National Narratives in the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games

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Abstract
By focusing on the cases of the Athens 2004 Olympic ceremonies, this article interrogates insular representations of the nation that are commonly nurtured by Olympic narratives. In particular, the article discusses the ways in which the Athens 2004 ceremonies articulated aspects of history, topography, and constituency in relation with Greece’s present as well as with its past. By also locating instances that contest the perception of national identity as an overarching, unique, and pure entity, the article argues that the Olympics might be seen not as opportunities to elevate a nation’s prestige, as it is hoped by many, but rather for making visible alternative identities and renewed national narratives that stretch the conceptual boundaries of the nation and its relation with Others.

Keywords
Olympic Games, Athens 2004, opening and closing ceremonies, national identity, ethnic identity

This article will interrogate insular representations of the nation that are commonly nurtured and perpetuated by Olympic narratives, locating at the same time instances that contest the perception of national identity as an overarching, unique, and pure entity. The aim of this article is to focus on the relation between Olympic Games and national representation in contemporary Greece, taking as a case study the opening and closing ceremonies of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. In the following, I will discuss the ways in which the ceremonies articulated aspects of history, topography, and constituency of the Greek nation, in relation with the present as well as with the past.

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Even though the perception of mega events, as defined by Dayan and Katz (1992), is typically based on the distinction between live and televised audiences, in the case of the Olympics, the major distinction at play has been (at least until the beginning of the 21st century) between domestic and foreign audiences. According to Puijk, parallel to the tensions of us versus Others, the mode of self-representation (or of watching ourselves) is constitutive of the host nation’s experience of the Olympic events. This entails the viewers’ identification with the whole event and not only with certain participants of the games—such as, for instance, the nation’s athletes—and characterizes the experience of many of the host nation’s citizens as well as of its diaspora (Puijk, 1994). The Olympic ceremonies, and especially the opening one, become condensers of a nation’s expectations, and their reception by the international audiences functions as a barometer that indicates the acceptance of the nation per se by its various Others. However, the domestic reception of the ceremonies is not monolithic either. Internal differences about the idea of the nation surface and become points of debate after the ceremonies take place and in the post-Olympic period.

Olympic ceremonies are based on a protocol specified by the Olympic Charter and, also, on an artistic program, which is meant to present the culture of the host city/nation. Most of the Olympic ceremonies besides expressing universal ideals of humanism and peaceful internationalism, which are constitutive elements of the Olympic Charter, are anchored into the specific nation that hosts them, endeavoring to express its distinct identity. According to Roel Puijk, besides the Olympic symbols, Most countries want to present something more, they want to create a performance proper to their country, representing their culture. This involves identifying useful national cultural elements that are generally accepted as such nationally, and presenting them for an international audience in a digestible way. In addition to being an arrangement full of tradition, it also is a very modern television show whose aim is to present tradition in a creative, new and refreshing way without duplicating previous ceremonies. (Puijk, 1994, p. 101)

With the Olympic ceremonies, a host nation, after years of effort, seeks to be recognized by the international community and also to reaffirm and celebrate its own identity. Identity, however, is not a static entity, but rather it is constantly negotiated and reformulated. The role of an Olympic ceremony’s artistic director and of all those involved in the making of the Olympics is thus not only to express what is already known and established but also to transform it and model it. Theorists of Olympic studies, such as Jackie Hogan, see the Olympics as “key sites in the discursive construction of nation” and their ceremonies as major representations that constitute discourses of national identity or what Stuart Hall has called the “narrative of nation,” that is “a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols and rituals which stand for or represent the shared experiences, sorrows, triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation” (Hall, 1992, p. 293; Hogan, 2003, p. 101).

What is the narrative of Greece that was enunciated by the Olympic ceremonies of Athens 2004? Which were the privileged stories, images, landscapes, historical events that
were selected to be recalled during the ceremonies? How did this experience of watching ourselves add to the existing narratives of Greekness? Also, what was the shared experience of triumphs and possibly sorrows that was formed during these events and is to be remembered for future generations? Did these events mirror or reproduce existing discursive constructions (and if yes, to which extend?), or did they construct new ones? In trying to answer such questions, I will point out aspects of the Athens 2004 Olympic ceremonies that depict an overarching national culture that has nurtured the recent generations of Greek citizens. Parallel to that, I will try to identify elements that defy ideas of cultural homogenization and historic continuity, entailing the capacity to open up the definition of Greekness in a manner that challenges its stereotypical perception.

