enactment; in the end, my aim was constantly to demonstrate *how* Olympism is configured in practice, rather than building an incontestable case for the understanding of Olympism as ritual. My definition of ritual has been a work definition with a reason: I did not want to attract the same critiques on my use of terminology that I anticipated with regard to the category of religion. In fact, as I explained in chapter 2, the categories of ritual and religion are intrinsically related, and there has been an influential school of thought in which religion was considered to have originated from ritual contexts. My understanding of ritual elements and ritual enactments as components of Olympic rituals has to be taken as a theoretical suggestion, a lens which helps to understand how particular elements, enactments and symbols are recurrently presented and become part of a standardized ceremonial set-up. The use of ritual also allowed me to resume, at some points, the discussion on Olympism and religion.

I presented a standardized set-up of Olympic opening and closing ceremonies to denote and discuss its various (closed) segments, introduced and perpetuated over time by the IOC. In the second part of the chapter I discerned the ritual elements and enactments within these segments which are arguably most significant to the configuration of Olympism. As I pointed out, the distinction between 'closed' and 'open' segments may be artificially induced, but it helped to outline and discuss the symbolic markers of Olympism before I turned to the specific analysis of the host country performances. The most important contribution of the fourth chapter has been to argue against the idea that these host country performances predominantly serve to express nationalist and/or culturally demarcated politics and aspirations. While all three host countries (China, the UK and Brazil) performed, after Hall, "narratives of the nation", each narrative either culminated in the prevailing endorsement of Olympism or happened, in any case, in an overarching globally orientated context supervised by the IOC. The tendency is that the values and principles of Olympism are emphasized to a greater extent when there is particular awareness of a global crisis, which increased the

need to set political and cultural differences aside and proclaim the need of “togetherness”. This is the main reason why the ceremonies of Rio 2016 were most compatible with the values and principles of Olympism, especially in comparison with Beijing 2008, which principally stimulated the discourse on the possibility of conflict between global and national aspirations, and the framework which I introduced (in chapter 4) to discuss that possibility. Ultimately, however, all “narratives of the nation” were subservient to the values and principles of Olympism and the configuration of Olympism as worldview.

A great amount of research has already been done on the past and present of the ancient and modern Olympic Games. Especially in these uncertain and uncomfortable times (at the moment of writing, the Covid-19 crisis is certainly not over), however, I am chiefly interested in the future of the Games. My expectation is that the compatibility of the host country performance with Olympic values and principles will prove itself even stronger during the postponed Games of 2021, when the IOC, the host country and all participants and audiences alike are still dealing with the actualities and effects of the Covid-19 crisis. I hope that scholars will be able and willing to follow the Olympic course, not only ‘now’ in 2021, but also beyond. They may be able to check my hypothesis and come up with many new observations on the basis of the Tokyo Olympics and other upcoming editions (aside from the summer Olympics there are the winter Olympics and the Paralympic Games). In addition, there is nearly endless potential in audience research, which I did not incorporate in this project due to considerations of scope, personal research interests and practical conditions.

On a disciplinary level, this study has been a project to explore the theoretical and methodological boundaries of religious studies in a stimulating, non-subversive fashion. I hope that its findings may support future research, not only on the configuration of Olympism during future editions of the Games but specifically on the relation between worldview (and worldview studies) and religion (and religious studies). I am convinced there must be more and similar case studies in which the conception of a coherent set of ideas and practices as ‘worldview’ may help to approach and reconsider the discourse on defining ‘religion’ and the potential of worldview studies. May they be of Olympic proportions – may they have Olympic potential.

Epilogue

I am finishing this study at the end of June 2021. The postponed Olympic Games of Tokyo (2020/2021) are exactly one month away, and at this point in time, I can state with certainty that the Games will take place under strict Covid-19 regulations. A maximum of 10.000 Japanese visitors is allowed (RTL Nieuws 2021). For a long time, it looked as if the Games would possibly be canceled again, since Covid-19 statistics were considered critical in Japan and many influential individuals (for instance the Japanese politician Toshihiro Nikai, see NOS 2021) and organizations (for instance the major Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun, see Woods 2021), alongside a considerable part of the Japanese population (see NOS 2021), called for a proper risk assessment. The costs involved in a second cancellation would be so tremendous (see the grey legenda in NOS 2021), however, that a green light on the IOC's behalf could be expected.

