

The Olympics on Film

 historytoday.com/taylor-downing/olympics-film



Body beautiful: a still from Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* Curiously, the cinema and the modern Olympic movement were born at the same moment of time in the same city. In June 1894 a young French aristocrat and intellectual, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, called a gathering of sports leaders to a meeting at the Sorbonne in Paris to establish the International Olympic Committee and to revive the ancient Olympic Games. Two years later, in April 1896, 311 athletes gathered in a brand-new marble-lined stadium in the centre of Athens to celebrate the first Olympic Games of the modern era. Meanwhile, also in Paris, in December 1895 in the basement of the Grand Café, the Lumière brothers gave what is usually regarded as the first public performance of the *cinématographe* to a paying audience. In many ways the story of the Olympic movement and that of the development of the moving image as a powerful tool of mass communication have been closely linked ever since.

Not that the marriage between the spectacle of the Olympics and the development of what has been called *the art form* of the 20th century was instant. The first Olympics in Athens was a tiny sideshow and no one bothered to film it. And, although there are a few brief newsreel clips of the next few Games, in Paris in 1900, in St Louis in 1904 and in London 1908, they do not amount to much. For the first time, in Stockholm in 1912, national teams marched in to the Opening Ceremony behind their own flags. This was recorded on film and there is some lovely newsreel footage of the rest of these Games. There is almost nothing of the postwar revival Games at Antwerp but a full 10-reel (100 minute) film was made of the 1924 Paris Games. These were the Games that inspired the film *Chariots of Fire* about Harold Abrahams winning the 100 metres and 'the Flying Scot' Eric Liddell winning the 400 metres. But

the real star of these Games was the Finn Paavo Nurmi, who took four golds in the middle- and long-distance running – superbly captured on film. There is little footage of Amsterdam in 1928 and, surprisingly, nothing but newsreel coverage of the Los Angeles Games in 1932. Hollywood was only just down the road but the studios did not know what to make of the Games and, although Universal shot a lot of material, it was all canned up and put away in the vaults, only to be rediscovered in the 1980s.

The turning point, both on film and with the Games themselves, came in 1936 at Berlin. The Games were awarded to Berlin before Hitler came to power in 1933, but he saw an immense propaganda opportunity to use the event to promote the Third Reich. He resolved that everything would be bigger and better than at any Games before. The stadium was enlarged to seat 100,000. A superb venue for the swimming was built nearby. A new sports complex was constructed to the north of Berlin. And in a spectacular new Olympic village the male athletes lived in 160 cabins built in woods around a lake. (The female athletes had to put up with dormitories in town.) In order to promote the Third Reich, not just for those lucky enough to be in Berlin but for millions of others around the world, Hitler turned to his favourite film-maker, Leni Riefenstahl. She had already made three Nazi Party films for him, of which the most infamous is *Triumph of the Will* (1934). This is no mere record of a party rally but expresses perfectly on film the spirit of Nazism, portraying thousands of party members lined up to worship the Führer. Everything is organised around strict obedience to the word of Hitler. The film captures the idea that the party is unified, the nation is one and the Führer rules. There never was another party rally film. There was no need for one.

[Video: Watch clips of the films discussed in this article](#)

Riefenstahl, still only in her mid-30s, then did for the Olympics what she had done for the Nazi Party. She took a spectacular event but turned it into an even more memorable film. She created a hymn to physical beauty and a celebration of the human struggle to be the best that lies behind each Olympic Games. The longest lenses then available were used to capture intimate moments as athletes waited, watched and prepared. High speed cameras were used to slow the action down so that athletes, swimmers and divers spin in a sort of surreal human ballet. She placed her cameras alongside the track to get as close to the action as possible. She freely inter-cut training footage with the real thing to show rowers heaving and the pounding feet of marathon runners. And as Berlin was the first Games to feature the torch ceremony, she created a prologue linking the ancient world of Greece with the Games in modern Berlin. She took over 18 months to edit the film, much to the fury of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, who wanted the film out a few weeks after the Games had finished. The Berlin Olympics was a deeply political event and it was only the genius of black American athletes such as Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe that challenged Nazi ideas of Aryan supremacy. Riefenstahl, to do her justice, gloried in all four of Jesse Owens' gold medals in the film.

