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4th International Conference on the Arts in Society

Venice 28-31 July 2009

Mediating Cosmopolitanism: Crafting an Allegorical Imperative through *Beijing 2008*

SLIDE 2

In this presentation I view Olympic ceremonies not simply as national spectacles but also as manifestations of globalization and modernity. Their primary function is to 'stage' nationalist narratives globally. Finally, I acknowledge that Olympic ceremonies communicate tensions between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. My own 'reading' of the *Beijing 2008* ceremonies suggests that their creators crafted China's national uniqueness in such a way that they racialised and gendered Chinese identity and history. The *Beijing 2008* ceremonies crafted an allegory on human nature. This allegory provided insight into Chinese understandings of what 'cosmopolitanism' might mean and how to communicate it to foreign political agents that might promote the Chinese national image abroad. Abstractions of humanity and ideas of cosmopolitan solidarity were subordinated to Chinese political objectives: as the humanity of the Beijing 2008 ceremonies was an allegory of Chinese national identity. This gendered and racialised identity was plural but hierarchical; cosmopolitan but particularistic; inclusive, yet exclusive.

SLIDE 3

The tension between the specific and the universal in Beijing 2008 always figures in the context of the Olympic Games. From the outset the specificity of nationalist expression stood in stark contrast to the underlying principles of Olympism outlined in De Coubertin's liberal internationalist vision and, more recently, embedded in a human rights agenda jointly promoted by the International Olympic Committee and the United Nations for sports-related programmes. Over the decades a number of Olympic venues harboured discord and tragedy: from the outplay of nationalist rivalries to terrorist attacks and from boycotts to human rights protests, the relationship between the Olympic hosts and their global guests has been troubled. The presence of political discord within celebrations of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and recognition of athletic excellence highlights the need to maintain a global sphere of responsibility, providing the contours of cosmopolitan belonging.

SLIDE 4

The emergence of mega-events as nationalist 'genres' can be traced in the late nineteenth-century expos and international sport events. This coincided with the rise of supra-nationalist versions of internationalism reminiscent of communist and fascist regimes. If the rise of nationalism is an aspect of modernity, nationalism's embodied/athletic and artistic expressions figure as a modern phenomenon. Olympic ceremonial expressions of nation-ness are replete with pedagogical messages that are projected on a blank technological canvas. The Games themselves are engulfed by symbols of nationhood, reminiscent of populist-fascist rituals and ceremonies that provide a

beginning, a middle and an end to the events. **We may also consider the Olympics as another cultural industry** that capitalises on notions of European heritage: ancient Greek genealogies of the Games operate as a master sign for capitalist networks that partake in the organisation of particular Olympic events.

SLIDE 5

It has been argued that the very idea of televised Olympic Games goes against Olympism's key commitment to face-to-face intercultural communication their founder sought to promote. But this disregards the transformation the Games underwent over the last century or so, clinging to an Aristotelian idea of face-to-face 'instruction'. In Aristotelian tragedy, *catharsis* or cleansing and moral education are performed, for an audience of participant observers. **Aristotle's experiential dimension** of *catharsis* has a moral-religious dimension. This universalist take on art's didactic potential dismisses the secular-contextual nature of nationalism. I borrow from Aristotelian poetics of tragedy, but couple them with an investigation of the educational possibilities the new technologies open up for us. To educate and to perform become constitutive of the same project of nation-building. **This performative-educational project** involves the strategic pluralisation of culture: the Olympic ceremonies produce a 'public face' for the 'nation' in which ideas of multiculturalism prevail. Behind this strategy political realities remain informed by hierarchies and censorship of opposing voices. These hidden national hierarchies do not exist in a void: nations respond to external political pressures, **partaking in** global hierarchies of political and cultural value. Since the Olympiad is firmly rooted in European history, some Olympic hosts debate the colonial legacies of Europe and their own place in world history. This may transform them into racialized and gendered agents – sometimes emerging as victors and at other times as victims of international politics. The first narrative colours Olympic hosts with white and masculine qualities; the second tarnishes them with black and feminine streaks.