**Background**

In May 2002, the Athens 2004 Olympic ceremonies were commissioned to a—then 38-year-old—artist and choreographer from Greece, named Dimitris Papaioannou. This was an unusual choice, as Papaioannou, the founder of a fringe rather cutting-edge dance company named “Ground Squad” in the 1980s, was not broadly known among the Greek public. With this choice, the organization of Athens 2004 anticipated that Papaioannou and his team would avoid a safe, parochial, or stereotypical approach to representing Greekness and would rather follow the language of the international vanguard. Papaioannou, who claims his influences in the work of the minimalist American director Robert Wilson, started his career as a painter but soon switched to theater and performance art. Besides his interest in international, alternative theatrical expressions, Papaioannou’s work has been also inspired by established modernist figures in the world of Greek art, such as music composer Manos Hadjidakis and painter Yannis Tsarouhis, who was one of his early teachers. With this choice, Athens 2004 clearly followed the *auteur model*, a term used by J. MacAloon in his description of different approaches to the direction of Olympic ceremonies, according to which a ceremony is the result of a strong vision of an artistic director, as it had been the case with Albertville 1992 Olympic ceremonies under the artistic direction of Philippe Decouflé. It is also important to note that the production of the ceremony was undertaken by Jack Morton Public Events, part of New York–based company Jack Morton Worldwide, and was a technically challenging endeavor that was characterized as a “design of epic proportions” (Cashill, 2004, p. 11).

It was for almost 3 years that Papaioannou and his team worked for the conception and realization of the opening and closing ceremonies. Unlike other major projects of the Olympics, and despite its cost, the work of the Olympic ceremonies did not become subjects of public criticism prior to the Olympics.

**Spatiotemporal Context of Athens 2004 Olympic Ceremonies**

The reception of the Olympics ceremonies is inseparable from the particular spatio-temporal context within which they evolve. In the case of the ceremonies of the Athens 2004 games, the timing was particularly charged. After 3 years of harsh international
criticism on Greece’s incapacity to fulfill its Olympic task (especially in relation with the architectural and infrastructural projects for the Olympics), the venues were eventually completed, some of them just a few days prior to the start of the games. As the Greek public was relieved to hear that the venues were ready, on August 12th, a day only before the opening ceremony, the news broke that the two favorite Greek sprinters Kostas Kenteris (a former Olympic medalist) and Katerina Thanou were prosecuted under suspicion for doping. In hearing these news, a large section of the domestic public was deeply disillusioned, and the suspicion over the two prominent athletes’ doping was experienced by many as a national shame. It was thus with a mixture of sentiments (pride and relief, on the one hand, and shame and disappointment, on the other) that the Greek audience came to attend the opening ceremony on August 13th. As media specialist Stratos Fanaras wrote in a mainstream newspaper, since the shock of the 12th of August, with the case of Kenteris–Thanou, waves of collective national humiliation alternated with emotions of national uplifting (Fanaras, 2004).

The space of the ceremony was also particularly charged. The Olympic stadium (part of the Athens Olympic Athletic Complex [AOAC]), with its signature roof designed by the internationally renowned architect Santiago Calatrava, had been a contested site for 3 years proceeding the Olympic Games. The great delays in the execution of the project caused the harsh criticism of local and international media, whereas its technological extravagance and high cost were interpreted domestically by many as symptoms of Greece’s uncritical acceptance of the rules of globalization, which would lead to games that were far removed from the ancient Greek ideals of measure. As a journalist in a mainstream Greek newspaper wrote, expressing the concerns of many Greek citizens,

When Athens was chosen to host the 2004 Olympic Games, the government promised to bring back the moderation and harmony appropriate to the Games and to avoid overcapitalizing on them for profit. Unfortunately, when the time came, those promises were forgotten and projects that bear the mark of megalomania, exhibitionism and pointless decadence were chosen. (“Megalomaniac Works,” 2004)

