

(Ir)Relevant Rings: the Symbolic Consumption of the Olympic Logo in Postmodern Media Culture

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This paper is an examination of the concept of the linguistic sign within the contemporary Olympic Movement. Specifically, we will investigate the Games' five-ring insignia, which acts as the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) overarching signifier and claims to refer to the universal ideals of sport as embodied in the Olympic Movement. These ideals, originally fabricated to bring the world together through sport, have been ironically successful, in that the quadrennial festival is a large and powerful social institution which systematically lures billions of viewers to their television sets. We argue that these ideals are not so clear cut, relying instead upon the rings' specious origins, largely irrelevant meanings, and malleable image. Nonetheless, the Olympic image is one that is much sought after by multinational corporations attempting to link themselves with the Games. For example, Coca-Cola and Kodak have already purchased international rights to sponsor the Olympic Games in Atlanta for an opportunity to merge their products with the Olympic logo and all that it ostensibly signifies. This sponsorship will translate into a plethora of media images linking the espoused ideals of the Olympic Movement to corporations such as Coca-Cola and Kodak.

It is a rare individual who does not recognize the Olympic Games' emblem. Today, this icon comprised of five interlocked rings colored (from left to right) blue, yellow, black, green and red accompanies the purchase of a multiplicity of goods advocated as essential for eating, drinking, clothing, shelter, transportation and amusement. This paper will examine the historical context and affiliation between such commodities and the interlocked rings while underscoring the true meaning (if any) of this internationally accepted and recognized logo. This

will reveal that the marketing strategies of various corporations aspire to draw meaningful connections between their products and the ideals connected to the Olympic Games.

We do not question the Olympic ideals themselves, only their presumed connection to the rings. These ideals are outlined in the Olympic Charter, which states:

The Olympic *flag* and symbol symbolize the union of the five continents and the meeting of athletes from all over the world at the Olympic Games in a spirit of fair and frank competition and good friendship, the ideal preached by Baron de Coubertin. (Miller, 1979: 194)

It is these ideals that we question by illuminating the historical origins of the Olympic rings, their linguistic operation in contemporary culture, and their commodification and symbolic consumption through the medium of television and consumers' advertising experience. We conclude that the Olympic rings operate as an open-ended signifier enabling their continued symbolic consumption as both affective cultural icon and linguistic item whose meaning emerges out of the links between products and people's everyday lives. As such, the Olympic rings do not represent ideals inherent to the Games, but are the product of a carefully cultivated media endeavor.

THE OLYMPIC LOGO

The original inspiration for the Olympic Games' five ring logo evolved out of the mind of Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games and his involvement in the Union des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Athlétiques (USFSA). As first president of this sport governing body, Coubertin had seen the USFSA ascend from the union of two other sporting organizations (Georges St. Clair and Coubertin's committee for physical education). As such, the logo of the USFSA portrayed two interlocking rings as a symbol of this union (Young, 1985:326).

This account of the birth of the Olympic logo disputes the widely accepted myth of an historical link existing between the five ring symbol of the modern Olympic movement and the Games of ancient Greece. This legend suggests the five ring emblem is 3,000 years old. Several recent pieces of

research have debunked this fable (Barney, 1992; Young, 1984, 1985). Nonetheless, it is both historically significant and theoretically pertinent to detail the circumstances under which the idea behind such a widely accepted relationship have been fostered. The confusion emanates, in part, from an altar which rested at Olympia (site of the ancient Olympic Games) and more recently at the adjacent International Olympic Academy. This altar has the five interlocked rings displayed. In addition, there is a stone located in Delphi (the city which, in antiquity, hosted an alternative set of athletic Games) also containing the five ring inscription. Alluding to either of these altars as the source of the 3,000 year-old association between the ancient and modern Olympic Games places one in error by approximately 2,960 years because the origin for both of these altars was Nazi "propaganda" that accompanied the 1936 Berlin Olympics (Young, 1984:261).

The Olympic Games' insignia first appeared publicly in June of 1914 at the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) 20th anniversary celebration of the birth of the modern Olympic movement. On that occasion, 50 white flags were used as a backdrop against which the five ring symbol was exhibited. Coubertin details this occasion:

The emblem and the flag chosen to represent this 1914 World Congress, which will place the definitive seal on the Olympic revival, has started to appear on various preliminary documents: five rings regularly interlocked (Barney, 1992:641).

It was only a short time after its inception that the rings began to circulate as an overarching insignia for the Olympic Games movement.