SLIDE 6

This is what I call allegorical imperative. Such Olympic humanisations of the nation hide an *ontological conflation*: 'nations' are abstractions of very diverse ethno-cultural groups that rarely have uniform agendas. My take on 'allegory' borrows from the German philosopher Herder's suggestion that nations are like living organisms with unique, human-like, qualities, and a special mission to carry out in the world. This debate provides insight into the Olympic host's self-knowledge as a racialised and gendered entity. National politics are performed in Olympic ceremonies, and through such performances we learn how specific social identities (racialised and gendered) are treated by the host – what their citizenship status is within the host nation-state. It is not coincidental that the same debate takes place simultaneously in activist networks that campaign for the protection of human rights that may be violated before and during the Olympic Games. Such clashes - between the host and other global political players, between activist networks and the host region or nation-state – exemplify 'diatopical hermeneutics': the tension, in other words, between

national self-knowledge and its universal application. Such tensions are productive however, as they are processes of reciprocal learning in encounters between the nation and the world. 'Relating' is viewed as a process of becoming through knowing and Olympic cosmopolitanism figures as an aesthetic process with political dimensions. This is what I call the host's 'aesthetic reflexivity'.

SLIDE 7

The '**allegorical imperative**' corresponds to the philosopher Kant's idea of a categorical imperative – an all-embracing, universally applicable morality. I would like to believe that Kant was wrong: morality is in the eye of the beholder, and different cultures have different takes on what is right, fair, just and beautiful. **If the Olympic charter** and its executive organ, the International Olympic Committee, represent a fictional universal morality by which all hosts have to abide, each Olympic host displays their own situational ethics: they will provide us with their own understanding of what it means to host the Olympic event. **And they invariably** do so by producing a public façade at the expense of internal difference. **Olympic allegorical imperatives** are narratives of the post-Enlightenment era on anthropopoesis, the aspiration to human betterment, the making of our humanity in short. Sports and technology, the two facets of the Olympic Games these days, work towards this goal of human perfection.

SLIDE 8

Allegories literally mean community orations (*agorévō* means to speak in the *agorà* or the ancient market) that take place elsewhere. **They** are public speech with private meaning formed through intercultural encounters. **I was inspired** to use the term by the 'Allegory' section of *Athens 2004* opening ceremony: that section was, in effect, mourning the burden of ancient Greek heritage for *modern* Greece. The fear that modern Greece cannot live up to the high standards set by global political players has been haunting the Greeks since the emergence of modern Greek identity in the **postcolonial** European plateau. **Modern** Greece thus figured in Allegory as Europe's Orient.

SLIDE 9

Beijing's allegorical imperative was constructed through technological innovations. Technology, China's educational medium, figured both in Beijing's spectacular Olympic ceremonies and the architectural makeup of Beijing and other Chinese cities-venues. The **outcome of this venture** was a 'social poetics' of identity, a response to the geopolitical constraints imposed on the Chinese 'nation' by a powerful West in the past. **The style** of this response included the expression of *ressentiment* against imagined or real enemies that obstruct global recognition. China's colonization by Western powers, and the loss of the Olympic bid over Sydney in 1990s merged into one narrative of national 'humiliation' and defeat which the 'nation' eventually overcame in 2008.

SLIDE 10

In the national public sphere Beijing's allegorical imperative presented Chinese nationalism as a form of sub-systemic violence. The preparations for the Olympics contributed to the 'mastering' of ethnic difference through urban planning, and the symbolic 'mastering' of femininity through role

allocations. **In the global public sphere however**, gendered and racialized representations of China presented the nation as the victim of Western injustices and China's Olympic project as a plan of national growth. The virulent face of China in domestic politics was thus strategically replaced with a non-white, subordinate, feminine face in global politics.

SLIDE 11

Artistic narratives of Chinese technological innovation employed corporeal metaphors to both illustrate the separation of the national body from (feminised) 'nature' and to idealise a (feminised) nation in the eyes of the world. Human 'allegory' became thus a map of national and cosmopolitan citizenship in its nuances: *techne* (as technological production) and *physis* (as female reproduction) occupied separate domains. The split between artistic and technological representations of nationhood corresponded to a broader division of labour tasks that demoted artistic work to unessential or peripheral labour performed by women or neurotic men and reserved technological labour for those who conform to normative models of hegemonic masculinity. Beijing's spatial (architectural) and artistic (ceremonial) geometries of power were gendered and ethnicized geometries of power.

