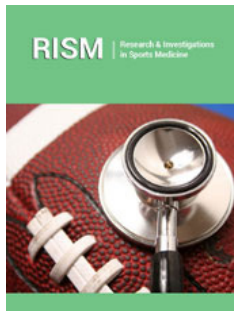


Study of Metaphor in the Design of Opening Ceremonies for Major Sporting Events

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Xu Xin¹, Li Li^{1*} and Huang Kuanrou²

¹Guangdong Food and Drug Vocational College, China

²School of Physical Education, South China Normal University, China

Abstract

This article explores the role of metaphor in the design of opening ceremonies for major sporting events. Through an analysis of recent performances, it argues that incorporating metaphor enhances the thematic impact of these events. A nuanced understanding of body language is highlighted as crucial for expressing the symbolic value of metaphors. Furthermore, careful attention to design elements such as points, lines, and planes is recommended to improve visual coherence. Thematic depth is further enriched by aligning artistic decorations with the overarching narrative of the performance.

Keywords: Games; Opening ceremony; Design; Metaphor

***Corresponding authors:** Li Li, Guangdong Food and Drug Vocational College, Guangzhou 510520, China

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Introduction

The opening ceremony of a large-scale sports event represents an integrative art form that encapsulates the cultural identity of the host nation. This visual spectacle combining sportsmanship with artistic design, cultural heritage, and advanced technology is presented to a global audience. The central challenge for designers is to unify these diverse elements into a cohesive narrative, often articulated through the thematic pillars of “health, strength, and beauty.” Unlike static artistic expressions, the opening ceremony serves as a dynamic platform for intercultural dialogue, merging cultural symbols with aesthetic presentation. However, a straightforward, literal approach to conveying the various linguistic nuances in a sporting event’s opening ceremony may result in a design that is simplistic and unengaging, ultimately lacking depth and failing to leave a lasting impression on the audience. As a rhetorical device, metaphor is one of the most prevalent symbolic forms. When employed in the opening ceremonies of large sporting events, metaphor reveals deeper, often hidden meanings by drawing on evocative imagery. This technique allows for the presentation of complex content in a uniquely creative and resonant manner, eliciting a more powerful emotional response from the audience.

Application of Metaphor in Recent Games Opening Ceremony Performances

Susanne K [1] Langer once remarked, “Art Was the Creation of Symbolic Form of Human Feelings” [1]. In her view, art constitutes a symbolic system a framework imbued with nuanced meaning. She explains that “Presentational symbolic forms articulates knowledge of feeling rather than a contagious and spontaneous outpouring” [1]. By this account, the performances within a Games opening ceremony can be viewed as inherently metaphorical. Common or familiar concepts and objects are employed to imply deeper, interconnected meanings, enriching the performances with artistic depth.

Use of metaphor in gesture and style

Gesture and style serve as foundational elements in the performance of a Games opening ceremony. Diverse and carefully crafted gestures not only define the performance’s

unique character and intensity but also carry embedded layers of meaning, as choreographers often use gestures to represent deeper ideological themes. For example, in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the “Nature” segment featured 2,008 performers executing Tai Chi. As a key discipline within Chinese martial arts, Tai Chi embodies the principles of resilience and harmony. The circular formation of performers, illuminated by radiant lights, symbolized Confucian philosophy specifically the “harmony between man and nature” suggesting an ideal coexistence between tradition and modernity [2]. In the 2012 London Olympics, the theme “Isles of Wonder” showcased a tableau of pastoral scenes within the stadium, depicting traditional English life. Performers mimed various agricultural tasks, evoking an idyllic British countryside. This portrayal celebrated the nation’s transformation during the Industrial Revolution, using metaphor to elevate the scene from a mere historical reference to a representation of British innovation and endurance. In the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the “Snowflake” segment featured hundreds of children carrying illuminated dove-shaped props arranged around a large snowflake sculpture. This imagery served as a powerful metaphor for unity, with the assembled figures symbolizing the lyric, “millions of us, united as one family.”