Nevertheless, and despite such criticisms, the completion of the project, as well as the ceremonies that were held in it, was met with both domestic and international praises. The role of the stadium in expressing ideology is particularly powerful. As history has shown, a stadium, with its mammoth size and surrounding discourse of grandeur, is a perfect setting of national propaganda. In the particular case of the Athens Olympic Stadium, Calatrava with the assistance of the Greek media gave to the Greeks the illusion that his work resurrected the lofty ideals of Hellenism and embodied these ideals into a contemporary, highly technological construct that became symbolic of Greece’s entrance to the 21st century. “We want to have a roof which will be the symbol of beauty and elegance, and this roof will have to reflect the spirit of this country” (Triantis, 2003), Calatrava declared in an interview he gave to journalist Yannis Triantis, hinting to
Greece’s architectural heritage from the Parthenon and Agia Sofia to the present.10 There was no more powerful moment of the stadium’s capacity to express its grandeur than the opening ceremony.

Building on Benjamin and Kracauer, art historian Ruben Gallo talks about the stadio-
genic effect of early 20th century’s stadia. The use of “mass ornament” within their arenas had the capacity to produce, according to Kracauer, numbing effects that transformed the public into masses (Kracauer, 1927/1975, pp. 67-76). Indeed this effect was pinpointed by Walter Benjamin, who saw the stadiums as perfect vehicles for the “aesthetization of politics” (Benjamin, 1934/1969, pp. 241-242). Calatrava’s roof contributed to the stadiogenic effect of the stadium (Gallo, 2005), not only by its rhetoric but also by incorporating mechanisms that improve its televised image. Indeed, in contemporary times, the stadiogenic effect is inseparable from the television broadcasting of the events that it hosts. Even though the Athens 2004 Olympic ceremonies did not resort to the totalizing device of the mass ornament, but on the contrary honored the individual body, the stadiogenic effect of the stadium—with its surrounding live aura, on the one hand, and its strong broadcasting support, on the other—contributed to the spurring of the nationalist sentiments of the domestic audience. As Stratos Fanaras (2004) put it, through the 13 days of the Olympic Games, the “rational spirit gave way to sentimentalism,” and the country “experienced a collective psychological drama”, which was played largely in the new, state-of-the-art Olympic venues. Within these arenas, in a physical or televised manner, the Greek audience had an emotive experience of watching themselves as they were being watched by the rest of the world. In particular, the assemblage of the Olympic stadium and the Athens 2004 Opening Ceremony became the locus where the idea of “new Greece”11 was celebrated and witnessed. This idea, as I will explain below, besides its rebranding of Greek identity through contemporary aesthetic forms, was founded on established conceptions of Greece, most of which would be met with no disagreement by a large percentage of the Greek population.

**Description of the Athens 2004 Opening and Closing Ceremonies**

According to John MacAloon (1984), Olympic opening ceremonies are “rites of separation from ‘ordinary life,’ initiating the period of public liminality,” whereas contrastingly, the “closing ceremonies are rites of closure and re-aggregation with the normative order” (pp. 252-253). The Athens 2004 Opening Ceremony created an uplifting atmosphere that aimed at boosting the nation’s pride and marking the experience of the days of the events as one of exception. The closing ceremony provided an antidote to the depression that many feared would follow the end of the games by extending the celebration and utilizing cultural forms of public entertainment and performance that were more familiar to the Greek public.

For the opening ceremony, the stadium’s arena was converted into an artificial lake (a major construction work that required 2,162 m³ of water). Two key segments of the opening ceremony, which I will discuss below, were titled “Allegory” and “Clepsydra.”
Allegory began with a kinetic sculpture shaped as a female kentauros throwing a javelin, which triggered a 17-m figure, styled after the head of a Cycladic idol, to emerge slowly from the lake. The head opened up in Russian-doll fashion to reveal a figure shaped after a 6th-century kouros and a 5th-century one nested inside it. Each of these figures broke up into numerous abstract forms, which then became platforms for a series of projections on the theme of shared humanity and universalism. Subsequently, the fragments fell into the water, transformed into entities reminiscent of islands or vessels. A more detailed view of Greek art unfolded in the next section entitled “Clepsydra.” A series of floats appeared on stage, loaded with tableaux-vivant representations of significant moments of Greece’s history of art. The sequence began with enactments of prehistoric art and continued with archaic, classical, Byzantine, Ottoman, and eventually modern artistic forms.