SLIDE 12

The Bird's Nest stadium is an excellent example of these tensions: **when tied** to the Chinese culinary tradition, it represents the 'thin' cosmopolitanism of 'travelling cultures'; **when tied** to 'nature', it acquires a reflexive quality, both gendered and racialised as the 'nest' alludes to the 'domestic hearth' of Europe - for once a non-Western, non-European country (*a nest nevertheless*). **Tied to the** Eurocentric tradition of Olympism, it becomes reminiscent of a myth of civilisational origins and beginnings. **As China's brand** of 'high culture', it contests American 'vulgarity' and re-enacts the 'clash of civilisations'. But the Bird's Nest design was reminiscent of the historical symbolism of *Munich 1972* architecture that countered the monumentalised neoclassical style of the Nazi and Stalinist era.

SLIDE 13

Interestingly the building's design retained connections with design of hats in Yi Mou Zang's *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), a romantic epic set against the decline of the Tang dynasty. The female heroine's sacrificial death in the movie helped thus to cast communist China as a global martyr, an undervalued donor to world civilisation and the symbolic 'head' of civilisation. Here we already have a strategic racialization and feminization of giving. **There is a dialectic irony** in all this, as the Bird's Nest was designed by the Swiss company Herzg & De Meuron, but the ideas belonged to famous Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, who saw his father being imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution as China's leading poet and foremost dissident. **The Bird's Nest came** to represent the 'New China', which was spatially juxtaposed to Tianan'men Square (Old China). **The shape** of the stadium, according to Weiwei speaks for 'a yearning for the rule of reason, but not without passion and dynamism – wanting to show that the head and the heart coexist'. Against a

background of human rights violations, the feminine and the masculine came to **complement** national identity.

SLIDE 14

The introduction to the opening ceremony blended the architectural into the ceremonial narrative: a militarised drum-beating by thousands of performers was followed by the Confucian verses 'Friends have come from afar, how happy we are', which gave an educational dimension to the performance, transforming *Beijing 2008* into a meeting ground for Western and Eastern civilisations. **Firework displays** shot across the four axes of the ancient capital, joining some historical 'dots' but erasing the dark aspects of China's communist past from the spectacular itinerary. From the Bird's Nest the fireworks led us to Tianan'men Square, the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven: Chinese humanity was drafted through a historic erasure of Chinese violence.

SLIDE 15

Another example of the ceremonies' gendered and ethnocultural hierarchies figured through a symbolic separation of the national centre from its provincial peripheries. The Chinese [national anthem](#) was sang by young schoolgirl dressed in bright red: 'New China' was thus represented as **femine**, puerile and in need of instruction by a **masculinised** Confucian wisdom. **A group of children**, dressed in ethnic costumes to represent China's 56 minority groups, carried the flag to the 'New China' but handed it over to the soldiers, *not to her*. This establishment of spatial distance was an **allegory** for *ethnicised* social distance. The message was clear: the centre rules the peripheries.

SLIDE 16

The handover of the Olympic flag mirrored that of the Chinese national flag: it was managed by a group of veteran athletes of 1950s generation, which included various *subordinate* identities (women and a Tibetan athlete). This silenced discriminatory socio-cultural realities - against women, ethnic groups, and even the 1950s athletic generation that was never allowed to compete on a global stage. **The flag was** handed over to representatives of the People's Liberation Army, - and thus, the 1950s procession matched that of the 'puerile' ethnicities that handed the Chinese flag to the military at the beginning of the ceremony. An age-gender axis of social hierarchy framed the ritual, which granted the ceremony with symmetry.