Use of metaphor in patterns and formations

Patterns and formations are crucial elements that enhance a Games opening ceremony’s visual and emotional impact. Given the physical distance between the audience and the performers, the strategic arrangement of these patterns effectively conveys the intended themes. Through metaphorical representation, choreographers transform these arrangements into visual art, imbuing them with symbolism that resonates deeply with viewers. For instance, various curved lines, circular arrangements, and spiral formations have become staples in recent large-scale sporting event performances. In the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, formations depicting “Five Rings and Peace Doves” symbolized unity and peace among nations. Similarly, the 2000 Sydney Olympics showcased horses galloping across a stage designed to resemble the Australian outback, eventually forming a “dynamic five-ring” and a “rotating windmill.” In 2008, the Beijing Olympics incorporated the ancient “Bagua” symbol within Tai Chi formations, representing the philosophical concept of harmony by integrating opposites [3]. These formations pay tribute to the host nation’s cultural heritage and underscore the Olympic values of friendship and unity. To achieve these effects, designers often blend artistic and technological elements, using metaphor to balance the real and the abstract. For instance, in the 2012 London Olympics, the introduction of the humorous character ‘Mr. Bean’ added a playful twist to an otherwise orderly performance, showcasing British humor and highlighting the importance of levity even on the global stage. In the 2024 Paris Olympics opening ceremony, dancers spontaneously interacted across the Seine River with onlookers on the opposite bank. It did away with it entirely as it hammered home a message that freedom must know no bounds.

Use of metaphor in artistic decorations and iconography

In the London 2012 Summer Olympics, a variety of quintessential British symbols such as pastoral landscapes, the Industrial Revolution, The Beatles, James Bond and Mr. Bean were woven throughout the ceremony. Through these familiar symbols, the designers showcased the spirit of Britain as a cultural and industrial powerhouse, transforming the opening into a rich visual narrative of British pride. In the Vancouver 2010 [1] Winter Olympics, a violinist glided through a maple forest in a canoe, beneath a twilight sky adorned with a golden full moon, surrounded by vibrant red and gold maple leaves. This striking imagery was rich in Canadian symbolism. The brilliant hues of maple leaves blanket the country and Canadians have an unparalleled affection for the maple, which serves as a national emblem [4]. After enduring the harsh winter, the maple reveals its green foliage, and in late autumn, it bursts forth in fiery red. The maple symbolizes unity, resilience and peace, making its presence in the opening ceremony a powerful metaphor for the Canadian spirit and its deep commitment to harmony, strength, and unity. In the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, a droplet of ice-blue ink descended from the heavens, transforming into the waters of the Yellow River as it cascaded down. This imagery draws inspiration from the ancient Chinese verse “The waters of the Yellow River come from the sky,” reflecting a romanticized admiration for China’s mother river. The surging waves ultimately crystallize into a shimmering realm of ice and snow. At this moment, the logos, dates and locations from the first to the 24th Winter Olympics appear and are captured in a still frame. Following this, six ice hockey players strike a puck and in an instant, a translucent ice-and-snow Olympic ring breaks through the surface. Utilizing advanced technologies such as real-time dynamic capture and virtual reality, this metaphor conveys breaking barriers and the pursuit of common ground amid diversity. In response to the Olympic spirit, people worldwide unite as one, collectively moving toward a brighter future [5].

Prospects for the Use of Metaphors in Future Sporting Event Opening Ceremonies

Metaphor is a fundamental creative technique in the design of sporting event opening ceremonies. Designers can employ methods such as “analogy to convey new meanings,” “form-based resemblance” and the “fusion of emotion and object” to imbue future ceremonies with rich layers of meaning. Drawing on symbolic imagery and nuanced messages, they aim to captivate and leave a lasting impact on audiences.