The closing ceremony converted the stage of the stadium into a gigantic wheat field that was formed in the shape of a spiral maze. The production began with a mock Greek wedding, which became a platform for incorporating local celebrations from various regions of Greece. These festivities were followed by the Exodus concert, a live show by representatives of the contemporary folk music scene in Greece. Despite the fact that the preparation of the opening ceremony received much greater attention than the closing one, the two ceremonies should be seen as supplementary to each other. If the Athens 2004 Opening Ceremony attempted to capture the archetype of Greek civilization in an Apollonian manner, the closing ceremony aspired to evoke its Dionysian character, and it was more pluralistic in nature, encompassing the regional diversity of Greek culture. If in the opening ceremony we encounter a nation more than a people, the opposite is true for the closing one. Last, although the opening ceremony clearly endeavored to be a vanguard, artistic performance, the closing ceremony was an apotheosis of the popular culture and the vernacular of contemporary Greece.

Decoding the Meaning of the Ceremonies

Despite their strong national content, Olympic Games and their ceremonies have often been criticized as cultural performances of a rootless, ahistorical character (Houlihan, 1994), expressed in the formal conventions of the spectacle, with all of its negative connotations, since Guy Debord’s influential writings in the 1960s (MacAlloon, 1984). Anthropologist John MacAlloon, however, offers us a persuasive argument that explains why even if, or precisely because, the spectacle is maintained as a norm, it can be subsequently surpassed and transformed to types of cultural performance that deceivingly seem as its opposites, such as ritual or festival (MacAlloon, 1984). Athens 2004 ceremonies indeed became doors to both such types of cultural performance. The opening ceremony was met with national and international praises, and with its Apollonian character did function as a ritual, at least for its domestic audience, reaffirming their belief in the loftiness of their national culture. The Dionysian in character closing ceremony endorsed Greek vernacular cultural forms and functioned as a festival inspiring the participation of the live audience.
The Rhetoric of Continuity

Which were the elements or deep structures that led to the spur of nationalist sentiments in the reception of the ceremonies by many Greek nationals? Starting with the lake that dominated the arena, what was its symbolism, and what was its ideological backbone? The transformation of the stadium’s stage into a nocturnal waterscape recalled a double birth: that of cosmos and nation. The evocation of a universal, cosmic space identified with Greece’s prehistory and what is seen, since the 1930s, as the birth of Greek civilization. This implied a double-sided union: a cultural continuity from prehistory to the present in the specific geographical area of Greece and a restatement of the belief that the birth of Greek civilization coincides with the birth of the world’s civilization. The pluralism suggested by the portraits of people of various ethnic backgrounds projected onto the statues’ fragments opened up the subject of universalism, though soon after, the symbolism returned to Greekness, thus collapsing the open, universal cosmos with the specific topos of Greece. This identification of the cosmic landscape with the specific topography of the Greek archipelagos continues a tradition that emphasizes the Aegean as the Greek landscape par excellence and Greece as the naval of earth. Thus, the segment Allegory, as a rite of passage from cosmos to topos, reaffirmed what was already known, at least for the Greek audience: that modern Greece is the natural descendant of the prehistoric and ancient Greek civilization, that last of which, according to neoclassical ideals prevalent in modern Greece, represents the foundation of the European civilization. The sequential representation of Greek art in the Clepsydra series restated the belief in Greece’s continuity from prehistory to the present. This view, rather being simply a symptom of neo-Hellenic nostalgia, allowed, and still allows, Greece today, as argued by anthropologist Neni Panourgia (2004), not only to reclaim, repossess, and colonize its past but also to modernize and Europeanize itself, adopting an idea that, having emerged in the Enlightenment, encapsulates the intellectual foundation of modern Europe.

This textbook version of Greekness (that has nurtured modern Greek citizens through their schooling in Greece and undoubtedly so for Papaioannou as well) was not accepted unanimously by the Greek society. For a reviewer such as Angelos Elefantis, the ceremony replicated conservative views of Greekness:

First of all, Papaioannou himself and his team believed in this historical trajectory... and... [its] linear development, according to which one [era] gives birth to the next. The same belief was shared by the spectators of the performance, at least by the Greeks... since then official discourse of power, the discourse of education, of the military, of the parades, of the national celebrations, of the public buildings, of the names of streets and public squares, of the journalists, of the public speakers etc. cultivated this belief, which is the dominant neo-Greek ideology... Papaioannou of course did not do history. He knew however that art “speaks deeply into history.”... His art... repeated through the means of this gigantic performance the basic elements of the 3000
years of continuous Hellenism that he learned at school, as all of us. (Elefantis, 2004a, 2004b)

For such reviewers, the ceremony did not do much but replicate conservative or deeply ideological views of Greekness, as a continuous notion from prehistory to the present, which even though have nurtured the identity of several generations of Greek citizens, are hard to justify from a historical viewpoint.

