

Metaphor Research in the Design of Sports Meeting Opening Ceremony Performances

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Abstract

This article through the analysis of the big games opening ceremony performance in recent years, think: In the Games opening ceremony we can use metaphor in order to enhance theme in the future; We should understand body language in order to reflect value of metaphor; We should pay attention to the "point, line, face" and the formation of the alike in the design of information; Art decoration should be performance themes to reflect depth of themes.

Keywords: Games opening ceremony; Design; Metaphor

Introduction

The opening ceremony of a major sports event is a comprehensive sports-art form that encapsulates the essence of the host country's national culture. As a visual spectacle, it aims to present a fusion of sports spirit, artistic design, cultural heritage and technological innovation. To integrate these diverse elements into a cohesive expression of "strength, beauty and vitality", designers must meticulously conceptualize every component and realize them through artistic mediums. Unlike static artworks, the opening ceremony is a four-dimensional composite creation that serves societal functions by merging cultural symbolism with design principles in people-to-people and nation-to-nation exchanges. Merely presenting cultural meanings in a straightforward manner risks oversimplification and disengagement. Metaphor, as both a rhetorical device and a symbolic form, bridges abstract concepts with tangible representations. By drawing analogies between subjects, it unveils hidden meanings and evokes profound psychological responses. Consequently, the application of metaphor in sports opening ceremonies warrants in-depth exploration [1].

Analysis of Metaphor in Recent Performances

Susan Langer once pointed out that "art is the creation of symbolic forms of human emotion." In her view, art is a symbolic system, more precisely, a symbolic system with special connotations. She also mentioned that artistic symbols, or expressive forms, are not entirely equivalent to familiar symbols. Their true essence lies in a kind of meaning. Thus, the performance of a sports opening ceremony should be a form of metaphor, using familiar objects or concepts to represent others and implying their hidden similarities, enhancing the artistic charm of the performance.

Metaphor in movement and form

Diverse movements enhance the uniqueness and richness of performances. However, choreographers design movements not merely to avoid monotony but to embed deeper cultural narratives. At the Athens Olympics opening ceremony, the poses of ancient Olympic athletes

left a profound impression—running, wrestling, discus and javelin throwing. These dynamic forms vividly embodied the Greek ethos of “truce through sport” and humanity’s celebration of strength and beauty. Here, movement and metaphor merged seamlessly, symbolizing the ancient Olympic ideal of peace and rekindling the audience’s hope for the Olympic spirit’s enduring legacy. In the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony’s “Nature” section, 2008 performers presented a very Chinese Tai Chi performance. As a representative Chinese martial art, Tai Chi emphasizes “combining softness and hardness”. The choreographers’ design was not just to show “Chinese Kung Fu”, but to convey deeper cultural meanings. Under brilliant lights, performers formed a circular array, embodying the Confucian idea of “harmony between heaven and earth”, the pursuit of harmony between humans and nature, and the integration of tradition and the future [2].

Moreover, the Beijing Olympics’ long scroll was a highlight. As the scroll unfolded, performers used modern dance to paint on it. Accompanied by guqin music, dancers turned their bodies into brushes, writing and painting on the scroll. This conveyed not just modern dance, but China’s ancient idea of “calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin” and the fusion of humans and artistic conception. The dove-releasing ceremony was also memorable. Led by over 100 white-clad girls, everyone in the stadium raised and waved their hands as if thousands of doves were flying. This creative design allowed everyone to release their inner doves of peace, conveying China’s desire for peace and an end to conflicts. The Olympic spirit of “unity, friendship and fairness” was well interpreted through this arm-waving performance. The London Olympics opening ceremony, themed “Wonderful Island,” presented a beautiful pastoral scene akin to a traditional Chinese scroll painting in the stadium. Women milking cows, men working hard, families picnicking, Edwardian village cricket teams and cheerful dancers—all these scenes depicted the customs of the British Isles. In a unique way, it showcased Britain’s rise during the Industrial Revolution. This approach of using known individual attributes of one thing to imply similar attributes of another elevated the use of metaphor.

Application of metaphor in formations and patterns formations and patterns are key to the charm of sports opening ceremony performances

As viewers are often distant from performers, varied formations help convey the event’s themes. Metaphorical formations transform ordinary patterns into evocative “artistic patterns,” making the performance more expansive, spectacular and profound. Curved, circular and spiral formations are frequently used in major sports ceremonies. For instance, the “Five Rings and Doves” formation at the Atlanta Olympics, the “Jumping Five Rings” and “Spinning Windmills” at the Sydney Olympics formed by galloping horses on yellow soil and the “Bagua” pattern in the Beijing Olympics Tai Chi performance all highlight the Olympic spirit of peace and global celebration. Formation designs also integrate high-tech and artistic methods with metaphor. This blend of real and abstract elements creates meaningful patterns. At the Doha Asian

Games in the “Overture,” dancers formed “waves” and “deserts” through formations. The desert and ocean imagery metaphorically represented Qatar’s cultural heritage, where coastal tribes and Bedouins with distinct lifestyles coexisted. This design signified the integration of Qatar’s diverse cultures. In the London Olympics, Mr. Bean’s humorous disruption of well-coordinated running formations showcased British humour, relieving the tension of competition. Such metaphors effectively reflect the host country’s traditions, culture and sports-tech aspects [3].