Enhancing the depth of movements and forms through “analogy for new meanings”

The technique of “analogy for new meanings” employs symbolic elements to reveal deeper, often concealed meanings. In the design of an opening ceremony, creators can choreograph specific movements and formations (the “subject”) to embody the culture and history of the host country (the “symbol”). This representation of cultural heritage serves as the foundation of the design, functioning as both a vehicle and a tangible expression of national

identity. An exceptional opening ceremony encapsulates a profound cultural essence, reflecting the host nation's identity through distinctive regional, ethnic and contemporary characteristics. Thus, designing an opening ceremony is both an artistic endeavor and a metaphorical expression rich with layered significance. Unlike similes, which create a direct comparison between two elements, metaphors connect seemingly unrelated components in a more nuanced manner, allowing audiences to discern latent connections between the subject and its symbol. This indirect association enables viewers to develop new interpretations and uncover hidden meanings. In future opening ceremonies, designers should harness performers "body symbols," choreographing movements that go beyond mere display to serve as acts of symbolic expression. Movements like twisting, running, jumping and shifting, alongside formations such as lifting, stacking and supporting, should be thoughtfully crafted to convey deeper meaning. Instead of merely layering movements and forms, the design should strive to transform these "external forms" into powerful metaphors for the 'spirit' they represent [6].

Past ceremonies exemplify this approach effectively. For instance, during the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics, projections of athletic poses provided concrete choreography, while the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics employed more abstract representations, such as performers using their bodies as "paintbrushes" on a giant scroll. Similarly, in the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, Russia's iconic art form ballet was used to bring scenes from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to life. The protagonist Natasha's graceful movements illustrated the elegance of aristocratic gatherings, while the ensemble's powerful choreography symbolized the resilience of the Russian people defending their homeland. Ballet's leaps, spins and lifts extended beyond isolated moves; they symbolized the hardships of wartime, embodying the courage and resilience inherent in the Russian cultural memory of the Napoleonic Wars. Through metaphor, these artistic designs celebrated Russia's cultural heritage and evoked collective memories, imbuing the performance with layered symbolic meaning. This approach, which intentionally leaves interpretive "blank spaces" for the audience's imagination, embodies the essence of metaphor. Such an abstract style of choreography does not constrain movement but instead emphasizes and accentuates particular forms, transforming them into symbolic gestures. This method invites viewers to engage on visual, emotional, and intellectual levels, encouraging reflection beyond mere observation.

Enhancing the allure of shapes and patterns through "similarity in form"

Formations and patterns are fundamental elements in opening ceremonies, contributing to the unique visual identity and conceptual coherence of the overall design. The transformation of these formations relies on a systematic integration of points, lines and planes: beginning with a "point" (each individual within the formation), progressing to "lines" (the alignment of individuals creating linear patterns) and ultimately culminating in "planes" (the collective visual composition). This layered configuration

imbues the formations with a profound symbolic resonance. Within this framework, the "point" signifies the source of transformation, serving as the focal element and the origin as well as the conclusion of the visual design. The "line" introduces structure and direction, while the "plane" functions as the ultimate expression of the design, capturing and manifesting the entirety of the formation's intended aesthetic. Thus, formations constructed through the interaction of points, lines and planes are integral to the realization of the designer's artistic vision. They embody the designer's conceptual intentions, providing a physical representation of creative thought and metaphorical ambition. The fluid, dynamic arrangement of these formations demonstrates the designer's capacity for symbolic expression, reflecting the host nation's history, culture, technological progress and civilizational identity. A prominent example is found in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, where thousands of performers arranged themselves to form characters representing "printing," thereby celebrating the ancient Chinese invention of movable type print a revolutionary contribution to global knowledge and culture. Through continuous transformation, these formations animated Chinese characters in a multidimensional display, skillfully juxtaposing ancient and contemporary interpretations of the character for "harmony".