It is a common misconception that the five ring symbol and its colours were originally designed to represent the participation of individual continents in the Olympic Games. That was not the case. Rather, as Coubertin himself explained:

Their diverse colorings - blue, yellow, black, green, and red - are set off against a background which is paper white. These five rings represent the five parts of the world from this point on won over to Olympism and given to accepting fruitful rivalry. Furthermore, the six colours thus combined reproduce the colours of all the nation's with no exception. The blue and yellow of Sweden, the blue and white of Greece, the tricolours of France, England and America, Germany, Bel-

gium, Italy, Hungary, the yellow and red of Spain next to the novelties of Brazil or Australia, with old Japan and new China. Here is truly an international symbol (Young, 1984:268-269; Barney, 1992:641).

Several pieces of evidence extractable from this citation substantiate the conclusion that Coubertin's original intent was neither to have the rings, nor their colours represent the continents. The six colours include the flag's white background. If each of these colours is assumed to represent an individual continent this means that any subsequent utilization of the "international symbol" must include this background. Historically, however, this colour has been omitted in continent-by-continent colour representations, not to mention the fact that there are neither five nor six continents, but seven.

However, it is debatable whether Coubertin believed there to be five or six continents (Young, 1984:269). We do know that he did not include Africa as a separate continent. According to Barney (1992:630), this was the case because, although South Africa (whites only) had participated in the Olympic Games since their inception, the South African athletes had competed under the flag of "Mother England." In addition, there is no reason to assume that Antarctica was included within the logo colour scheme, given that there is no historical account of athletes from that continent participating in the Olympic Games before, or since, 1914. Therefore, the largest possible number of continents Coubertin could have included was five, yet the number of colors on the flag is six, as Coubertin himself admits.

So perhaps it is the rings representing "the five points in the world" which undergirds the notion of a ring per continent equation. It is likely that this was not the case however, for it has been argued that the five rings and their colours were meant to represent the first five host nations of the Modern Olympic Games (Greece, France, United States, England and Sweden) (Young, 1984; 1985). Thus, we can see from the above quote that Coubertin listed those five nations which had already hosted the Games followed by Germany that in 1914 was expected to host the ill-fated 1916 Games and Belgium, the eventual host of the 1920 Games. Following Young, Coubertin intended to add a ring for every country that hosted the Games. This practice was

halted either because of Coubertin's disillusionment with the inevitability of World War I, or a deep seated aversion to including a ring for the nation of Germany (Young, 1985:273).

The five ring symbol was co-opted from a party celebrating the successful completion of twenty years of Olympic resuscitation, which in turn gained inspiration from the union of competing sport federations. It is clear that the symbol chosen to embody the modern Olympic movement has no distinct meaning outside of that which was conferred upon it from the exercise of 'sporting license' with history, both recent and ancient. This process of co-optation cannot be taken lightly, however, because these specious origins have contributed to its being one the most sought after commercial images in the world. As such, the rings have no inherent bond with the Games. In fact, if Coubertin's original plan of adding a ring to the white background for every host nation had continued, the celebrated five ring logo would not exist today. So why is there such a strong association between the Games and the logo? More importantly, what dynamics are responsible for the taciturn existence of the true intentions of this internationally recognized emblem? To answer these questions the sign and function of the logo must be understood alongside its attendant commodity function. This analysis will disclose the source of the rings' symbolic power.

THE SIGN AS STRUCTURE

At first glance, the relationship between the Olympics and the five ring symbol seems both direct and unequivocal. However, the meaning of this partnership is open to question. So ingrained is this association that it is rarely scrutinized and, indeed, widely accepted. The partnership is owed to the construction of the Olympic Games' five ring logo as a single linguistic item, one that is operating as a "double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms" (Saussure, 1966:65).

As Ferdinand de Saussure (1966:66) points out, the operation inherent to associating these two terms, in structuring a single linguistic item, entails the connection of more than "a thing and a name." Instead it is "the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses" (ibid). The rings' linguistic operation can be understood as an organic relationship of parts that make sense only in

relation to one another, comprised of the modern Olympic Games (concept/signified), and the rings (sound-image/signifier). The signifier consists of the material aspect of the sign (sounds and letters), while the signified is the meaning represented by the material aspect of the sign. These parts comprise what Saussure called the "sign", that is, an association between concept and sound-image, which should be thought of as an organic relationship, not simply the sum of two discreet parts.

Two immediate objections might be raised at this point. First, as the rings are visual and not phonetic, how can they constitute the sound-image to which Saussure referred? In response, we submit that the rings are not simply visual, for the term 'Olympic rings' can not only be written, but instead can be used phonetically, in reality conjuring up the powerful psychological images which have lead to its ascribed status. Moreover, the rings seem to operate as a signifier, inasmuch as their visual impact evokes the 'Olympic rings' at the same moment as they are seen, and inasmuch as there is an organic link between the rings and the concept to which they now refer, the Olympic Games.

