

Chapter 3

Branding the Games: Commercialism and the Olympic City

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Branding the ‘Good’ Olympic Games

If all goes to plan¹ the London Olympic Games will close successfully on 11 September 2012.² Londoners, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), local, national and global TV audiences will express (variously) gratitude, pleasure and pride in a ‘good Games’ – or even ‘the best Games ever’. The spectacular and moving events witnessed or reported on and off the sports field will be the culmination of considerable effort and investment – public, private, personal and institutional. Such an outcome will depend upon the successful management of tensions and contradictions within and between Olympic organisational bodies.³ At some level and to some extent Olympism – as philosophy and practice – will have been tested and affirmed. Many Olympics-related questions and plans have already been hotly debated. No doubt further controversies will arise. Reflection on London 2012 will continue long after the Games are over. The Games’ consequences and memories will be collated and contextualised globally and locally.

There are two areas which will certainly remain prominent in critique and analysis, before, during and after the event. The cost of the Games will continue to provoke criticism, counter-justifications, re-budgeting and muddle. Similarly, the assertively *commercial* ‘feel’ of the Olympic event-culture will attract ongoing attention. As the promotional register becomes yet more evident, notably in everyday advertising communications (via local and global media), attention will turn to the 2012 Games ‘image’ – to its ‘brand’ and the brands that circulate around the city and around the Olympic rings. The promotions associated culture of London 2012 will draw out questions

1 For instance, as outlined in DCMS (2008).

2 The dates for the London 2012 Games are 27 July–12 August and for the Paralympics 31 August–11 September.

3 Notably the IOC, the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG), the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA), the British Olympic Association (BOA) and the 200+ National Olympic Committees (NOCs) of other nations and various national and international sporting associations.

regarding the place and value of the Olympic 'brand' as an appropriate focus and vector for educational and social programmes; in health, sports participation, urban regeneration and the environment.

Some hint of the passion surrounding a 'promotional Olympics' emerged in 2007 with the launch of the London 2012 brand logo. Most critique was reserved for the logo itself. The logo, initially at least, was widely unpopular. Press and public indignation was aimed at LOCOG's chosen brand imagery⁴ and at the £400,000 fee paid to brand consultants Wolff Olins. Critique of the logo as design object (i.e. as opposed to an analysis of the Olympic promotional system as a whole) deferred, displaced or replaced other anxieties and criticisms, e.g. that the hyper-commercialism of previous Games, notably Atlanta 1996, famously dubbed the 'Hamburger Games', might be repeated in London 2012.

The distinctive design of the London logo – unwieldy and garish as it is – has an uncorporate look which (apologists might argue), on reflection, signals some departure from the designer-slick image-making of past Games. If the multi-coloured and multi-changeable proto-chaotic London logo is anything to go by then some excesses of McDonaldisation⁵ may be being curtailed (in LOCOG) in favour of more open ended approaches to the Games – at least

4 Journalists and other commentators took great pains to record the negative impact expressed by the public. *The Independent* canvassed global opinion: 'Cier Vianney, from Bayonne, in France, wrote yesterday: "This logo is one of the worst I have ever seen: and that's a point of view of a typographer." Jonathan Bradshaw, from Toronto, said the logo reminded him of "some sort of rejected logo of an early Nineties children's programme". Zoltan Banffy, from Budapest, said it was "very painful to look at". Amy Murphy, from Miami, called it "pathetic" and David Barnett in Dubai said it looked "like a failed soft-drinks label". Ryan Torres, from Massachusetts, called it "illegible, inelegant, and communicating absolutely none of the spirit, nobility, athleticism or beauty of the Olympics".'

One indicative serious criticism of the launch video was outlined in the *Daily Mail* (*Mail Online* 2007) which reported: 'Epilepsy Action said it had received reports of 22 people having fits while watching the video, with reports of others vomiting and having migraines.' In the House of Commons, 'Tory Philip Davies attacked the design as a "pathetic attempt to appear trendy" and called for it to be scrapped'. In a partially prophetic put down, government minister Alan Johnson dismissed the new logo with the observation that it looks 'like Boris Johnson's [famously chaotic] hair'. Following his election in 2008, Boris Johnson is now Mayor of London and currently central to planning for London 2012.

5 McDonalds, of course, are central to the imagery and funding of the Olympics, in London and elsewhere. McDonaldisation here refers to Ritzer's (2000) analysis of hyper rationalisation and commercial efficiencies – at the expense of the qualitative specificities of work and consumer experiences in contemporary institutional environments – and to the detriment of human engagement with culture and its objects.

at the level of the brand imagery. Even in relation to branding however, where appearances are seemingly all, the logo is not the main point.

Future criticism of Olympic marketing will focus more widely on qualitative aspects of the Games. The prominence and status of the Olympics, as the world premiere sporting mega-event, will invite evaluations of the *cultural* quality of the London Games. The Olympics will allow commentators of all kinds, in their various registers, to rehearse and record their sense of the meaning and value of a highly complex cultural-mega event experience. Prominent in the qualitative evaluation of the 'good' Olympics will be questions about the extent and nature of commercial elements in the 2012 'mix'. The delivery, experience and subsequent evaluation of a 'good' Olympics depend upon the sensitive and ongoing management of balances between the cost, commerce and cultural value. This chapter sets out some of the tensions that will inform judgements – of the 'good' Games in a "good" city. The aim is to consider one or two interdependences – notably between income and sponsorship – rather than to dwell too heavily on the extent to which these interdependencies form necessarily vicious or virtuous circles.

The Olympics and Commerce: Historical Contexts

Pavitt points out (2001: 48) that the modern Olympic movement emerged at the same time as a number of today's well known international brands. Pavitt cites BMW, ICI and HMV as examples of early modern proto-global brands that trace their history to a 'dramatic phase' of international commercial-institutional expansion between 1880 and 1925 (2001: 48). Kodak and Coca Cola might readily be added to the list. These brands might well owe some small portion of their historical international marketing successes to early-days Olympic affiliations. During this period some of the larger US advertising agencies were establishing quite extensive international networks to better service clients (e.g. General Motors) operating internationally. For instance, by the end of the 1930s US-based agency J. Walter Thompson had offices in over 30 countries. Historical accounts of Olympic marketing activities (Barney et al. 2004) suggest that despite this context (of potential global commercial operations) there were few large scale commercial collaborations directly supporting the modern Olympic movement and its events until the 1980s.

Indeed the IOC operated a *de jure* if not always *de facto* counter-narrative to commercial-centric visions of international sport. There was never quite an age of non-commercial innocence however (Toohey and Veal 2007: 279; Barney et al. 2004). Brand promotional commercialisation of the early and mid century Olympics (especially in the pre-television era) was largely a matter of opportunistic local sponsorships by entrepreneurial businesses. The powerful discourse of amateur sport that defined much in the meaning and operation of the Olympics until the 1980s appeared also to extend to

an institution-wide anti-commercial stance in principle, and to only sporadic and opportunistic local arrangements in practice. Long-serving IOC president Avery Brundage (1952–1972) made it clear throughout his period of office that money and Olympic sport were, wherever possible, to be kept apart. Richard Pound points out in this connection that the IOC had ‘lived hand to mouth for the first sixty or seventy years of its existence’ (Pound 2004: 139) and that ‘even as late as 1980 there was no concerted effort to develop private sector support for the games’ (Pound 2004: 139).