During the Games any kind of political protest will be prohibited. EU Athletes, an overarching organization which represents athletes and sport unions from various disciplines, is worried that this prohibition will disable participants to speak out freely (AD 2021). The decision of the IOC to prohibit *any* kind of protest is in line with the objective, initially expressed by de Coubertin and formulated in the Olympic Charter (principle 5, IOC 2020, 11), to secure political neutrality. I have argued throughout this study that this not possible, since the IOC cannot refrain entirely from taking a political stance and advancing ideological content, be it deliberately and explicitly or not. I am curious, as a consequence, whether there will be a moment in the (near) future at which the IOC will either let go of the political neutrality principle entirely or increase its acceptance of political statements and protests. My hypothesis is that resistance to the principle will grow, which increases the pressure on the IOC to allow more or to take a stance. Something similar happens during the European Football Championships (UEFA Euro 2020/2021), which is progressing at the moment of writing, where the UEFA did not take action when the team captain of Germany wore a ribbon in the rainbow colors (in order to support LGBT-rights), and yet refused a request by the German Football Association to display the rainbow colors on the Allianz Arena (one of the football stadiums, in München, that is used for the championship). In this particular

context the UEFA applies a similar principle of political neutrality, but the boundaries are blurry and it becomes unclear and inconsequential which statements teams and players can and cannot make (NOS 2021).

I repeat my expectation, formulated in the conclusion of this study, that the host country performance of the upcoming Olympics will prove itself (extra) compatible with the values and principles of Olympism. My hypothesis is that we will see a “crisis response” to the Covid-19 crisis as we did in 2016, when the issue of climate change was addressed. This “crisis response” strengthens and substantiates the global orientation of the IOC, since a global crisis increases the demand for global solutions. Thus, we may expect a global call for solidarity and unity, which could again be related (as I already witnessed and analyzed it in the context of the last three Olympic editions) to the projection of a global utopia in which conflicts and differences can become relics of the past. The question is, of course, whether this utopia is actually attainable or whether the IOC and the Japan NOC are mainly content to be able to provide an actual context in which the dream can flourish, albeit for a few weeks only. I wish the reader a pleasant and informed Olympic summer.



Figure 27: a Japanese greeting to conclude the announcement of the host country in Rio de Janeiro (2016 CC).

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Notes on the use of sources

1. Throughout this thesis, I consistently use 'IOC' as author for 'Olympic publications', unless explicitly stated otherwise. This concerns, for instance, the Olympic channel and the Olympic Charters. If known, other (related) institutions and right holders are always mentioned.
2. Likewise, 'United Nations' is used as the author for 'United Nations publications'.
3. "Accessed" in the case of all internet entries standardly concerns the last or most recent date on which I visited the hyperlink.
4. Dates of publication with regard to internet links are only included in the bibliography if they are mentioned on the related page as well.
5. *= I retrieved the article by Larson & Rivenburgh (1991) used in chapter 2 from a Worldcat source (Worldcat for Utrecht University, protected access) that did not include the original page numbers (75-94). This means that I used p.1-15 for my in-text-references, in order to let the references correspond with the text I used in the best way possible. My apologies for the inconvenience.

Note on the use of the broadcast registrations provided by the IOC on its Olympic YouTube platform:

Throughout this study I have always used the ceremony broadcasts as they were provided by the IOC on the official 'Olympic(s)' YouTube-platform. This also means that all images (screenshots) can be traced to these particular broadcasts. When I visited the "Olympic Channel" on YouTube on April 6th, 2021, I noticed that the name of the channel was "Olympics". I dare to state that the name was probably changed, as I had listed the channel as "Olympic" on December 24th, 2020. I have solved this by referencing the channel as "Olympic(s)" whenever I reference the channel in general.

Appendix of abbreviations

BCE/CE: (Before) (the) Common Era

IOC: International Olympic Committee

NOC: National Olympic Committee

UN: United Nations

The following abbreviations (and variations of it) are only used for the imagery captions:

2012 OC: Opening Ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games

2012 CC: Closing Ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games

Note on the use of language

Unless stated otherwise, the use of a particular pronoun or gender-specific reference (for instance 'herself' or 'sportsman') in a sentence that is not gender-particular is meant to hypothetically include other genders as well.

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