Second, and more importantly, are not the rings a symbol of the Olympic Games, invoking "a natural bond between the signifier and signified" (Saussure, 1966:68)? That is, is it possible to compare the Olympic rings with, say, the scales of justice, an archetype Saussure offers as exemplifying this natural bond? This query raises the problem of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, a relationship which is necessary for constituting the sign, where convention designates the signifier in play. The scales of justice seem to occupy such a non-arbitrary position, for not any symbol - - for example, a chariot - - could be used to represent the judiciary (ibid). Don't the rings have such a natural bond as a product of a fundamental link between the rings and the Games? But this is just the point, there seems to be such a strong, almost essentialist link, and yet none exists! Do the rings represent the continents? No. The Ancient Olympic Games? No. Do the colours represent the continents? No. Indeed, the previously presented history of the rings has shown there to be no such natural bond, only an arbitrary invention and application emerging through convention, and over time.

Saussure's work, of course, provided a paradigm in structuralist semiotic theory, analyzing language

in terms of its laws. For Saussure, the different parts of the system of language take on meaning *only* in relation to differences or, in other words, acquire significance only in relation to what they are not. Despite the importance of this structuralist account, it does not completely explain the universal recognition of the Olympic logo as a symbol, nor does it account for its' widely accepted status among advertisers. Our important goal of producing a more complete understanding of the Olympic logo as an advertising tool must transcend, but not neglect, semiotic analysis and examine the political economy of the sign in order to illuminate the relationship between sign and commodity.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE SIGN

Many more recent theoretical efforts have journeyed beyond Saussure's early position in stressing both the arbitrary nature of language and the properties of the sign in a capitalist political-economy. This elaboration is generally attributed to Jean Baudrillard, whose insights emerged out of an early neo-Marxist interest in examining commodities as they convey meaning from the desires they satisfy. Baudrillard's work, begun in the late 1960's, has continued to provide theoretical impetus as a project discerning the impact of new communication forms on society. Indeed, these labors have been expanded, becoming the foundation for an extensive cultural critique positing that simulations have acted to fundamentally alter perceptions of reality (cf. Baudrillard, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c; Poster, 1988, 1990). More specifically, it has been suggested that "advertising takes over the moral responsibility of all of society and replaces a puritan morality with a hedonistic morality of pure satisfaction, like a new state of nature at the heart of hypercivilization" (Baudrillard, 1988a: 12-13).

Baudrillard's earliest research proposes that "sign value" is a necessary insertion into the usual Marxian distinctions between "use value" and "exchange value", thereby capturing the prestige element that accompanies any commodity purchase and its reflection upon the consumer. Indeed, Baudrillard calls for an end to the distinction between the concepts of use value and exchange value because both are ensnared in the logic of capitalist production and act as a pretext for its continued existence (Baudrillard, 1981). Baudrillard's own typology, then, sug-

gests that Marxism can be read as, not so much a radical critique of capitalism, but as an ideology that justifies the full metamorphosis of this economic form (Poster, 1988:4). Accordingly, Baudrillard (1988b: 116) mandates the union of the concepts of exchange value and use value within sign value. The relationship between consumer and object, then, is not only the satisfaction of needs, but the production of inexhaustible desires (Poster, 1988:3). For example, purchasing Nike brand footwear transcends the procurement of an attractive and expensive mode of personal transport; rather, replacing old shoes becomes an act of endowing meaning and accumulating 'cultural capital'.

Baudrillard's discussion of the emergence of sign value, we herein would like to suggest, has direct bearing on the Olympic Games. Gruneau (1984) notes that during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the expanse of time devoted to work and devoted to leisure became conspicuously separated as a result of the cultural hegemony of capitalist conceptions of work and temporality. This development enhanced opportunities for free time expenditure to become inextricably contingent on the capitalist marketplace. Moreover, this provided the impetus for the commodification of popular or mass recreation, leading to an acknowledgment of sport as just another realm of the prevailing economic system. It is no surprise, then, that the modern Olympic movement was affected:

No matter what the intentions of the founders of the modern Olympics, the *actual possibilities* open to them were limited by the nature of the economic system as a whole and the network of social institutions associated with it (Gruneau, 1984:5).