Application of metaphor in artistic decoration

At the Athens Olympics opening ceremony, “water and fire” were central themes. The Greeks cleverly harmonized these elements, making the audience feel the “Aegean Sea” on site. This wasn’t just a simple change of scene from previous Olympics. Actually, it metaphorically conveyed that water was the primary element in ancient Greek thought. The Aegean Sea is crucial to Greece’s history and civilization. It gave birth to ancient Greece’s prosperity and the Olympic Games that transcend regions, races and cultures. It also represents Olympic spirits like life, origin, inclusion and communication. Fire symbolized the sacredness of the ancient Greek soul and spirit, reflecting their cultural trait of “valuing the soul.” In the final act “Olive Tree,” an olive tree grew and shot up to the sky. It wasn’t just a prop but symbolized the Greeks’ desire for peace and freedom. In Greek Olympic history, champions wore olive-wreath crowns and received olive-leaf crowns and olive-oil jars as prizes. During the Olympics, city-states halted wars. Over time, the olive branch became a peace symbol. So, the olive tree at the end of the performance carried a deeper metaphor, symbolizing the Olympic spirit of “peace and freedom” and the “humanistic sports concept” of “friendship, unity, and fairness.”

At the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, a giant Chinese ink-wash painting unfurled in the centre of the venue to the sound of a guqin. Using the traditional Chinese scroll-axis form, it condensed rich Chinese culture onto one “piece of paper.” The long scroll served as a narrative vehicle and the main thread of the ceremony. Through modern multimedia, it showcased China’s most civilized and greatest historical achievements. Fundamentally, the directors’ design was metaphorical. The scroll-axis, unique to Chinese culture, implied the Chinese nation’s long history and culture. Moreover, it alluded to printing and paper-making. These Chinese inventions, as carriers of civilization, have aided global cultural communication. They allowed the Olympic movement, originating in ancient Greece and flourishing in modern Europe, to reach China. Thus, the Beijing Olympics became a “dialogue between ancient and modern civilizations.” The London Olympics opening ceremony featured pastoral scenes, the Industrial Revolution, The Beatles, *Trainspotting*, 007 and Mr. Bean. These British-isles cultural symbols took the stage one by one. The designers used these typical British elements as “prototypes.” Through metaphor, they expanded their artistic impact, presenting them on stage. This focused presentation of British cultural characteristics gave the audience an engaging visual and cultural feast.

Outlook on the Application of Metaphor in Future Sports Opening Ceremony Performances

The “analogical meaning creation” technique enhances the depth of movements and forms

Analogical meaning creation involves using the vehicle to reveal the hidden depth of the tenor. In the design of sports opening ceremonies, creators use the “body” (i.e., the choreography of different movements and forms) to reflect the “vehicle”—the host country’s history and culture. In this process, the presentation of history and culture serves as the foundation of the design, while the final form of expression becomes the carrier and concrete manifestation of history and culture. Outstanding sports opening ceremony designs always contain profound cultural connotations, embody the essence of culture and “reflect a nation’s cultural features, ethnic, regional and era characteristics”. Therefore, such designs are not merely materialized forms of artistic concepts but also applications of metaphor with deeper implications.

Unlike simile, metaphor does not directly compare one thing to another but subtly connects two seemingly unrelated or dissimilar things, prompting audiences to discover “the intrinsic connection between the body and vehicle that originally existed but remained unnoticed, thereby generating a new transferred meaning” [4]. Based on this, in future sports opening ceremony designs, creators must thoroughly understand performers’ “bodily symbols”, ensuring that bodily movements are not merely displays but also symbols—an art of symbolism and signs. In future sports opening ceremony performances, designers should meticulously choreograph and assign meanings to physical expressions such as twisting, running, jumping, moving, as well as forms like high, medium, low, overlapping, lifting and supporting. This ensures that the relationships between movements and between movements and forms, are not mere simple accumulations but embody the metaphorical transformation of “external things into spiritual elements”.

Furthermore, in opening ceremony designs, whether in concrete movement choreography (e.g., the athletic poses projected during the Athens Olympics) or abstract movement design (e.g., the “body brushes” in the scroll painting of the Beijing Olympics), the design of performance movements and forms must leave room for audience imagination. For example, in the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics opening ceremony, the directors used ballet—an art form Russians take great pride in—as the movement element to depict Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace. Through dancers’ eternally graceful and perfectly proportioned postures and through the strictly symmetrical geometric spatial transitions of every ballet movement, the hardships of wartime were presented to the audience, evoking their reflections on war, peace, and the vicissitudes of life. This artistic design showcased Russia’s proud cultural symbols to the world and stimulated viewers’ imagination through the organic integration of two distinct art forms. The concrete display of ballet movements awakened collective memories related to the era of the Franco-Russian War in the audience’s minds, while the deeper symbolic meaning was interpreted through “metaphor”.