The IOC (2008: 19) gives some indications of the extent of early commercial associations with Olympic Games. In 1896 companies including Kodak advertised during the Athens Games. In 1924 in Paris, advertising signs appeared for the first (and last) time within Olympic venues. At Amsterdam (1928) Coca Cola began its long running association with the Games. In the same year the IOC banned the appearance of advertising signage within Olympic venues – affirming a long-standing commitment to ‘clean’ Games spaces. As anthropologist Mary Douglas might put it (Douglas 1966/2005), the ‘purity’ of Olympic sport was defended against the ‘danger’ of commercial adulteration.

Berlin (1936) was a highly orchestrated ‘promotional’ or propagandist event. However, the IOC history does not record any commercial sponsorship as such – notwithstanding the prevalence and integration of Nazi imagery into the Olympic event. Notably 1936 witnessed the first ‘live’ Olympic broadcasts (Barney et al. 2004: 54–5). It was not until 1952 (Helsinki) that an International marketing programme of any kind was introduced, with companies gaining publicity in return for providing food for athletes – and flowers for medallists. In Rome (1960) a more extensive sponsor supplier programme was developed and in Tokyo (1964) over US\$1m was generated via the new ‘Olympia’ cigarette brand. Two hundred and fifty companies made official marketing relationships with the Tokyo Games.

The 628 sponsors and suppliers to the 1976 Montreal Olympics contributed only US\$7m for the OCOG. The event costs notoriously far outstripped OCOG incomes. This left Montreal with a serious debt. By the 1970s it had become clear that, as Tomlinson (2005: 180) puts it: ‘The IOC was innocent and naïve in terms of the commercial exploitation of its product’. Significant sums were by this time being generated via television broadcasting rights deals. However the IOC largely resisted or ignored the potential for commercial sponsorship. The majority of income from TV and sponsorship was generated via US markets and corporations and disbursed via USCOG⁶ – a state of affairs that undermined something of the ‘global’ character of the Olympic movement.

The large deficit after the 1976 Montreal Games was a watershed moment in the history of Olympic commercialism. The large municipal debt, estimated at US\$2 billion, including interest, was finally paid off in 2006 and arose as

6 United States Committee for the Olympic Games.

a consequence of grandiose over-spending (especially on the stadium) and because the Canadian government refused to underwrite the city's mounting debt.⁷ A contributory factor was the inadequacy of other income streams – inadequacy amplified by the national government's refusal to pick up the bill.

The events of 1976 are emblematic,⁸ or perhaps symptomatic, of a broader dynamic in the financial management of large-scale sports, culture and entertainment events – 'industries' growing rapidly in the television age. The Montreal example, in amongst a good deal else⁹, led to a crisis for the Olympic movement in the 1970s. Cities became reluctant to host Games (Poynter 2006; Preuss 2004) for fear of financial disaster. Naomi Klein (2000) gives a relevant summary of the broader socio-economic climate.

In Canada under Brian Mulroney, in the US under Ronald Reagan and in Britain under Margaret Thatcher (and in many other parts of the world as well), corporate taxes were dramatically lowered, a move that eroded the tax base and gradually starved the public sector. As government spending dwindled, schools, museums and broadcasters were desperate to make up their budget shortfalls and thus ripe for partnerships with private corporations. It also didn't hurt that the political climate during this time ensured that there was almost no vocabulary to speak passionately about the non-commercialized public sphere. (Klein 2000: 30)

When, in 1982 the IOC established a Commission for New Sources of Finance, it was responding to this emerging worldwide socio-economic settlement. Adequate commercial exploitation of cultural assets became a compelling pre-condition for staging cultural events. Mega events, such as the Olympics, needed some quite deep-seated adjustments to survive in this new economic climate. The IOC took something of a leading role in the development of

7 The contexts of global financial turmoil – linked to the 1973 oil crisis – and local labour disputes were additional contributory problems to cost overruns.

8 Whitson notes that there are a number of checks in place against the likelihood of a Montreal style financial meltdown impacting the Olympic movement. 'The factors that produced the debts incurred by the Montreal Olympics are highly unlikely to be repeated. The political tensions that led to the Canadian government giving so little financial support to Montreal were a product of historically specific political circumstances (although one might compare Canada's response here to the generous support that Spain gave to Barcelona's Olympic infrastructure, Catalan nationalism notwithstanding). More generally, the revenues that Olympic cities now receive from television contracts have risen exponentially, almost guaranteeing that hosts can build the sports facilities required without going into debt. However, doing so still requires a readiness, on the part of local elites who may be ... consumed with place promotion ... to scale back 'signalling' ambitions to what they can afford' (Whitson 2004: 1220).

9 The 1970s and 1980s saw the Olympics plagued by serious boycotts, notably of the Moscow Games, by the USA and a number of other teams.

sponsorship-culture. As Klein notes: ‘... sponsorship went from being a rare occurrence (in the 1970s) to an exploding growth industry (by the mid eighties) picking up momentum in 1984 at the Los Angeles Olympics’ (Klein 2000: 30–31).

During the 1980s the media-advertising-promotions-industry infrastructure was emerging in a way that encouraged the conception and establishment of large scale global marketing initiatives. McAllister (1997) points out:

The year 1986 is known as ‘The Big Bang’ in the advertising industry. During this year, a series of major agencies merged, largely to facilitate global advertising efforts ... These mega agencies ... have become specialists in global advertising. Of the forty largest ad agencies in the US and Great Britain, only about one-third had departments specialising in global advertising in 1987; by 1992 only one agency of the forty did not have such a department. (McAllister 1997: 38)

The IOC was, by this time, more than willing to engage with global commerce.

Between Montreal and Los Angeles the Olympic ‘funding’ pendulum had swung from over-dependence (as it would today seem) on public funds (Montreal) towards (in LA) a large-scale ‘privatisation’ of the event and its associated cultural ‘assets’. There were legitimate criticisms levelled at both ‘business models’, pointing to commercial excess at one end, and financial failure at the other. The IOC began to take steps to institute a more stable path binding Olympic ‘goods’, i.e. historic principles and the event-ethos, to public ‘goods’, i.e. managing costs and fulfilling event and regeneration potentials within the host city. In addition these were to be assertively linked to private ‘goods’, i.e. to commercial imperatives: consumer-advertising, brand building and other corporate agendas. It should not be assumed that private sponsorship has ‘saved the day’. In Atlanta (1996) and LA (1984) less than 20 per cent of the Games funding came from state sources. However in Barcelona (1992), and as will be the case in London (2012), over 70 per cent of financial support is from public funds.

The practical and ethical dependence upon volunteers in the delivery of the Games is an indicative further complication of affairs. Within what might be referred to as the ‘asset structure’ of the Games (the blend of public, commercial, political and Olympic-institutional social, economic and cultural capital) there are significant contradictions to be grasped and managed. For example, the perceived tension between a sponsor who gives financial support in return for valuable corporate exposure, and volunteers who give freely of time, skills and commitment, in return for various, perhaps ill defined but powerful intangible ‘rewards’. The volunteer is by definition willing to service the Olympic movement. But there is a question to be raised regarding the extent to which, however indirectly, his or her goodwill can be legitimately

mobilised in the service of an event operating, in part, in the service of corporate commercial brands (and the profit motive).¹⁰ Perhaps this is a logical rather than a practical contradiction. It is clear that recent Games have had few problems attracting volunteers. In London 2012 however such complexity will require considerable thought.