Gruneau (1984:9) asserts that the prohibitive cost of hosting the Games became a factor in the expanded circulation of the Olympic logo as both sign and commodity. For example, that the 1972 Munich Games cost of 850 million dollars was almost doubled to 1.5 billion for the 1976 Montreal Games (Gruneau 1984:9). In addition, it is estimated that Spain spent nearly 8 billion dollars in preparation for the 1992 Barcelona Games (Double, 1989:4). Clearly, the sales of television rights along with public donations and investments could not adequately cover such staggering sums. Gruneau

(1984:9) suggests that Olympic organizing committees foresaw this development and were virtually forced into marketing the Games as a commodity, leading to the 1984 Los Angeles Games' nickname "the hamburger Olympics".

Gruneau's scheme details how the commodification process engulfed leisure and sport. The Olympic Games, as a major component of sport became "more commodified to the point where, at its highest levels, it is now a simple division of the entertainment and light consumer goods industries" (Gruneau, 1988:358). This signalled an increasing prominence devoted to the Olympic Games' logo as a marketing symbol or trademark as an integral part of this development. Gruneau appropriates Baudrillard's insights making it possible to provide an analysis of the 'political economy of the Olympic sign' where sign value is the only meaningful element of the political economy. This examination contributes to the new logic of production finding resonance in Baudrillard's (1981: 147) call for a drastic shift in understanding consumption:

Today consumption - - if this term has a meaning other than that given it by vulgar economics - - defines precisely the stage where the commodity is immediately produced as the sign, as a sign value, and where signs (culture) are produced as commodities.

Baudrillard (1981: 146-147) asserted that language lost its reciprocal nature when an abstract code emerged (the era of the sign). A composite of signifiers is called a "code," and a code extracts signifieds from the social and represents them in the media (Baudrillard, 1988c). This "era of the sign" resonated with a corresponding emergence in capitalism. Today, there has been the complete separation of signs from their referents and the result is that signifiers operate randomly, unable to express meaning. The media then, can be understood as offering endless and excessive signifiers that fail to operate according to any rational process of information dissemination.

Baudrillard expands upon the foregoing point, judging "desire" to be the driving force behind a commodity purchase. This abolishes the standard position of rationality and need as prime determinants in the consumer-commodity relationship and, in turn, destroys normal social conventions and rules

of conduct. This leads to the notion of commodity acquisition wherein the commodity attaches meaning to the consumer. For Baudrillard, advertising begins this process by coding "products through symbols that differentiate them from other products, thereby fitting the object into a series" (Poster, 1988:2). Baudrillard's analysis postulates the existence of a system of signs wherein varied meanings connote differences between individuals based upon commodity purchase patterns. Moreover, these meanings offer new and continuous delights which act to exacerbate compulsive desires. Baudrillard extends his interest in the power of desire suggesting that it acts as a seductive force that could potentially replace the model of supply and demand production.

Baudrillard concludes that *the code no longer refers to, nor even has a relationship with, the consumer object*. Instead, the code can be reconceptualized as simulacra; that is, as a system which has no grounding in a wider reality, but only refers to itself (Rosenau, 1992: 110). Baudrillard's term for this condition is "hyperreality," a contemporary and unexplored form of linguistic existence, that is more undeniable than concrete reality. In other words, the model replaces the real, and the model to which we aspire is a simulation (Best and Kellner, 1991:111-145).

Hyperreality has two grand and interrelated implications. The first regards a potential shift in the focus from the subject to the (hyperreal) object. This typically postmodern perspective asserts that changing conditions of contemporary existence have altered one's "individuality and self-awareness - the condition of being subject" (Rosenau, 1992:42). This denial of the privileged position of the subject in determining truth constitutes the second connotation. According to Baudrillard's scheme, we are relegated to the station of mere sign consumers, vulnerable to the seductive qualities of consumer objects as elucidated by the prevailing code.

It is critical for our present concerns to ascertain if Baudrillard's most recent contributions further an understanding of the Olympic logo. Consequently, it is necessary to conduct a detailed and grounded examination of the "coding" of products through symbols. To begin, we turn to Gruneau (1984:1) who asserts that the underlying rationale behind all advertising is the establishment of a set of "deeply rooted symbolic connections with a target audience." Explicating the nature of these symbolic

connections goes beyond determining whether or not the five rings operate as a symbol, concentrating instead on the significance of establishing such a symbolic relationship. We begin by briefly examining the type of affiliations sought through linking one's product with the Olympic logo. Although these vary among advertisers, generally it encompasses the elicitation of such images as: 'the sporting life', 'youth', 'success', 'brother or sisterhood' and 'universality'. Jhally (1989:79) concisely articulates some of the previous assertions on sport, the media, and advertising:

The sports industry has become dependent upon the media; the media in turn derive their revenues for the purchase of sports broadcast rights from advertisers who wish to reach the audiences that watch sports. The other way in which sports can derive additional revenue is to sell themselves directly to advertisers. The 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles are the best example of this commercialization taken to extreme lengths. Sports are undoubtedly a very important and powerful cultural force in contemporary America - they give meaning to the lives of many people. That meaning, though, is mediated through the commodity form of culture.