**Privileged Landscapes**

What were the topographical characteristics of Greece that were represented by the ceremonies? In the opening ceremony, we witnessed the idea of Hellenism being almost exclusively associated with a landscape that has been privileged since the 1930s, that of the Aegean Sea, with which most international audiences are familiar through tourist iconography. The obsession with the sea, that characterizes most representations of Greekness, should not be simply viewed as an aesthetic or as a market-driven choice, but it is actually an ideological one. By emphasizing the seafaring character of Greece, the mainland and particularly the mountainous areas of Greece are downplayed as the beholders of Greekness. One should not forget, however, that in Greece’s premodern past it was the mountain, with its associated notion of pastoralism, that was considered to be the stronghold of patriotism. Such an emphasis on the Mediterranean character of Greece reproduces the mythology of Greece’s separateness from its Balkan neighbors and assumes Western Europe as Greece’s ultimate bond. As historian Christina Koulouri has described,

> While we would expect that the Greek national identity, the Balkan identity and the European identity are organized in a scheme of concentric circles . . . this is not happening. The reason is that the cultural contents . . . of Europe and the Balkans are defined in antithetical terms . . . Greece therefore accepts its Balkan identity only within the framework of anti-western positions . . . Balkan identity keeps representing a weak identity that is not a subject of negotiation.

(Koulouri, 2004)

In that respect, Papaioannou has internalized the exoticizing gaze of the European Other, viewing Greece as a territory distinct from the Balkans and the East but also not fully European. As cultural critic Evgenios Aranitsis suggested,

> My objection is grounded on my impression that Papaioannou matured as a purely Western artist, which means that he approaches the Eastern part of the Greek mixture of East–West from an idealist distance, using its content as something exotic. It is obvious that this gaze drives from Romanticism. Thus, the fact that he was selected proves a strategic wisdom, as the spectacle was targeted to Western consumers, more or less nurtured by the belief that Greece is a mixture
of Aristotelis and Kazantzakis. . . . Papaioannou’s work was the panoramic work of a philhellene. (Aranitsis, 2004)

The Opening Ceremony reproduced an insular view of Greece in which both internal and external otherness were concealed, obscuring the influences of numerous cultural encounters and cross-pollinations in ancient and recent Greek history with groups that are now perceived as Greece’s Others. Alefantis criticized the hyperaestheticized emphasis on the water that we saw in the opening ceremony as one that concealed the cultural pluralism that for him is integral to Greece’s history:

In the multiple symbolism of the Ceremony. . . . there was no interest in showing a bit of earth where living people lived and where dead people were buried. And there were many types of living and dead in this corner of the world: Minoans, Mycenaeans, Pelasgians, Lelegs, Greeks, Galatians, Goths, Romans, Bulgarians, Turks, Saracenes, Arvanites, Slavs, Latins, Frankish, Venetians, Catalans, Vlachs, Cumans, Jews, Armenians. . . . If you want in half an hour to talk about 3-4,000 years, it is necessary that you will do a selective reading, there is no other way. Are we going to talk about Arvanites now or about Armenians? Only the Greeks were approved. The reductions transformed the 4,000 years of civilization into a lonely, . . . a narcissistic civilization. (Elefantis, 2004a, 2004b)

Who Partakes in the Nation?