SLIDE 17

The Olympic Flame was introduced in the stadium by first Olympic gold medallist Xu Haifeng. A self-trained athlete of working class background, Haifeng helped to dissociate cosmopolitan narratives of educational attainment from social capital. Nevertheless, his presence linked China's brand of cosmopolitanism to the **masculinised** and **militarised** ethos of the Communist Party: Haifeng's father was a soldier. **The athlete** that lighted the Olympic Cauldron was gold medallist Li Ning. Ning's professional trajectory is characteristic of the middle-class culture of New China: he is a BeijingOCOG member, self-made businessman and philanthropist. But Ning was born on the southern border of China-Vietnam, one of the 5 autonomous regions of China. Thus province

Guangxi, a symbolic frontier of Chinese civilisation, was relocated in the national centre. Ning's **gymnastic** (and therefore feminine) identity complemented Haifeng's. Both athletes were gold medallists of the LA 1984 Games: thus, Beijing's allegorical imperative seemed to be opening a dialogue with the American West.

SLIDE 18

The very moment this intercultural dialogue commenced other forces promoted the expression of resentful suspicion towards a colonial West. A series of technological inventions figured in the ceremonies as China's unacknowledged, stolen, contributions to world civilization. These included gunpower, the compass, the kite, calligraphy, and even the mark of cosmopolitan knowledge par excellence, the discovery of other civilizations. However, the Seven Journeys made by a Chinese Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433) half a century before de Gamma and Columbus (1405-1433) across the Indian Ocean were narrated in such a way so as to omit *the explorer's Muslim identity*. This erasure corresponded to an Orientalist discourse that feminises Islam and excludes it from civilization: a Chinese giver can only be symbolically white and male.

SLIDE 19

The ideal of cosmopolitan togetherness was mediated through environmental, humanitarian and athletic concerns. The 'Martial Arts' section (Tai Chi) of the ceremony combined references to nature and culture. TaiChi was described as a combination of the 'dynamic' with the 'static', the 'hard' with the 'soft' –by extension, the masculine and the feminine. The professional section of the ceremony opened with the display of the youngest female survivor from the Sichuan earthquake, presenting the new Chinese 'face' both as feminine and ethnically diverse. Finally, the procession of world athletes left their footsteps on a giant paper-scroll upon **entrance in stadium**, creating the carpet that was used for the official speeches of the opening ceremony.

SLIDE 18

The Olympic torch itself also partook in the Chinese allegorical imperative. Reflecting the motto 'Faster, Higher, Stronger', the torch was complemented by the gymnastic qualities of its carrier, Ning. But Ning, the feminine face of China, clashed with the fascist history of the Torch. **Thus**, a narrative of cosmopolitan inclusivity was juxtaposed to a Chinese *Realpolitik* that counters human rights law. The rationale of this clash was revealed during the London 2012 handover. At some point during their 8-minute show, the British performers were circled by Chinese men who formed a cordon around them. This issued a reminder of the necessity for global cooperation against the risk of terrorist threat – the selfsame fear Chinese security agents expressed for black plagues and radiological 'dirty bombs' that Muslim radicals might have planted in China during the Tibetan unrest.

Conclusion - 19

I sought to provide some snapshots of the 2008 ceremonies as a way to investigate ritualised expressions of national identity. I argued that celebrations of transnational or cosmopolitan ideals

aside, the Olympic spectacle remains grounded politically, culturally and geographically. As a result, the Games are used as a therapeutic stage on which regional and national dramas are enacted: the 'nation' provides the producers and the actors, whereas the politics of gendered and racialised difference provide the script. In Beijing 2008 the host's feminised and racialised art became the standard-bearer of social change, whereas its masculinised technology was demoted to its facilitator. A *homo nationis* may be fashioned upon ideals of a *homo universalis* (reminiscent of a togetherness, unity, harmony and balance we can only find in nature) but, of course, socio-political realities (of gendered and racialised inequalities, of institutional and interstate hierarchies) render this project a chimera. The opening and closing ceremonies of *Beijing 2008* were designed to narrate the nation's opening to the world, but remained haunted by China's oppressive organised principles and hierarchies. As this type of performance requires the mobilisation of tradition and custom for both commercial and political purposes, the symbolic crafting of the Olympic **HUMAN** carries all the contradictions of human nature as a product of its social context.