COMMODITY QUA OBJECT

The concept of "the commodity" serves as an important conduit for a discussion of the Olympic rings, undergirding our claim that it is in relation to the flow of commodities that the rings have simultaneously achieved their prominence, meaning and attendant confusion. The nature of commodity production in consumption-oriented cultures, however, is no simple matter. Indeed, the relationship between the commodity *qua object*, people as consumers, and the wider cultural landscape is extremely complex terrain to traverse because, for example, the capitalists' profit motive alone does not completely account for the commodity's meaning, for "commodities are consumed as much for their meanings, identities, and pleasures as they are for their material function" (Fiske, 1989:4). In other words, *people*, as consumers, and not just capitalists, utilize and make sense of the commodity.

As suggested earlier, semiotic power is always involved in the consumer's relation to the object because commodities have both a material and symbolic component. Margaret Carlisle Duncan

(1993:361) cites the example of women that serves as a guide: "women may be transformed symbolically (e.g., as pornographic images) or materially (e.g., as prostitutes) into commodities, either more or less valuable depending on their external surfaces." Furthermore, the meanings of objects consumed are negotiated in and through the varied cultural backgrounds of consumers. John Fiske (1989:6) notes the importance of "the interface between everyday life and the consumption of the products of the cultural industries." Television audiences, for example, are social subjects who read programs and commercials differently, depending on the social-cultural context of the viewers (Fiske, 1987:62-83). Finally, if it serves the profit-oriented interests of capitalists to produce commodities that can be sold to as many different stripes of consumers as possible at the same time, and if these same consumers produce many and diverse meanings associated with the commodity, then it follows that the interests of capitalists would most effectively be served by a commodity-production system that is as germane to as many consumers as possible. How is this possible?

The answer, in part, can be examined by investigating the concept of '*relevance*' which John Fiske (1989:5-6) suggests is vital to the creation and continued fulfillment of commodities and their related meanings in popular culture. Simply put, the notion of relevance refers to "a site of struggle, for relevances are dispersed, and as divergent as the social situations of the people" and captures the attempt "to produce meanings that are relevant to everyday life." As such, popular culture has within it "parody, subversion, or inversion" which are "full of puns whose meanings multiply and escape the norms of the social order and overflow their discipline" and, which produce "contradictions, for contradictions require the productivity of the reader to make his or her sense out of them." In other words, an open-ended signification and consumption system most efficaciously sells the commodity by leaving its meanings open to the interpretations of consumers in and through their everyday experiences.

This system takes on heightened importance in contemporary or "postmodern North American society", an epoch wherein culture is guided by, "shaped," and imbued with life by the interrelationship between the use-value of the object and its symbolic meaning, being commodified and "com-

modifying everything” in its wake (Duncan, 1993:360-361). The crucial difference between modernism and postmodernism rests, according to Slavoj Žižek (1992: 142), in “unmasking” the logic of capitalism and all its oppressions, in “the utopian abolition of the difference between ‘alienated’ life spheres, between art and ‘reality’.” Within modernism, this “unmasking” assumes something just around the corner, i.e., a utopic ending to the alienation inherent to capitalism or the discovery of the foundations of democratic principles. As manifested in popular culture, texts, movies, or on a televised sport spectacle, there is always the object of one’s desire which lurks just around the corner. Conversely, postmodernism “consists not in demonstrating that the game works without an object, that the play is set in motion by a central absence, but rather in displaying the object directly, allowing it to make visible its own indifferent and arbitrary character” (Žižek, 1991: 143).

The repercussion is that in advanced postmodern consumer-oriented cultures the object’s meaning, be it material or symbolic, is not so simple as to be completely definable. In addition, the relevancies of commodities insinuates something very different for postmodern culture than it does for modern. While it may be true that the commodity’s meaning in early capitalism could be defined in relation to its utility, in late-capitalism the role of mass communications, advertising, and the creation of consumer-oriented culture depend on an ever-expanding set of needs and meanings attached to the commodities that venture to satisfy those needs. As such, perhaps it is more fitting to suggest that the (*ir*)relevance of the commodity, its advertising symbols, and its meaning seems to be the name of the game in postmodern societies. In other words, if a particular symbol - qua signifier - were to be irrelevant, to have no inherent meaning or to be recognized as inherently neutral then that symbol would be an especially powerful advertising tool. It could be used to represent virtually any product, advertisers could construct any story they wanted around such a symbol, while at the same time it would mean something different for diverse groups of people. The product would be sold, diverse groups of people could create their own meanings around the symbolic representation of products and, in the end, the symbol would be at the same time completely relevant and irrelevant.