In her examination of national narratives in various Olympic ceremonies, Jackie Hogan has claimed that “discourses of national identity contain spaces for contestation as they shift in response to changing social conditions.” She gives several examples, such as “the positioning of an Asian American woman as a symbol of all Olympic athletes” and “as a reminder of the increasing visibility of women and ethnic minorities across the American social landscape,” “against a backdrop of White American masculinity in the Salt Lake opening ceremony” (Hogan, 2003, p. 118). The overarching identity of the Greek nation as a continuous entity that unfolds uninterrupted from prehistory to the present, that was represented by the Opening Ceremony, was counterbalanced by the closing ceremony of the Athens Games. If the opening ceremony celebrated archetypal figures of ancient and modern Greek mythologies, the closing ceremony presented distinct and recognizable cultures of contemporary Greece. On a musical and performative level, it might be argued that the closing ceremony nullified the opening ceremony’s claims of Greece’s ties with Western Europe, as most of the closing ceremony’s musical content tied Greece to the Balkans and the East. The closing ceremony also attempted to portray the internal diversity of the Greek culture, by emphasizing the subnational cultural differences of Greece as they correspond to its various regional divisions. This distinction, even though defying the aspect of cultural homogeneity that characterized the opening ceremony, did not truly reveal the country’s actual ethnic and religious diversity, neither did it portray the major influx of immigrants to Greece since the 1990s.
Even though the regional approach was a rather conventional way of presenting Greece’s internal diversity, the closing ceremony contested the prevalent view on who partakes to the nation. Toward the end of the wedding section, recognizable demographics of contemporary Greek society paraded into the stage, and among them a group of Rom (gypsies) joined the party. This unconventional move had mixed reviews. Some applauded and saw the Rom’s presence as an exceptional but as a real part of Greek life. For Olga Bakomarou, they brought memories of her childhood:

I was getting excited, or even mystified, that they would appear out of nowhere and would again leave for nowhere; mysterious, fearless, free like the air—this is how my childhood’s eyes would see them. Stuck at the door, I would see them vanish down the slope with envy and sadness. I liked that I saw them suddenly coming back, with almost the same colorful dresses and fanciful decoration, with their red lips and painted nails, with their hair undone, happy, hasty, erotic, always free like the air, at the AOAC, under the space age–like roof of Calatrava. (Bakomarou, 2004)

Writer Amanda Michalopoulou in her weekly column in Sunday’s newspaper Kathimerini saw the inclusion of the gypsies, in combination with other cultural forms of Eastern origin, as an affirmation of Greece’s internal plurality that would lead to a reconciliation with its premodern [or for some even antimodern] attributes:

The amanes [vocal improvisations of late Ottoman musical tradition that were adapted by early 20th c. Greek folk musicians], the tourists’ syrtaki [Greek folk dance invented for tourist consumption], the band that signs rebetika [Greek urban folk music with influences from Middle East, that was associated with 1920s subcultures from Asia Minor], the fire dance, the truck with the watermelons and the gypsies behind them, the traditional songs of Domna Samiou, the tsifieteri [a Greek dance of Turkish origin] sang by blond glittery signers, all these fragments of Greek life that do not talk with each other, were tied together in the same kourelou [traditional type of rug made by using remains of old clothes] . . . Of course Greece that is not ashamed and is not afraid is not so real either. It is rather the idealized country in which we would also want to reside without feeling unpleasant about the music that our dad liked, for the ragged clothes that our grandfather used to wear, for our cousin who . . . goes to skyladika [clubs with live contemporary folk music which for many are considered to be vulgar products of low culture] . . . And the desire remains the same: . . . to be wide, to be fluid and to move back and forth forbidden territories. Something very difficult in Greece, where territories and species are predetermined. (Michalopoulou, 2004)

But the same scene was met with the strong disapproval of many others. Art critic Manos Stefanidis saw this scene as a mixture of low taste and postmodern pretentiousness:
But the Datsun with the gypsies refers directly to Sakellarios [film director of light comedies that represent middle-class Greek life in the postwar era], but also to post artist Papadimitriou [contemporary artists whose work includes and references cultural artifacts that derive from contemporary Rom material culture] of the Outlook [large-scale exhibition that took place in 2003 within the framework of the Athens 2004 Olympiad that presented contemporary, international art works, some of which were found to be controversial and led to lawsuits]! A mixture of styles and forms, put together in order to emotionally move the readers of life style magazines and their publishers. (Stefanidis, 2004)

From a different perspective, Journalist Lina Thivani wrote:

My admiration for Papaioannou did not blind me. I saw that the closing ceremony . . . was atrocious. Tons of people were running disorderly on a plastic floor, glamorous, ethnic gypsies were selling glamorous, ethnic watermelons dancing tsifteteli and at last Marinela [folk Greek signer] showed up. . . . Now, how was Papaionnou converted into Dalianidis [a film director of populist cinema of post-1980s Greece] is a mystery. . . . Most probably he was overworked to death. (Thivani, 2004)

Beyond the obvious disappointment over what was perceived as a fall from high art to low culture, comments as the above hide a degree of shame for Greece having exposed its dirty laundry in front of an international audience, although it reflects the broader negative attitude of modern Greeks toward the Rom. Elements, such as the appearance of the Rom and the overall endorsement of contemporary folk scene, for many alluded to Greece possessing an Eastern rather than a European sensibility, a fact that was seen as incompatible with the ideals of modernization that Athens 2004 stood for.