The TOPS Scheme: History and Operation

During the 1980s the IOC replaced a ‘confusing commercial clutter’ which ‘acted to depress the values of sponsorships and to inhibit companies from venturing into the field at all’ (Pound 2004: 144) with a highly lucrative marketing system. One journalist writing in *Adweek* after Barcelona (1992) observed that, as he saw it, ‘the Olympics have transformed themselves from a nationalist sports festival to an international marketing event in just eight years’ (Buchanan 1992: 20).

This radical response to the emerging necessity to more fully exploit the (global and local) income potential of the ‘Olympic asset’, during the presidency (1980–2001) of Juan Antonio Samaranch, and driven by marketing director Richard Pound (Pound 2004), depended upon the collaboration with commercial sponsorship and (global) advertising agencies. The IOC and the sponsorship industry contrived a partnership scheme to better enable corporate sponsors to develop marketing agreements with the Olympics – both within host cities and globally, across the numerous national Olympic committees. Given the large number of stakeholders (NOCs, the IOC, OCOGs, longstanding national sponsors, advertising and marketing agencies), and the complex international legal terrain being negotiated, it is perhaps unsurprising that the TOPS (The Olympic Partners) scheme took some years to institute (between 1982 and 1985). It was important to unify the Olympic marketing system under one (global) IOC banner, as opposed to having individual NOCs and OCOGs operating primarily local agreements – with reference to particular, selected national markets. This was in line with more widespread trends in commercial globalisation – facilitated by new technological and media networks.

There have been subsequent revisions and adaptations to TOPS, but it remains as it began: a mechanism to guarantee exclusive global and local sponsorship agreements from selected Olympic Partners (e.g. Visa, McDonalds, Coca Cola etc.) throughout renewable four-year licence periods (including one Winter and one Summer Games). TOP sponsors are permitted to use the Olympic logo and enter into other Olympic event related marketing activities across all national marketplaces. TOP sponsors become part of ‘the Olympic

¹⁰ Further complexity emerges around the use of sponsors’ corporate managers and other employees as ‘volunteers’. This is discussed briefly, below.

family' and are required to adhere to certain promotional rules in respect of the Olympic 'brand'. The IOC gives guidance to sponsors encouraging them to promote and support Olympic ideals (staying however within partners' commercial promotional agenda's).

Sponsors pay for these exclusive rights (see Figure 3.1), rights which formally exclude competitors (within specified business or product sectors) from sponsoring the Games. For example, in the credit card sector, once Visa has signed its TOPs agreement for a particular "quadrennium", then the Visa brand owners possess and can deploy those rights to the exclusion of any similar corporations (e.g. American Express), who cannot join the scheme. The principles underpinning the partnerships are set out as follows by the IOC.

The aims of the TOPs scheme are:

- to contribute to the independent financial stability of the Olympic Movement;
- to generate continual and substantial support through sustained, long-term partnerships;
- to provide equitable revenue distribution throughout the Olympic Family;
- to ensure the financial and operational viability of the Olympic Games;
- to prohibit the uncontrolled commercialisation of the Olympic Games.

The sponsors must operate in line with the Olympic Charter. The IOC lists a number of rationales for the involvement of sponsors. In addition to the primary point of the scheme, i.e. that, 'Sponsorship provides valuable financial resources to the Olympic Family' (IOC 2008) There are a number of further motivations for collaboration:

- sponsors provide support for the staging of the Olympic Games and the operations of the Olympic Movement in the form of products, services, technology, expertise and staff deployment;
- sponsors provide direct support for the training and development of Olympic athletes and hopefuls around the world, as well as essential services for athletes participating in the Games;
- sponsors provide essential products and services for broadcasters, journalists, photographers and other media;
- sponsorship activation enhances the Olympic Games experience for spectators and provides the youth of the world with opportunities to experience the Olympic ideals at the global and local levels;
- sponsorship support contributes to the success of the educational, environmental, cultural and youth-oriented initiatives of the Olympic Movement;

- sponsors develop advertising and promotional activities that help to promote the Olympic ideals, heighten public awareness of the Olympic Games and increase support for the Olympic athletes (IOC 2008).

In financial and practical terms the TOPs scheme seems to have been a success. Certainly judged in terms of IOC income growth and other targets the scheme has performed well. Figure 3.1 shows the growth of the scheme in financial terms over a three year cycle since the first scheme commenced in 1985:

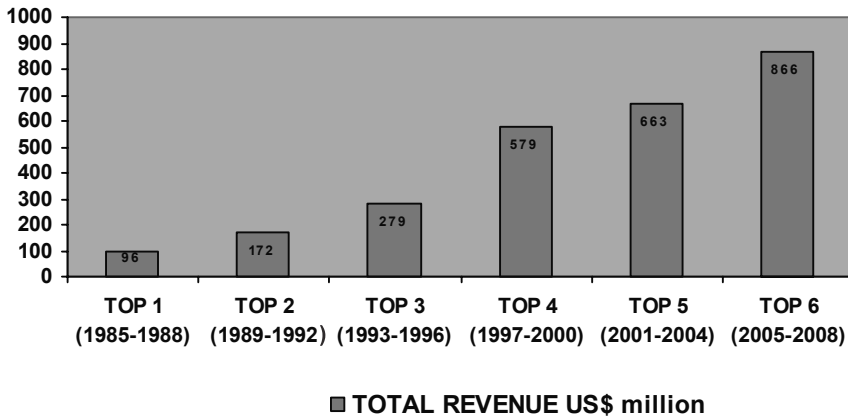


Figure 3.1 Growth in TOP revenue 1985–2008

Figure 3.2 shows the allocation of income from the TOPs sponsors identifying the proportion given (in total) to the NOCs (which receive varying amounts of support) and the host cities (OCOGs). The allocations are made in part via Olympic Solidarity, an IOC sub-committee responsible for allocating funds (from TOPs and TV rights sales), via NOCs to the various national-local schemes, to the support of athletes and to sports development (Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbot 2008: 56–7).

The IOC outlines some basic principles governing the regulation of the TOPs scheme and its participants. The IOC aims:

- To ensure that no advertising or other commercial message in or near the Olympic venues is visible to the Olympic Games venue spectators or to the Olympic Games broadcast audience. No advertising or commercial messages are permitted in the Olympic stadia, on the person of venue spectators, or on the uniforms of the Olympic athletes, coaches, officials, or judges.

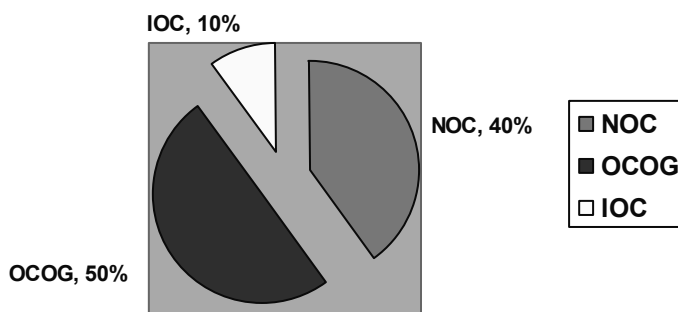


Figure 3.2 Overall proportional allocation of TOP income to beneficiary bodies

- To ensure a clean telecast by all Olympic Games broadcasters. Images of Olympic events are not allowed to be broadcast with any kind of commercial association.
- To control sponsorship programmes and the number of major corporate sponsorships...The TOP VI worldwide sponsorship programme...has twelve Partners, each with global category exclusivity.
- OCOG programmes are also designed to maximise support for the Games through the minimum number of partnerships.
- To control sponsorship programmes to ensure that partnerships are compatible with the Olympic ideals. The IOC does not accept commercial associations with tobacco products, alcoholic beverages (other than beer and wine), or other products that may conflict with or be considered inappropriate to the mission of the IOC or to the spirit of Olympism. (IOC 2008)