The Olympic logo, as such..an irrelevant signifier, serves the needs of consumerism very well. The symbol’s fictitious past verifies its contemporary power, establishing an implicit link to the Games and adding to this power, for what international event is venerated as more “neutral”, that is, non-political? The symbol’s meaning, in other words, is not pre-given so as to be advertised and consumed. Indeed, the internationally accepted logo for the Olympic Games, through communicative and symbolic consumption, is accorded continuously invented meaning.

The greatest advertising medium, and the most important for the Olympic Games and the utilization of the Olympic rings as an advertising tool, is television. Indeed, we find that television’s omnipresent status in the contemporary global marketplace infuses the rings with their power as it is largely through this conduit that the rings work their magic.

TELEVISION CONSUMPTION AND ADVERTISERS

Television’s role in advanced capitalist societies, where high consumption levels are necessary for the expansion of capital into virtually every aspect of life, cannot be overemphasized. In particular, Robert Dunn (1986:49) notes the manner in which television exists in an “unfinished” relationship with the viewers, suggesting that the meanings created by television are ambiguous, as is our knowledge of how the complex television-viewer relationship operates.

Dunn (1986: 1) asserts, like Grunewald, that in the process of constituting workers as consumers in the early 20th century, advertising came not only to sell products but ways of life, i.e. an “expression of lifestyle.” Mass culture has been the result, where “culture itself is turned into an industry--its various products packaged and marketed like any commodity.” The effect of television has been to reduce objects to images, where “meanings get attached to commodities as objects of visual perception, thereby turning objects into images” (ibid, 53). In effect, the object takes on a Baudrillardian hue becoming both commodity and sign.

Also noteworthy is recent research suggesting, contra Baudrillard, that the viewer in this complex relationship is not a completely passive one, but is constituted as an active subject (Dunn, 1986; Fiske,

1987; Poster, 1990). As Dunn (1986:55) articulates: "the logic of television's code, however, points to numerous questions concerning the claims of passive spectatorship and ideological reproduction". For one, television has its own kind of language, it "offer[s] something to the spectator, but what is it that is offered, and with what consequences for the spectator and society?" (ibid). Moreover, as Poster (1990:44) maintains, the media changes society by mixing audiences normally kept separate; consequently, it rearranges social order. For television, this corresponds to a reduction of everything -- all content and form -- to its own code, and this is accomplished in order to accommodate a range of themes and communication functions within continuous flow broadcasting, television must abolish traditional distinctions of subject matter and taste. News, documentaries, comedies, commercials, editorials, sports, etc--the whole repertoire is more or less indiscriminately reduced to a single language of television's own making. (Dunn, 1986:56)

As a result of its own predetermined dictates, television is capable of creating perverse contrasts, for example, between news of famine and a commercial for luxurious food (Dunn, 1986:56); or, as during the 1994 Winter Olympic telecast, images relating the rings to both war-torn Sarajevo or Coca-cola within a short period of time. This is accomplished via the ability of television to play upon emotions, to enact the "language of *affect*":

The objects of fulfillment encoded with consumerist meanings can be decoded in a variety of alternative or oppositional ways by members of this audience. . . set[ting] in motion a number of contradictory tendencies: it both arouses and calms, excites and dulls, stimulates and drains (ibid, 57).

This is accomplished through television's complex technology, its "visual regimentation," "routinized technical structures," its "dynamic" "round-the-clock broadcasting," and so forth (ibid, 59-60).

Far from creating an image of viewers as passive receptacle, however, Fiske (1989: 10) maintains:

Semiotic resistance results from the desire of the subordinate to exert control over the meanings of their lives, a control that is typically denied them in their material social conditions. This . . . is politically crucial, for without some control over one's existence there can be no empowerment and no self-esteem.

This comment bears relevance to Gruneau's claim that beginning during the latter half of the 19th century, and presumably since then, there has been a rise in the opportunities for "free-time." Accompanying this has been the entry of capital into every component of free-time use, including sport. While work is the privileged form in capitalism, there is at the same time the conspicuous consumption of free-time which, otherwise, would be considered idle or wasted time. The meanings created out of everyday free-time become especially important, finding resonance within the commodity/consumption pattern in order to satisfy individual modes of social existence. And isn't that what is going on with not only with the symbolic consumption of the rings but also with the Olympic Games in general?