It has to be noted that, besides the presence of minority groups such as the Rom, today approximately 10% of Greece’s population is of immigrant origin. Nevertheless, modern Greek identity, as that of a typical ethnic modeled nation, is centered on the belief in an ancestry that is shared by all true Greeks, a lineage that is believed to be uninterruptedly embodied into the present. This belief poses great hindrances for accepting Other non-Greeks as equal members in the national body; both legal and illegal immigrants are not easily accepted as full members of the imagined community of modern Greeks. At the same time, as several other Olympic before, the building of the Athens 2004 venues, including the area surrounding the Olympic stadium, was preceded by the displacement of undesirable populations, many of which were Rom.

Even though the ceremonies did not engage directly with the complex issue of demographic flow that prevails in Greece today (apart from the particular aforementioned episode), as part of an athletic event, they could not remain unaffected by this condition. Sports in Greece today, as everywhere else in the world, bypass all borders when it comes to recruiting and naturalizing foreign athletes and have become indicators of
the new, complex ethnoscapes that are emerging worldwide. The flag bearer of the Greek Olympic team, for example, was the Albanian-born weight lifter and medalist Pyros Dimas, who immigrated to Greece in 1991 (he was known as Pirro Dhima until 1990, when he was competing for Albania). According to anthropologist James Verinis (2005), the case of Dimas demonstrates that the “irregular, anomalous anti-hero may be well included and sanctioned through the ritual of the Olympics.”

The dominance of non-Greek-born figures in important past and contemporary Greek cultural dramaturgies, as well as in the everyday life of most Greek citizens today, suggests the need to expand the national narrative of Greece from an emphasis on roots and essences to the question of encounters. Despite a long history of cross-cultural encounters, Greece has valorized endurance and continuity in its self-representation rather than change. An unconventional view of Greece’s cultural history—one that searches for cross-pollinations rather than purities—would instead reveal the effects of cultural encounters with others and especially with the various immigrant populations, particularly from the Balkans and the Middle East, who labored for the very construction of the Olympic monuments.

Due to the high visibility of the Olympic ceremonies, elements that challenge the conventional perception of a nation are destined to be distinguished within the hypnotizing aura of the Olympic spectacle. They entail the capacity to stimulate the reaction of the spectators and a public discourse that spreads out of the spatiotemporal realm of the event. Such elements may dissatisfy some viewers but are necessary for making visible what is suppressed or marginalized and for nurturing the possibility of change. The Olympics might be seen not anymore as opportunities to elevate the status of a country in the international arena, as it is hoped by many, but rather for making visible alternative identities and renewed national narratives that stretch the conceptual boundaries of the nation and create new links with a nation’s Others.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared that he had no conflicts of interests with respect to his authorship or the publication of this article.

Funding

The author declared that he received no financial support for his research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes

1. In a recent book, Monroe Price has rightly noted the fragmentation of Olympic audiences into various transnationally based civil society advocates, noting the hunger by a multitude of groups to take advantage of elaborately created fora [such as the Olympics] to advance political and commercial messages. Media events become marked by efforts by free riders or interlopers to seize the opportunity to perform in a global theater of representation. (2008, p. 86)
These phenomena—which coincided with the explosion of Internet-based platforms of social networking—characterized the reception of the Beijing Olympics and signify a new function of the Olympics in our present era, but these were not particularly active in the case of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. Nevertheless, despite their difference in terms of reception, the ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics displayed an even higher degree of insularity in their representation of Chinese national culture.