The benefits to sponsors accruing from affiliations are difficult to estimate (Miyazaki and Morgan 2001; Stipp 1998; Shani and Sandler 1992; Stipp and Schavione 1996). The Olympics offer a rich but unstable promotional and persuasive 'script' to consumers and marketers alike (Challip 2000). Crimmins and Horn (1996) examined various attitudinal data on US consumers in relation to Olympic sponsors:

In studying the Olympics, we have found that about 60% of the US adult population say 'I try to buy a company's product if they support the Olympic Games.' And about 60% say 'I feel I am contributing to the Olympics by buying the brands of Olympic sponsors.' This gratitude exists before, during and after the games. A brand that creates an enduring link with the Olympics will enjoy the benefit of enduring consumer gratitude. (Crimmins and Horn 1996: 12)

However, such marketing success is not guaranteed. Consumers have no desire or need to be interested in who is sponsoring what. They often report ignorance and indifference regarding Olympic sponsorship deals, failing to identify Olympic sponsors, or mistaking non-sponsors promotional interventions for 'legitimate' Olympic marketing.

Marketers have pointed to the special global reach of the Olympics. For example Chinese beer makers, Tsingtao, named after the port city where the drink is brewed – and the host location for the Olympic sailing – hope to exploit the 2008 Games as an opportunity to promote their beer in global markets, especially the US (Matthews 2008). Martin Sorrel, Chairman of global advertising group WPP sees the Beijing Olympics as a central moment in the development of Chinese commerce – with the Games contributing to the development of local Chinese brands into significant global properties (Sorrell 2007, 2008). Visa brand managers point proudly to their long standing relationship with the Olympics and detail their commitment to a marketing approach which actively embed branding and other corporate activity within the Olympic Games – via athlete mentor schemes and other long term investments connected to their self styled marketing operation: 'Team Visa' (SportBusiness International 2007). The Visa approach is indicative of the incentive to bind corporate identities to the Olympic 'brand' as a means of re-defining or re-characterising the ethos and public image of the enterprise.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have observed that such re-characterisations of ethos have also been attached to various conceptions of the role, status and function of managers in contemporary corporations. People in management roles are described – and describe themselves and their activities – so that they 'become "team leaders", "catalysts", "visionaries", "coaches", "sources of inspiration" ... [and even] ... "business athletes"' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 77–8). This was evident in Autumn 2005 when, following London's successful bid, *Spectra: The Journal of the Management Consultancies Association*, launched a special issue (2005) asking: 'Why Does Business Love Sport?' (italics in original). Wakerley (2005) discussed 'Exchanging the Office for the Olympics'; Adiba (2005) proposed 'Reaching Olympian Heights' and Phillipson (2005) considered 'Jumping on the Brandwagon'. This is perhaps an expression of a broader development identified by Omno Gruppe who points out that: 'sport [has] not only become part of cultural life, but furthermore a sportization of culture as a whole' has taken place (Gruppe 1990, cited DaCosta 2002: 112). The discourse of Olympic sport promises a hotline to a pervasive cultural sensibility. This is deemed highly valuable by corporate HR leaders, sponsors and advertisers.

Maintaining and Protecting the Olympic Brand

A good deal of the IOC agenda is assertively restrictive in relation to commercial-promotional agendas and practices. In some sense this simply secures the view that the IOC is behaving responsibly, as stewards of the intellectual and other properties within which the Olympics and Olympism – as global cultural assets – are enshrined. The IOC have worked hard (sometimes after the fact) to counter the kinds of flagrant over-commercialisation that characterised some aspects of, for example, the Atlanta (1996) ‘Hamburger’ Games.

However, there is clearly also a commercial motivation underpinning the principles outlined by the IOC in respect of TOPs. This is connected to the production, maintenance and credibility of the Olympic ‘brand’ as a commercial property. There are three constituencies for whom this ‘brand’-credibility (in different ways) is a matter of considerable importance.

1. Citizens/and their governmental representatives: i.e. ‘the public’, who fund and support a good deal of Olympic activity (directly as ‘consumers’ but also via public support, financial underwriting and large subsidies). The public are (also) at times the source and target for media-promotions. The public must, at some level, retain a sense of the credibility of the Olympic ‘brand’ as a values driven (educational) cultural asset. Otherwise the Olympics become, in some regard, (merely) one of a number of other (formally) comparable mega events (world championships, world cups, the Superbowl etc.). That is, spectacular sports events – but understood as largely disconnected from other socio-cultural values – and public policy agendas.
2. ‘The Consumer’: spectators and fans, and the targets of marketing communications. Consumers must remain committed to the idea that the sporting spectacle is the point of the event. Attention is given to sponsors in passing, and as a consequence of their paid for support. If consumers/spectators feel that the ‘tail’ of commerce is wagging the Olympic-sports ‘dog’, then the credibility of both the event and of the associated sponsorship is diminished.¹¹ Likewise, as the IOC argue, if advertisers are associating themselves with the Olympic event without having however given approved IOC support, they are ‘invading’ and disrupting the consumers’ experience and the event space – to the detriment of both.
3. Sponsors/sponsors’ investors/shareholders: sponsors are formally committed to, and have a marketing interest in, the Olympic brand.

11 This dynamic is in operation in other areas of cultural entertainment. Donaton (2004) notes the convergence of commercial messages via placement of products in films, but also the wholesale adoption of events – which become the brand. This can turn consumers off.

They recognise that excessive or inappropriate exploitation of the Olympic event and its symbolic capital (by the IOC or by other sponsors and franchisees) is likely to diminish the value of their investment. It is the premium and 'special' nature of Olympic marketing affiliation that remains the IOC's USP in the work of persuading sponsors to sign up for TOPs and other sponsor relationships – and to keep the sponsors loyal. The Salt Lake City controversies in 2000 placed a good deal of pressure on the Olympic 'brand' values (Pound 2004) – as some sponsors' and others' trust in the principled operations of the IOC were diminished in the light of a corruption scandal (related to city bidding and inducements for IOC members).

The character of the Olympics 'brand' is important. It can serve (by its status as a socio-cultural 'good') to 'detoxify'¹² a sponsor brand in the face of consumers' boredom or cynicism in the face of yet more (run of the mill) marketing. The Olympics, notionally at least, offers a particular order of imagery, experience and value which is useful to advertisers seeking to transform their commodities into something that (seemingly) has a supra-marketing character.

It is perhaps for this reason (to maintain the auratic branding function of Olympic symbolic capital) that the IOC launched its 'celebrate humanity' brand building campaign in 2000. Celebrate humanity, as Maguire et al. (2008) propose, was partly an attempt to address anxieties over losing sponsors following the Salt Lake City corruption scandal. It was also a response to the media climate induced by the anti-globalisation movement and prominent anti-branding campaigns in that period. The IOC's campaign actively promoted the Olympics as a brand, and as a brand partner (Maguire et al. 2008) – hoping to re-produce the Olympics and Olympism as a sensitive and attuned vector for global or 'glocal' (commercial) relationships. This aim is affirmed in a campaign, which offered inspirational images around Olympic "brand propositions": hope, friendship and fair play for example.