In addition, it is important to recall that we are discussing an active subject that knows the difference between fiction or non-fiction, and often "simply because mass media 'demand in principle' an attitude of passive acceptance does not mean they actually obtain it" (Dunn, 1986:58). Different groups of people, for example, offer alternative readings of television shows and advertisements. John Fiske (1987:62-83) cites studies that demonstrate conformist, alternative, or even oppositional readings of television shows, concluding:

In practice, there are very few perfectly dominant or purely oppositional readings, and consequently viewing television is typically a process of negotiation between the text and its variously socially situated readers (ibid, 64).

While it may be true, then, that in capitalist societies the mass-production and consumption of goods requires concomitant mass-advertising schemes through television creating a homogenization of messages and symbolic representation of commodities, it is equally true that diverse groups of television viewers are able to decode messages just as heterogeneously as the encoding seeks homogeneity. This is not a contradiction, in fact it is the consistent manner in which the senders, receivers, and context (structure) of the message interact. As Umberto Eco (1972: 105) says, in mass communication "the transmitter of the message works within a communicative code which he knows *a priori* is not shared by all the receivers". "Aberrant decodings" in other words are "the rule in the mass media" (ibid, 106).

To argue that advertising and the production of cultural commodities - the production of culture itself - creates a passive spectator/consumer is, of course, much too simplistic. Advertisers do not exploit a mindless viewer, rather advertising adroitly plays on the ability of spectators/viewers to create meanings in their everyday lives. That is why irrelevant/ambiguous meanings are thrust into viewers' lives via advertising, and the utilization of the Olympic Games is such an effective tool for such an undertaking.

ADVERTISING, AMBUSH MARKETING AND OLYMPIC RIGHTS

By merging the trademarks of their corporation and the Olympic institution, advertisers hope to formulate an image of their product that partakes in the prestige accorded the modern Olympic movement as symbolized by the five interlocking rings. This is accomplished in television advertisements by companies offering products as diverse as sports clothing ("it takes a little more to be a champion"), fast-food (the owner of Wendy's has a dream of "winning gold"), or camera film ("just a reminder from Kodak that some of the greatest Winter Games take place in your own back yard"). The host network takes advantage of the Games' prestige and sells its own television shows in a similar fashion: "after you share a moment with the world, spend an hour with Dave"; "You've seen our team bring home the gold for our country, now the country gold of [promo]"; "Northern Exposure returns with world class"; "[CBS Evening News] where your world comes together." Advertisers, in other words, imply that the consumption of their products is directly and symbolically linked to Olympic Games' participation.

That corporate advertisers and television networks use the Olympic logo however, does not mean there are any inherent qualities in the Olympic logo. Indeed, we have shown that such inherent qualities do not exist. Nonetheless, a great deal of prestige has been conferred upon the Olympic image and, therefore, any product incorporating this image into a marketing strategy. In other words, advertisers are clearly aware of the nexus between image and commodity:

Whether or not US athletes actually thrive upon Chocolate bars, Coke, Big Macs, or Budweiser beer

is unimportant to the sponsoring companies whose primary concern is that their products become associated in the public mind with the Olympics (Tomlinson and Whannel, 1984:v).

What has emerged, then, is an ironic situation where the Olympic logo remains "faithful" to its invented historical 'roots' and fulfills its role to advertisers by providing a set of powerful images which are completely receptive to being affiliated with virtually any commodity. For examples, among the advertised products during CBS's U.S.A. broadcast of the 1994 Games were cars (Ford, Dodge/Plymouth), clothing (Champion, L'eggs, Hanes, Reebok), telecommunications (Sprint, Xerox, IBM), fast-food (McDonalds, Wendy's), soft-drinks (Coca-Cola), drugs (Tylenol), life insurance (John Hancock), credit cards (Visa), general merchandise (K-mart), leisure/theme park (Walt Disney), beer (Budweiser), and so forth. As one advertising consultant working for large corporations, including Coke, suggests, "[T]he company helps to forge the link between the 'grand scale' of Olympic events and the ideals and everyday lives of millions of ordinary people around the globe" (Dwek, 1991: 16).

The advertising phenomenon of 'ambush marketing' provides circumstance for examining the power and obscurity of the Olympic image, an image which weaves into one the mundane, the magnificent and the material. Ambush marketing refers to the practice whereby corporations buy broadcast airtime during the Games without having directly sponsored the IOC by paying a fee, a National Olympic Committee (NOC), or a National Governing Body (NGB). 'Ambushers' hope to have their 30-second promotions sandwiched around the advertisements of official sponsors, thereby appearing as corporate advocates or benefactors of the Olympic movement without providing remuneration (Levine and Thurston, 1992:30). Official sponsor status notwithstanding, by purchasing advertising space during the broadcast of sporting events ambushers hope to immerse their products in the composite of the meanings imputed to the Olympic spectacle.