This visual transformation infused the formations with deeper symbolic meaning, underscoring China's cultural legacy of valuing harmony and its contemporary pursuit of a harmonious society. Additionally, the compositional arrangement through the integration of lines and spatial layouts can evoke visual analogies between formations and the themes they intend to convey, thereby amplifying their artistic and metaphorical significance. For example, during the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics, parkour athletes navigating rain-soaked streets evoked imagery reminiscent of the *Assassin's Creed* character, moving seamlessly among historic landmarks. Each leap and slide converted the dynamic visuals into spatial expressions that were both athletic and tension-filled, directing the viewer's focus to a central point while subtly evoking themes of peace. This synthesis of form and symbolic meaning illustrates the potent role of metaphor in visual design. Looking forward, designers of future opening ceremonies should employ formations and patterns as expressive symbols that convey profound cultural and thematic significance, rather than using them merely as decorative elements. These shapes and patterns should evoke imagery that resonates with the audience, fostering an immersive visual experience that reflects and celebrates the hosting nation's unique identity.

Enhancing the depth of artistic decoration through the "fusion of emotion and object"

Artistic decorations in an opening ceremony should go beyond literal representations of everyday objects, embodying specific meanings within their context and conveying metaphorical significance through thoughtfully crafted visual imagery. Achieving a fusion of emotion and object is essential for capturing deeper layers of meaning, using "depth of form" to convey the intrinsic and profound elements of the ceremony's central theme. A notable

example is the 2023 Paris Summer Olympics, which featured an innovative opening ceremony staged against the iconic historical landmarks along the Seine River. This open-stage design integrated diverse artistic elements, including a fluid performance space, massive LED screens, and intricately orchestrated light displays. These components clarified the performance's narrative structure and causal relationships, creating a vivid visual experience that seamlessly blended art with urban life, connected culture with technology, and intertwined the classical with the contemporary. This design revealed Paris's multifaceted identity as the "City of Romance," illustrating the power of metaphor by moving beyond mere sensory portrayal. Instead of simply mirroring reality, the design equated the object of expression with something fundamentally distinct, sparking the audience's imagination and encouraging associative thinking. In future opening ceremony designs, spatial treatment should prioritize substitution and implication. Through the thoughtful selection, arrangement and manipulation of visual elements such as perspective, angles, light and shadow, color and composition designers can present scenes with special significance for the audience.

Additionally, the color palette of artistic decorations should consider factors such as brightness, intensity and weight, with gradients strategically employed to evoke imagination and associations. Colors that resonate with the ceremony's theme should be deliberately chosen to reinforce underlying messages and evoke desired emotional responses. Moreover, the selection and use of props should be guided by the symbolic relationships between elements, allowing one object to represent or suggest another. Concrete objects are often used to convey abstract concepts and special meanings, and the selected props should therefore embody significance that extends beyond their literal appearances. This approach enables objects to serve as symbols, enriching the depth of meaning communicated in the ceremony. Ultimately, artistic decoration should involve the synergy of multiple artistic

components rather than relying on isolated elements. Adopting a holistic perspective is crucial for the effective design of an opening ceremony. Without this integrated approach, without this integrated approach, the design risks devolving into fragments, thereby undermining its artistic integrity and the practical expression of its themes and meanings. To achieve metaphorical depth, designers must unify various artistic elements into a cohesive whole, ensuring that all decorations contribute to and reinforce the central theme of the ceremony.

Conclusion

Movement, formations, and artistic decoration constitute the three foundational components of an opening ceremony. Through the application of metaphorical techniques, these elements can harmonize and resonate with one another, creating a cohesive artistic fusion of emotion, setting and object. This approach fosters a meaningful connection between the audience and the design, enabling the themes of the ceremony to be communicated with clarity, creativity, and engaging depth. Furthermore, it enriches the performance with layers of symbolic meaning, enhancing both its substantive impact and aesthetic appeal.

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