The Olympic brand-building campaign marks a specific departure in terms of marketing practice on the part of the IOC. It included research into different regional and national 'markets' and feelings about the Olympic brand. Such information is helpful in persuading sponsors that the Olympic brand has 'reach', in the manner of a media channel, and 'currency', in the manner of a cultural icon. Both are key components of the Olympic brand value. This was not a matter of promoting this or that event or programme; nor was there a sponsors' brand leading the promotional strategy. Instead it was a matter of the IOC articulating, affirming and asserting its values (commercial

12 That is, remove the sense that it is an objectionable and over-marketed commodity and return the idea that, here, there is a credible cultural idea, product or relationship.

and cultural), in the language of branding, advertising and promotion. The motivations include aims:

1. to fulfil the IOC's longstanding commitment to promoting Olympic values world wide – here in an up to date manner using contemporary formats and technologies;
2. to maintain, develop, distinguish and defend the value of the Olympic brand to ensure the brand and its associated events could continue to serve sponsors as a suitable vector, or channel, for sponsorship and other promotional activities.

The second strategy is in line with a widening conception of what brands are, and what they do. Brands operate not just as clusters of values to pin to products and corporations, but as multidimensional channels touching multiple areas of life and culture.

Policing the Brand: Ambush Marketing

The IOC's, LOCOG's and NOC's dependence upon sponsors' belief in the integrity and distinctiveness of the Olympic brand has led to a policy of stringent policing in relation to any infringements of the IOC's Olympic symbolic properties and rights, and, also to a detailed scrutiny of non-sponsors' activities in and around the Olympics. This latter is an attempt to offset non-sponsors' various attempts to draw valuable Olympic associations into their brand profile. To this end in advance of London 2012, LOCOG invites corporate (LOCOG 2007a, 2007b) and other institutions (charities and universities etc.) to 'respect our need to protect the value – both monetary and inspirational – of the London 2012 brand and of the Olympic and Paralympic Movements' (LOCOG 2007b). LOCOG set out guidelines¹³ forbidding certain verbal and visual usage; this in defence of the Olympic brand. This misuse is now called 'ambush marketing'. LOCOG (2007b) defines it as follows:

13 For instance, for 2012 the following visual and verbal signs are regulated: the Olympic symbol, the Paralympic symbol, the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic emblems; the words 'London 2012' and '2012', 'Olympic', 'Olympiad', 'Olympian' (and their plurals and things very similar to them – e.g. 'Olympix'); the words 'Paralympic', 'Paralympiad', 'Paralympian' and their plurals and things very similar to them – e.g. 'Paralympix'; the Olympic motto – 'Citius Altius Fortius'/'Faster Higher Stronger'; the Paralympic motto – 'Spirit in Motion'; the Team GB logo; the Paralympics GB logo.; the British Olympic Association logo; the British Paralympic Association logo; London2012.com (and various derivatives).

... ambush marketing describes a business' attempts to attach itself to a major sports event without paying sponsorship fees. As a result, the business gains the benefits of being associated with the goodwill and public excitement around the event for free. This damages the investment of genuine sponsors, and risks the organiser's ability to fund the event.

This is by no means a new phenomenon. However, in the past, such infringements were policed in the name of *anti*-commercial values. Barney et al. (2004) cite instances of trademark protection (in the US) from the 1930s to the 1950s, especially with reference to the protracted conflict between IOC president Avery Brundage and Helm's Olympic bread (Barney et al. 2004; Tomlinson 2005: 180–81), at issue was not the value of the Olympic 'brand' but the 'purity' of the Olympic (amateur) ideal.

In Weymouth in 2007 a butcher was required to take down his Olympic sausages sign because it infringed IOC and LOCOG trademark rules. This seems like a trivial incident. In many ways it is. However the LOCOG response, i.e. that it had 'no discretion' in matters of rights protection indicates a rigorous commitment to brand value – in the commercial sense.

There have been far more serious instances of ambush marketing. Meenaghan (1994) cites Sandler and Shani (1989): 'In the 1988 Winter Olympics we observed Wendy's 'ambushing' McDonald's, American Express 'ambushing' Visa, Quality Inns 'ambushing' Hilton. Ambush marketing is a perennial issue. The *Financial Times* (Birchall 2008) reports that Nike, not an official Olympic 2008 sponsor, plans to launch a 'prominent' campaign during the Beijing Olympics – across all media. Nike is determined that it will not be affected by IOC and BOCOG efforts to police 'ambush' marketing¹⁴. Birchall reports further, indicating the complexity of image and rights issues:

Efforts to control marketing by non-sponsors have become part of the modern Olympics. Beijing Olympic committee marketing officials have said local media would be advised against allowing advertising from non-Olympic sponsors. China Central TV and Li Ning, a local sportswear brand that is not an Olympic sponsor, have reportedly suspended a deal under which presenters and guests would have worn Li Ning's clothing in CCTV's studios during the games. (Birchall 2008: 5)

The policing of Olympic symbols and rights aims at preventing infringements of official sponsors' promotional investments, as well as curtailing promotional excess. There is a clear marketing rationale to such protections. There is a

14 Nike has a history of 'bad boy' ambush marketing (Klein 2000). This affirms its brand image as 'anti-institutional' and 'maverick' relative to competitors. At other times Nike have been in the fold, so that in Sydney (2000) Nike sponsored the Games (Pound 2004: 162)

further consequence however. As nef (the new economic foundation) (2008) point out: ‘strict branding rules prevent local community organisations leveraging values from association with the Games’ (nef 2008: 4). Given that the major sponsors of the Games are global brands there is a sense that – in it’s promotional-symbolic dimension at least – 2012 will serve more often to signal global ‘goods’ as opposed to local ones.

A promotional tactic akin to “ambush marketing” is used not only by commercial competitors but also by political protestors. For instance there were anti-globalisation protests against the Olympic sponsors in Sydney – notably Nike and McDonalds (Lenskyj 2002: 207). Given the continuing mobilisation of branding and PR-style techniques¹⁵ – facilitated by Internet and other new communications technologies – by political protestors and social movements, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Olympic brand and affiliates, can be ‘ambushed’ not by sponsors’ competitors, but by political activists utilising the global prominence of the Olympics as a highly effective means to promote various agendas.

In recent months (in 2008) such activities have been focussed on the run up to the Beijing Games. Concerted campaigns highlighted human rights issues in Tibet (notably during the torch relay).¹⁶ Another campaign, ‘Dream for Darfur’ picked up on the Beijing 2008 Olympic strap line ‘One world, One dream’ and urged people to target Olympic sponsors to lend active support in the alleviation of the famine and civil war in the Darfur region of Africa. The campaign web site describes its strategy:

We are not calling for a boycott [of the Games]. But we are urging the Olympic corporate sponsors to join us in pressuring the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and China to, in turn, press Sudan to ensure that there is immediate protection for civilians and humanitarian workers on the ground in Darfur well before the Games begin. The Olympic corporate Partners, Sponsors, and Suppliers would prefer to say that this is not their problem. We believe that the more voices that are raised, the more hope there is for peace in Darfur. The Olympics belong to all of us, and in the face of genocide, anyone in a position of influence must try to act. (http://www.dreamfordarfur.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=75)

A further ‘Dream for Darfur’ campaign tactic has urged TV watchers to switch over during ad breaks to threaten TV rights and advertising revenue.

15 It might be more accurate to say that many new marketing techniques have borrowed from the ‘informal’ and ad hoc activities of new social movements – so that PR comes to resemble political agitation, just as political agitation comes to resemble PR.

16 However, Olympic online newspaper *Around the Rings* (18 April 2008) suggested that the protests over the Torch relay have had no effect on LOCOG’s negotiations with potential sponsors.