This was clearly demonstrated during the 1992 winter Olympics in Albertville, France when the Federal Express Courier Corporation ran a series of commercial spots that lead to 61% of the viewers polled to believe -- wrongly as it turned out, that Federal Express was an official sponsor of the

Olympic Games (Levine and Thurston, 1992:30). During CBS's American broadcast of the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Games, Visa and American Express 'fought it out' once again. As both companies' advertisements took the viewers on whirlwind tours of the host country Norway, official sponsor Visa claimed "if you think the elements are cold, wait'll you see your reception when you try to buy a ticket at the Olympic Games with your American Express card", while ambusher American Express reminded viewers "if you're traveling to Norway, you'll need a passport, but you don't need a Visa."

A subtler version of this same phenomenon occurs when an official sponsor of the Games competes against corporations underwriting individual teams only. For example, the Fuji company sponsored the US track and field team in the 1992 Games, thereby reducing the value of the larger Olympic sponsorship investment for Kodak (Levine and Thurston, 1992:30). Coke attempted to prevent a similar occurrence during the 1992 Albertville and Barcelona Games by buying the rights to 37 out of 40 separate US National Governing Bodies as well as purchasing the logo rights from the IOC (Dwek, 1991). Coke's overall expenditures for sponsorship rights and marketing approached 100 million dollars. One wonders what Coke will spend to promote their connections to the 1996 Atlanta Games, a venue that just happens to be headquarters for this soft drink giant. Perhaps the 1984 'hamburger Olympics' will have its parallel at the 1996 'Coca-Cola Games'.

Purchasing the rights to the Olympic logo assists in shaping individual consumer consumption patterns. Firms are willing to pay enormous amounts of money for the privilege of creating an association between their product and the five rings. In fact, the amounts for worldwide Olympic sponsorship rights have almost quadrupled since the 1984 Games. At the 1992 Games (both winter and summer) 15 million dollars was paid by corporate interests for inclusion into the International/Worldwide or TOP-2 sponsorship program which grants corporations the global rights to promote their commodities by linking their consumption with the Olympic Games (Double, 1989:3). This 'sponsorship' has translated into expenditures of upwards of 450 million US dollars in total advertising and promotion costs for TOP-2 participants. Moreover, the 1996 IOC sponsorship fee will escalate to 43 million dollars (Levine and Thurston, 1992:30).

CONCLUSION

We have shown that the actual origins of the five interlocking rings were as a commemorative icon, not as an overarching symbol for the Olympic movement. Indeed, the rings represent the lack of Olympic ideals, while at the same time ironically sustaining the Olympic Games, for it is the Games' marketing, based largely on the use of the logo, that has aided its financial success in the late 20th century. This suggests that one of the world's most recognizable commercial images cannot be explained solely by a traditional critique of political economy. In other words, the rings symbolic consumption contributes more to the Games' marketing success than the use value of the products to which they are attached.

In this context, the rings represent the superimposition of two interrelated operations. First, the modernist utilization of global ideals such as unity and peace which pervade this sporting institution and are reflected in the (ultimately false) belief in the rings logo and its referent, the Olympic Games as symbolizing these global sporting 'ideals'. Second, a post-modernist interpretation of the rings render them as no more than convention, depicting their consumption as highly symbolic despite the fact their meaning is ultimately irrelevant. In understanding these mechanisms we are confronted with the rings' marketing appeal.

As such, we contend that the *symbolic consumption* of the Olympic Games is more appropriately constituted within postmodern media culture. While the five ring symbol played a historically vital role in the commodification of the Games, contemporary developments have engendered a postmodern everyday world that circumscribes the symbols attached to this spectacle. Accordingly, their circulation in the media has taken on myriad forms, supplying an insatiable television industry with sets of images which merge with viewers' everyday lives. Television, as we have seen during the 1994 Winter Olympic Games, enables advertisers to work the magic of the rings by nurturing meanings that accompany such images. In other words, both the medium and the message fastidiously buttress the shape and structure of existing meanings by offering them to the viewer as coterminous. This act confers relevance upon an irrelevant entity to ensure the consumption of such meanings.

Finally, we understand these links to be crucial as they depict the Olympic Games, one of the most visible elements of the institution of sport, as constructed by neither the needs of capital, nor the demands of consumers. Rather, it is that mediating space lying at the point of constructing meanings which finds resonance in the Games' success. These meanings are as endless as the rings are endlessly meaningless.

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