2. The opening ceremony according to the protocol includes three speeches (by the president of the Organizing Committee, the president of the International Olympic Committee-IOC, and the head of the State who declares the games open); the playing of the Olympic, the Greek and the host nation’s anthem; the athletes parade (headed by the flag of each nation), the entry and raising of the Olympic flag, the last stage of the Olympic torch relay that culminates to the lighting of the Olympic cauldron, and the taking of the oath by a competitor and a judge. A closing ceremony includes an athletes’ march in a band (not segmented by nationality), the extinguishment of the Olympic fire, the lowering of the Olympic flag and its being handed to the mayor of the host city of the next Olympic Games, and at last, the IOC president’s declaration of the ending of the games.

3. The team was composed of Yorgos Koumentakis (cocreation and music-concept creator), Lili Pezanou (production design), Angeliki Stellatou (choreographer), Eleftheria Deko (lighting designer and director), Robert Dickinson (colighting designer and director), Sophia Kokossalaki (costume designer), Athina Tsangari (video director), Lina Nikolakopoulou (ceremony texts), Christophe Berthonneau (pyrotechnic design), Roula Pateraki (narration workshop director), Alexandros Balabanis (hair design), and Petros Petrohilos (makeup design).

4. Papaioannou has studied in La Mamma Experimental Theater Company in New York and was trained in the Japanese Butoh dance. His work had received recognition in international young artists events (such as the Biennale of young artists in Barcelona in 1987 and in Bologna in 1988, and at the EXPO 1992 in Seville).

5. The other two models of Olympic directorship, as defined by MacAloon, are those of the impresario (such as in Los Angeles 1984 and Barcelona 1992) and the cultural expert (such as in Seoul 1988; MacAloon, 1996).

6. The budget of the ceremony was of the scale of 50 million Euros. The artistic director’s and his team’s fee was 1,300,000 Euro for both ceremonies.

7. Papaioannou asked the journalists not to reveal any details if they were to know them, for not to dissolve the element of surprise that he saw as a prerequisite of a successful performance (Ntaliani, 2002).

8. For a detailed examination of the reception of Calatrava’s design by the media, please read Jilly Traganou (2008).

9. The reconstruction of the Olympic park cost 220 million Euros, out of which the roof’s cost was 130 million Euros.

10. For a more extensive discussion on Calatrava’s rhetoric, see Traganou (2009).

11. The head of the Athens 2004 organizing committee, Gianna Daskalaki-Angelopoulou, presented the Athens 2004 Games as a celebration of the idea of “new Greece” in her speech at the opening ceremony.
12. Interview with Dimitris Papaioannou to the author, June 25, 2005.

13. Even though it predates Hellenism, since the 1930s, Cycladic art has been considered as emblematic of Greek culture and especially Greek modernism (Plantzos, 2007).

14. Even though the Greek government recognizes only the Muslims as a minority group, there are several self-claimed or unrecognized minorities in Greece today, such as Slavophones in Greek Macedonia and the Rom.

15. In recent years, Rom dwellings in Greece have been dismantled to make room for the construction of cultural or athletic venues. Such was the case in Athens with the 2004 Olympic Games; in Patras, the Cultural Capital of Europe in 2006; and the Votanikos area, the site of a new soccer stadium. (“Migration, Citizenship, Education,” n.d.).

16. According to a report by the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) in partnership with the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions and other organizations, 140 Roma residing in a settlement adjacent to the main Olympic Complex were forcibly evicted, and several other Roma communities were threatened with forced eviction in the Greater Athens area during the preparations for the Olympic Games, many of which were not provided with adequate compensation, reparation, or resettlement (GHM, 2006). Ironically, in the post-Olympic era, one of the major areas of the Olympics in the District Faliron has been appropriated by Roma populations who converted it into a temporary settlement.

17. Verinis makes an analogy between Spiros Louis’s case in 1896 and Pyros Dimas. Even though Albanian-born students in contemporary Greek public schools are often refused to carry the Greek flag in national ceremonies, Albanian-born Dimas became for the second time the flag bearer of the Greek team (after the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta). According to Verinis (2005), “the Albanian and Vlach/Aroumanian identification of his name, from bearing the connotations of the ‘dirty’ and ‘barbaric’ appears as ideally embodying the purity and ethical qualities that are unhinged from the corrupt sedentary life of the ordinary modern citizen.”

18. This follows the argument of the Anthropologist James Clifford discussed in his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997).

19. More than 3.5 billion people watched the Athens 2004 Opening Ceremony.

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**Bio**

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