Promoting the City

As numerous chapters in this book have suggested the Olympics can be understood as fulfilling a wide range of broadly 'promotional' briefs. Prominent, as discussed, is the highly visible advertising and marketing tie-in between the Games and corporate sponsors. However, other promotional agendas are perhaps equally central to the Olympic cycle – of bidding for the Games, planning and preparing for the event, hosting the event and developing and sustaining various legacies in the aftermath. Primarily these are related to the promotional activity of 'place-making'. Cities and nations demonstrably enter into various attempts, as the branding language has it, to 'reposition' themselves. This strategy is a response to an increasingly competitive global 'market'. Cities (and nations) aim to attract mobile capital, labour and tourism – as well as further mega events – as a means to develop, grow and assert themselves on the world stage. Both bidding for the Games (successfully or unsuccessfully) and in particular hosting the event, can signal to a global audience that this or that place (city, region, or nation) is in transition, increasingly ready to accommodate new businesses, new events and new ways of life. Burbank et al. (2001) argue that this entrepreneurial approach to city management in particular marks a shift in the modes and aims of municipal government. The Olympics can assist in promotional strategies towards:

- improving 'location factors' to bring in investors, new businesses (Preuss 2007);
- gaining attention from business and leisure tourists;
- signifying 'the good life' to tourists and potential inhabitants;
- reassurance against anxieties about 'unfamiliar' cities and nations or countries in political, economic or social transition.

In London there are significant sub-regions and locales which hope to benefit from the promotional aura of the 2012 Games. Olympic venues, such as the ExCeL Centre, will expect to accrue kudos from their Olympic partnership. Stratford, site of the main Olympic transport hub, will become more prominent 'on the map'. Local municipal boroughs (especially Newham, Tower Hamlets, Greenwich, Waltham Forest and Hackney) wish to boost their associations with the 2012 event – as 'host boroughs' and so enhance their 'brand image'. There is a tension, also, between an understanding, and projection, of 2012 as an *East* London event, as opposed to as a London-wide enterprise. One of the intended benefits of hosting 2012 is to be that London would affirm 'World city' status. The West End, the City of London and long-established tourist, retail and leisure locations¹⁷ have a good deal of global 'cultural capital'

¹⁷ From The Bank of England to Soho and from The Tower of London to Buckingham Palace, the central royal parks and including Covent Garden, Oxford

already – with East London hoping that the Olympic experience will go some way in rebalancing (Greater) London's profile to better reflect the extended East End. The geographies of promotional activity around 2012 will feed the emergent sense, globally and locally, of post-Olympic London.

Retooling the City Ethos

As pointed out above Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have observed the tendency to appropriate sporting and other metaphors in the reconception of management and other corporate practices. The sporting metaphors ('team', 'goals', 'business athletes' etc.) demarcate this or that 'new' business ethos as distinct from older, 'functional' or 'instrumental' descriptions of organisations and work patterns. In addition to the traditional processes of promotion and city-marketing the work of bidding for and delivering a Games allows numerous work-communities within the city to draw upon the Olympic ethos as an additional motivational script. This is often enacted in practical ways as corporate employees work as 'volunteers' in various functions. The intermingling of metaphors of current management-speak with Olympic Games discourses – i.e. discourses of the humanist ethical project and the sporting event – allows (at least in fantasy) for a reinvigoration and re-conception of service industry work – whether it be town planning, marketing, or other kinds of service provision (see e.g. Wakerley 2005; Adiba 2005; Smith and Westerbeek 2005).

The Olympic city promises (at the level of script and motivation) a (metaphoric) escape from instrumentalist managerialism (and its common languages) in favour of a more glamorous and revered ethos. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) discuss the 'projective city'. One feature of this conception of an emergent working ethos is a focus on work as projects-based – activities bounded in time and linked by informal networks and connections – rather than by hierarchy or bureaucratic processes. This is a 'fit' and 'flexible' city. The drive (from government and business elites (Burbank et al. 2001) to become a host city is an expression of the urge to re-tool the city, to project a sense of the city as rehearsed in an ethos connected to the ultimate project (the Games) – and so, also for future projects. This serves a final promotional function: the Olympic city and its work force become associated and associates itself – reflexively and from outside – with the latest (motivational) discourses in (global) project management and delivery.

Street, Piccadilly, Kensington, The Strand and stretching towards Fulham, Chelsea and Richmond Park.

This Is and Is Not a Brand

Olympism is a doctrine of the fraternity between the body and the soul. (Widely attributed to Pierre de Coubertin¹⁸)

For the thing we are looking for is not a human thing, nor is it an inhuman thing. It offers, rather, a continuous passage, a commerce, an interchange, between what humans inscribe in it and what it prescribes to humans. It translates the one into the other. This thing is the nonhuman version of the people. What should it be called? Neither object nor subject. An instituted object, quasi object, quasi subject, a thing that possesses body and soul indissociably. (Latour 1996 cited Lury 2004: 148)

The operation of the Olympic brand has developed to play a significant role in contemporary marketing and culture. Advertising and other media agencies factor in an Olympic ‘windfall’ in those years when clients will spend extra marketing budget on advertising around the Olympic festival and corporate sponsors evidently pay a great deal to be involved. What is it, in the contemporary moment, and as 2012 approaches, that makes the Olympic brand such a compelling property? The Olympic ‘brand’, if that is the word, seems to be both a powerful and a fragile property.

Sometimes, as we glimpse the famous and familiar five-ring symbol, or see a medal placed around the neck of an athlete, perhaps one who has won against the odds; or, as we intuit the long and lonely struggle (hitherto) of a striving competitor (here and now) spontaneously joyful in simply taking part; or, perhaps, as we grasp the cosmopolitan goodwill framed and ritualised in a closing ceremony set against a host city backdrop, and remember or anticipate the Olympic festival enlivening other fans and cities past and future; in these and many other moments the ‘Olympics’ might affirm something of the ‘good’.

In addition to the Games’ snap-shot moments (and unlike many other sporting events), the Olympics has a more explicit ethical commitment – to a kind of humanism. Coubertin’s philosophico-religious doctrine of ‘the fraternity between the body and the soul’, draws upon, specifies, figures and re-figures ancient and modern definitions of what it is to be human. The Olympics (via ‘Olympism’ and the IOC), while being primarily a sports event, is also a working discourse and a (global) movement actively defining, redefining, and defending particular versions of personal and social ‘good’: prominently, such values for example as ‘fair play’, ‘taking part’, ‘commitment’, ‘joy’ and ‘effort’, but also peace, community and social regeneration, developmental sustainability and environmentalism.

The Olympics (as such) provides both an historic and contemporary repository of imagery and ideals fit for the affirmation of ‘good’, this even

18 A sentiment widely echoed in de Coubertin’s writings about Olympism.

in the light of scrutiny and analysis pointing up deficits, contradictions and infringements of explicit and implicit 'Olympic' ideals. The Games (as idea and event) opens and articulates spaces where (individually or collectively) we can ascribe, remember and build on a sense of values. Those experiencing the Games (directly or indirectly) can find, here or there, then or now, epitomes and epiphanies to capture or enact this or that otherwise abstract thought, relation or ideal. The Games invite and produce objectifications of 'the good' across numerous dimensions. Through its charters, in cities as they bid, plan and build, via media portrayals and *in situ*, Olympic Games provide unique 'arenas' to stage, experience and consider versions of the 'good'.