These “undetermined points” and “blank spaces” left for audience imagination are metaphors. Such abstract movement design “does not suppress movement but emphasizes specific forms through exaggerated artistic actions” [3], thereby endowing it with symbolic meaning. This transforms audience appreciation from mere visual observation into a mental and emotional experience that provokes profound contemplation.

The “formal resemblance” technique enhances the charm of formations and patterns

Formations and patterns, crucial elements in sports opening ceremony performances, are composed of points, lines and planes. Specifically:

- A. A “point” refers to each individual in a formation.
- B. Connecting these points in sequence forms a “line” (created by rows of people in the formation).
- C. The convergence of multiple lines forms a “plane” (the overall visual presentation of the formation).

This plane ultimately defines the entire formation and pattern, becoming a formation design with profound implications. Among these elements, points can be regarded as the “source” of formation changes—they are the focal points, the beginning and the end. Lines serve as frameworks, while planes—resulting from the movement of lines—represent the ultimate manifestation of formations. Thus, formations constructed from points, lines and planes play a vital role in design. They must reflect the designer’s artistic thoughts and intentions, serving as the materialized expression of artistic concepts and the “vessel” for artistic metaphors. The flow and layout changes of formations reflect the designers’ metaphorical artistic thinking and their desire to showcase the host country’s history, culture, technology, and civilization through metaphorical techniques.

Example, At the Beijing Olympics, thousands of participants formed the vivid image of “text” to demonstrate ancient China’s “movable-type printing”. Through continuous changes in formation arrays, the symbolic element of Chinese culture—“Chinese characters”—was presented to the audience in a three-dimensional manner. This also subtly displayed the ancient Chinese character “和” (harmony) and its modern counterpart. This artistic transformation endowed the formation changes with deeper artistic significance.

In terms of formation design, artistic transformation aims to create visually similar compositions. The formation display of the “和” character communicates China’s long-standing cultural tradition of “valuing harmony” and its current commitment to building a “harmonious society”. Additionally, composition—as an integration of lines and layouts—can make formations and patterns appear “mutually similar and suggestive” [4] of the design theme, thereby generating artistic metaphorical value.

As a spatial representation, composition should be dynamic and possess “tension”. This tension not only directs the viewer’s “eyes” to the visual center but also allows the viewer’s “mind”

to perceive implications from other related points on the visual experience network. Such relationships between forms realize the value of metaphor. Therefore, in future sports opening ceremonies, choreographers should use the lines of formations and patterns to create “form-and-spirit” statements with deeper meanings, rather than mere ornamental elements. These implication-rich formations and patterns should be figurative, enabling audiences to mentally seek similarities or substitutes and delve into deeper meanings.

The “integration of emotion and object” technique enriches artistic decoration

Artistic decorations in sports opening ceremonies should not be concrete “objects” from daily life but must carry specific meanings within defined contexts. Moreover, they should acquire metaphorical significance through constructed visual presentations. To convey deeper meanings in such ceremonies, it is essential to integrate emotion and objects through “depth of form”, expressing the internal and profound aspects of the opening ceremony’s theme.

Example: At the London Olympics, the slow rolling-up of the field turf signified the beginning of the Enclosure Movement, where farmers lost their land and flocked to cities. The erection of seven chimneys symbolized the immense social changes brought by the Industrial Revolution. These props and backgrounds clarified the narrative logic and causal relationships of the entire performance, vividly recounting Britain’s modern and contemporary civilization—a nation reviving from an industrial legend and moving toward a new future. This exemplifies the power of metaphor, which “focuses not on creating a sensory resemblance to the subject but on establishing equivalence between the subject and a dissimilar object, thereby inspiring imagination and association” [5].

Guidelines for Future Designs:

a) Stage Design: Spatial arrangements should employ substitution and implication. This can be achieved by selecting, organizing, and controlling visual elements, as well as utilizing compositional techniques such as shot scale, angles, lighting, color and structure to present scenes with special meanings.

- b) Color Selection: Consider the lightness/darkness, intensity/softness and weight/lightness of colors. Use color gradients with variations and depth to evoke imagination and association. Choose color elements related to the sports event’s theme to imply the subject.
- c) Prop Usage: Consider the relationship between objects (e.g., using Object A to imply Object B). Concrete objects often represent abstract concepts or special meanings. The symbolic objects selected should have connotations that transcend their literal forms.
- d) Holistic Integration: Artistic decorations consist of multiple elements. Therefore, designers must adopt a “holistic” concept. Without this, the design becomes a pile of fragmented elements, artistic integrity is lost, the theme cannot be optimally expressed and metaphorical value remains unrealized.

Thus, designers must integrate various artistic elements into an organic whole, incorporating all decorations that can showcase the opening ceremony’s theme.

Conclusion

Movements, formations and artistic decorations are the three pillars of sports opening ceremonies. Through metaphor, these elements harmonize emotions, scenes and objects into a unified artistic experience. This approach ensures thematic clarity, intellectual engagement and cultural depth, elevating ceremonies beyond spectacle to philosophical discourse.

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