This 'inspirational' property is fundamental to Olympism. However, all of these features of the Olympics; the movement, its ideals, the moments and imageries of the Games, everything *good* about the Olympic 'good', produces also, and, increasingly, is produced *as*, a 'property'. This property is enshrined and embodied in athletes, in the Games, in the host cities and in Olympic paraphernalia of all kinds. It is a property which is ostensibly 'invaluable', but which is (therefore) also of great *commercial* value. The Olympic good can be – and is – transferred to 'goods' (cars, computers, financial services) and the Olympic 'values' can lend value – estimable and purchasable – to this or that brand. Thus, and incrementally, Olympian-human-cultural inspiration is (to a degree) reconfigured in the discourse of consumer motivation. In this transition, and in line with a long tradition of cultural criticism, (Williams 1980) there is a perceived (qualitative) diminution of human engagement – as, for instance, inspirational relationships between people are translated into aspirational relations to things (for sale).

In his (2004) analysis of commercial communication, entitled *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands*, Saatchi and Saatchi CEO Kevin Roberts outlined his sense of some of the problems facing contemporary branding practitioners (and corporate bodies) charged with building and maintaining successful large-scale commercial communications strategies around logos, trademarks and advertising slogans. Brands, says Roberts (2004: 35), are 'running out of juice'. Roberts (from an advertising industry perspective¹⁹) outlines a number of reasons why branding, seen as such a powerful organisational principle for commercial and, increasingly also, 'non-commercial' activities²⁰ in the 1980s and 1990s, might require rethinking and reframing.²¹

19 Roberts's agency (Saatchi and Saatchi) held the 2004 Olympics campaign (Roberts 2004: 99).

20 It became widely intelligible and acceptable to talk about for instance universities, political parties and even religions (without irony) as 'brands' in the 1980s.

21 Roberts cites, for instance, the anti-brand lobby, the formulaic nature of contemporary brand management and communications design, new media and media clutter and customer apathy amongst the major problems for brand managers.

Roberts identifies a number of exceptional ‘brands’ and re-titles them as ‘Lovemarks’ in order to differentiate these, certain favoured exemplary iconic products and companies, against numerous ordinary run of the mill brands ‘out there’ in the cluttered environments of commercial communications. His list of cult brands – or rather ‘Lovemarks’ – includes some familiar and other less familiar ‘brand’ names; commercial and non-commercial icon. iPod, Lexus, Brahma beer, Olay, Guinness, Steinway, Doc Martens, the Statue of Liberty and the BBC are just some examples of ‘Lovemarks’. He intimates (without any concerted attempt at providing evidence) the ways such ‘brands’ might enchant – ‘beyond reason’. In sociological terms he finds a distinction between bureaucratic brands and charismatic ‘Lovemarks’ – those objects, activities and signs embedded in a space that describes neither (just) the market’s arrays of reified objects and choices nor (only) the subjective space of desire, memory and affect (see Latour 1996).

The underlying point of Roberts’s analysis²² is that ‘brands’ (and the products – objects and events – they embody and in which they are embodied) succeed or fail in the extent to which they inspire passion and intimacy, and in the extent to which there is a degree of authentic engagement between the consumer and the activities, iconographies (and enacted values) of this or that corporate body. Brands which become formulaic, abstract and inauthentic fail. Such brands and associated products suffer ‘commoditisation’. They become a mere ‘thing’, cast out and subjected entirely to the rational logics of the marketplace. They are forced (says Roberts) to resort to price-based competition and diminishing returns:

One day you are sitting on a premium product, enjoying high margins and fighting off consumers. The next your product is being bottom-loaded on back shelves or dumped into ‘specials’ bins. (Roberts 2004: 29)

This is the brand managers’ nightmare. The antidote to such a fate, for any and every brand, is to inspire passionate engagement – to become, no doubt with the help of Roberts’s expensive team of advertising experts – a ‘Lovemark’. The path to successful branding is (paradoxically) to be something more, or rather something *other* than a brand. If the 1990s were the decade for re-branding this, that and the other, then Roberts (alongside a number of other advocates for “new” marketing paradigms (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Holt 2004)) is arguing for de-branding, or, as he puts it ‘post-branding’.

Prominent on the list of ‘brands/non-brands’ which embody and inspire the passionate engagement characteristic of such post-brands or ‘Lovemarks’

22 The book is in part analysis of contemporary communications problems, in part a kind of showcase for successful work undertaken by Saatchi and Saatchi (Roberts’s agency) and in part perhaps a kind of ‘pitch’ aiming to attract the attention of potential future clients.

is the Olympics. Roberts points out that while the Olympics have become a 'marketing behemoth' they nevertheless 'hold tightly to the inspiration that sets them apart from other events'. He continues:

The Olympic Spirit is characterized as Joy in Effort, Friendship and Fair Play, Dreams and Inspiration, and Hope. With sensational icons like the rings, the torch, the flame, and the medals as well as the sensual excitement of the opening events and competitions, the Intimacy of personal achievement, and the passion of thousand of athletes competing – the Olympics is a textbook Lovemark. (Roberts 2004: 99)

There are many ways in which the Olympics can be seen as a brand, and a powerful one.²³ However, and in a paradox that Roberts is alert to, the semiotic power and resonance of the Games, its nomenclatures, history, and its iconographies lie in the heritage of a movement whose distinction and mystique, such as it is, depends upon commitments to values formally and formerly understood to be 'outside' or at odds with commercial and marketing relationships. The IOC's 2004 Olympic Charter sets down some principles which are outlined as an appendix to the *IOC Olympic Marketing Fact-File 2008*.

Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. The goal of Olympism is to place everywhere sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to encouraging the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity. The Olympic Movement is the concerted, organised, universal permanent action, carried out under the supreme authority of the IOC, or all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of Olympism. It covers the five continents. It reaches its peak with the bringing together of the world's athletes at the great sport festival, the Olympic Games. Its symbol is five interlaced rings. (IOC 2008: Appendix)

23 The Olympic five-ring symbol, as Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbott report (2008: 37) 'is said to be the best-known logo in the world, above that of Shell, the McDonalds golden arches, and the Mercedes star, and well ahead of the Red Cross or the United Nations'. The elision of distinctions between categories of organisation such as the UN, McDonalds and The Olympics within a notation that they are all 'brands' is important to note. Roberts (2004), the CEO of a global advertising agency, is willing after all to concede that thinking 'brand' can diminish the specificity and impetus of consumers' but also 'brand' strategists' recognition of the properties and activities in the marketplace and in consumer experiences.

These principles, this ethos, manifesto and constitution, have much in common with ideas that appear in branded statements. Perhaps what distinguishes Olympism and its institutions (if anything does) is a sense of a history, ancient and modern, and the knowledge, that unlike a car brand (think of Skoda) or a fashion label (e.g. Levis), the Olympics could not be so readily re-branded and remain, distinctively, Olympic. Unlike a product which is to an extent divisible from its cultural meanings (via revisions to marketing imagery), the symbolic power of the Olympics is indissociable from its ethos, history and institutions.

'Brand-speak' and the Olympics

This chapter has looked at some aspects of this paradoxical balance between Olympics as brand/non-brand, and outlines something of the ways that cities, sponsors and the IOC have attempted to both protect the Olympic 'mystique' and its values from commercial exploitation and to (concurrently) exploit heritage and 'mystique' for commercial gain – a 'mystique' embodied in intellectual and symbolic properties (logos, mascots, nomenclature and so forth), but also bound to the history and institutional structures of a cultural movement.

The terminology 'brand' here, above all, serves as a flag of convenience – since the irreducibility and relative complexity of the Olympics in its contexts is at issue – compared to a 'brand'. Such usage should be considered carefully on two counts. Lury (2004) warns in general that the term 'brand' used to account for corporations' economic activity can be a misleading shorthand implying 'a single thing' or 'a set of convergent processes' where there is none.

To assume that the brand is a single thing would be to mistake the multiple and sometimes divergent layers of activity that have gone into producing the brand. (Lury 2004: 16)

This is perhaps particularly apposite in the context of discussing the Olympics 'brand' given the longstanding contestations over the extent to which such designations ('brand', 'branding' etc.) are adequate or accurate in describing and developing Olympic activities and values.

MacAloon²⁴ (2008) for instance reports ethnographic observations of the emergence of 'brand-speak' in the IOC's corridors of power. His detailed close observations enable him to provide a rich characterisation of the complexities underpinning notions of the Olympic brand – even within the IOC. MacAloon

24 MacAloon's analysis in this paper extends in more detail into a rich and important examination of the mobilisation of 'legacy' as a structuring term that has in some ways superseded 'brand and branding' in Olympic discourse.

suggests that ‘the appearance of ‘Olympic brand’ conceptualisation and language’ was by no means ‘straightforward, unproblematic, and uncontested’ (MacAloon 2008: 3). He goes on to point out that, on the contrary:

To other IOC members, administrators, and interlocutors throughout the ‘Olympic Family’, this kind of [brand-] speech was taken to be offensive and it remains highly resented and resisted among such parties today. (MacAloon 2008: 3)

So the genealogy of ‘brand’ as a contested structuring concept is an important caveat. Nevertheless ‘brand’ certainly has currency, even hegemony, in current LOCOG and IOC documentation – and practice (IOC 2008; LOCOC 2007a, 2007b).

Lury’s (2004) recognition of brands as necessarily multilayered and complex, and MacAloon’s (2008) understanding of the fraught and contested genealogy of contemporary stratagems regarding the Olympic ‘brand’, in particular together, contextualise a contradiction which, in simple terms disentangles what, in practice, cannot be disentangled: i.e. the imbrications of Olympism by commerce, and the dependence of the commercial Olympic ‘brand’ upon the embedded history and culture of the Olympic movement and its institutions.

The risk that is only implicit in Roberts’s (2004) celebration of the Olympics ‘Lovemark’ is that its symbolic, affective and institutional pre-eminence (for cities, athletes, fans, and sporting bodies) is provisional upon the careful and continuing maintenance of distinctions from other ‘products’, experience and entertainment commodities (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Wolf 1999). In this context, the maintenance of such distinctions is essential otherwise the Games becomes one of the herd – the numerous competing mega-event and sporting spectacles that are now characteristic of the increasingly competitive economies of entertainment, experience and cultural consumption – from the Superbowl, to the World Cup and other sporting and cultural mega-events.

Such potential ‘brand’ dedifferentiation and consequent over-commodification of the Games would be contingent upon a widespread and emergent sense that the values expressed and embodied in the Olympic charter, the Rings and via the actions and governance of host cities in their stewardship the Games and its legacies (i.e. London 2012), i.e. ‘all individuals and entities [including sponsors] who are inspired by the values of Olympism’, were (in fact) merely operationalising abstracted and instrumentalised bureaucratic ‘brand values’. Contemporary consumers – if it is as ‘consumers’²⁵ that we

25 The ‘brand’ paradigm invites the assumption that relations between people and institutions, objects, processes and events is necessarily in the manner of ‘consumers’. This presumption is at odds with an older discourse of Olympism where the crowd engages as part of the spectacle. It is also at odds with participation in the Games by

are to relate to the Games – are highly alert to inauthentic pseudo-events and sloganeering (Gilmore and Pine 2007). The 2012 and other future Games may not be exempt from criticality – articulated by vociferous minorities and by apathetic majorities – aimed at various actual and perceived negligences in regard to the over-commercialisation of Olympic culture.

Savan (1994), in an article first published in 1988 just in the aftermath of the Seoul games, where the first TOPs scheme was in force makes the point with a telling irony:

We Americans – heck, even Koreans – are tied in by cash, credit card, and consumption to the indomitable will of stadium studs. Today the Greek ideal of individualism has been pretty much reduced to choosing between Pepsi and Coke. If we don't run and dive with our heroes, we can at least drink and eat with them. Send the families, feel the heartbeat of America, add your two cents to history. It's just that this process makes family, heroism, and history taste like they come in Styrofoam containers. (Savan 1994: 93)

Conclusion

Klein's (2000) suggestion in regard to sponsorship schemes emerging in the 1980s, is relevant here.

At first these arrangements seemed win-win: the cultural or educational institution in question received much-needed funds and the sponsoring corporation was compensated with some modest form of public acknowledgment and a tax break. And, in fact, many of these ... public-private partnership arrangements are just that simple, successfully retaining a balance between the cultural event or institution's independence and the sponsor's desire for credit. (Klein 2000: 31)

There is however, and as Klein argues elsewhere, an issue of balance. The TOPs scheme has been a concerted attempt to balance the commercial development of the Olympic brand alongside and within the principles and parameters connected to its history as a global cultural and humanist movement. This balance no doubt shifts with, and within, broader trends governing the interplay of commerce and culture in the era of globalisation and consumer culture. In 2001, IOC marketing director Michael Payne's assessment was that:

volunteers, in the notion of citizens of host cities serving as 'hosts' to the games and not consumers of them. While 'consumer' is apt for the global TV audience (for games and advertising) it should not be the default category of all popular connections to the Olympic movement and its events.

With the sheer size and complexity of today's Olympic Games, it has reached the point where if there were no sponsors, there would be no Games. (Michael Payne, cited DaCosta 2002: 108)

This seems like a somewhat partial assessment. Payne's economic logic might be flawless, but it is important not to underplay the relationships of interdependence –between a unique cultural property (The Olympics), governments, the public and a commercial system, at times desperate for credibility and trust, from jaded consumers.

The Olympic Games provide a widely recognised, intentional and ostensible signifier of a global good society. Embodied in the IOC, and practically applied in the complex process of city bids, Olympic congresses and, primarily in the Games themselves (Winter and Summer), Olympism seeks to transcend the places and controversies it touches and which touch upon it. It is the case that any such transcendence is an impossibility since Olympism also seeks to catalyse and crystallise positive transformations; regenerating cities, affirming values associated with fair play, environmental responsibility, health and well-being and so on. Lately, as we have seen, the Games have become closely associated with consumerist imperatives; binding inspiration to consumer motivations – in the service of brands and products.

As a result the Games and the Olympism becomes defined in dialogic controversies setting past ideals against current realities and future ambitions against real capacities. City by city and decade by decade the Olympics are constituted and reconstituted in the space of this dialogue. The dialogue between the Olympic movement and the commercial world requires a complex balancing act – only partially stabilised in the conception and development of an Olympic 'brand'. Reminiscent of some of the gymnastics performed during the games by young athletes, the IOC attempts a dynamic and spectacular balancing act. They strive to display their "brand", maintaining the prominence, integrity and significance of its symbolic and cultural presence – some times deploying spectacular and audacious manoeuvres – playing to win. At the same time they seemingly also have the means to resist submission to the gravity of commercial appropriation, and evoke the joy of the movement itself. Before, during and after 2012 spectators will watch critically on, partly in hope and partly in expectation, and wonder if the Olympian-marketing gymnasts will fall flat on their faces, or take a graceful bow and move on to the next event.

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