Riefenstahl's film, *Olympia* (in German: *Olympische Spiele*), opened in Berlin on Hitler's 49th birthday in April 1938. The premiere was a dazzling event decked out with Olympic flags and Swastikas, attended by the highest dignitaries of the state, the military, the film industry and the diplomatic corps. Hitler was delighted with the film and publicly presented Riefenstahl with a bouquet of white lilacs and red roses. It did Hitler good to be associated with the glamorous young ex-dancer, actress and film-maker. Riefenstahl's reputation never recovered from her close association with the Nazi leader. *Olympia* posed the central question about Olympic films: should they be merely a documentary record of the event or should they be something grander, more epic, more of a celebration of the human spirit behind the striving for excellence epitomised in every Games? It is clear that she went for the latter and, although *Olympia* is steeped in the politics of the Berlin Games, Riefenstahl produced what is probably still the greatest sports film ever made.

From 1936 it was inconceivable to imagine an Olympic Games without some sort of film to record and celebrate the human endeavours that had taken place. In almost every subsequent Games film-makers would use the newest technology to push back the boundaries of what was possible for the cinema. In London, for the 1948 Games, Castleon Knight closed down film production in Britain and brought all the giant 3-Strip Technicolor cameras to Wembley to film the key elements of the Ceremonies for *The Glory of Sport*. He made a charming film that

beautifully captures the austerity of postwar London, but has none of the power or emotion of Riefenstahl's film. Some later productions come near. In 1964 Japanese director Kon Ichikawa made a stunning record of the Tokyo Games. Again he used the latest film technology, including massive telephoto lenses and super-speed slow motion cameras to explore the incredible human element of the event. He captures the dedication, the desperation, the anguish and the triumph of competition, all in Big Close Up.

In 1972 David Wolper gathered a team of eight leading film-makers to explore different aspects of the Munich Games. These included Milos Forman, Claude Lelouch, John Schlesinger and Arthur Penn, who each made their own short film. But the separate features never gelled together as a single piece. Mai Zetterling's portrait of the human giants that were the weightlifting champions is the most remarkable feature.

Official films of the Games were made for several more Olympics, including a fascinating 16mm observational documentary in the 'fly on the wall' style of the 1976 Montreal Games. And at Los Angeles in 1984 Bud Greenspan concentrated on telling personal stories set against the drama of the Games in *Sixteen Days of Glory*. But from the 1960s onwards it was really television that made the running and further cemented the link between new ideas as to how to use the moving image and the Olympic Games.

In Berlin in 1936 Telefunken had televised the Games, sending cable signals to giant halls around the city. In London in 1948 the BBC was the first to broadcast the Games to the 60,000 homes in the UK that had television sets. And for the first time the organisers demanded a fee should be paid for the television rights. The BBC resisted but the organisers insisted and the BBC paid £1,500 for the privilege of broadcasting the Games live. For some time the story went around that, having established the principle that a fee should be paid, the organisers then never actually cashed the cheque. In those innocent days, gentlemen were clearly gentlemen.

It was at the 1964 Tokyo Games that television made the breakthrough. The first communication satellites, such as Telstar, meant that pictures could be seen live from one continent in another. Although the image was flickering and the audio had a dreadful hum, watching events live from the other side of the world was a sixties sensation. It is difficult to recall this in our more tele-sophisticated age, where such things are taken for granted. There is footage of Cliff Michelmore in 1964 hosting the show in a London studio, hoping and praying that the satellites will link and the pictures will come through. They did. And the Olympics were on their way to becoming a live global spectacle.

Along with viewer excitement came commercial opportunity. In 1968 the Winter Games in Innsbruck and the summer Games in Mexico were the first big Games that worked for prime time in the United States. ABC Television, the youngest of the three US networks, seized the moment and paid what then seemed an incredible \$4.5 million for the broadcasting rights to the Games. ABC's *Wide World of Sports* was already pioneering new ways of filming sport, with miniature cameras fixed to athletes, swimmers and ski-jumpers. None of this technology was allowed inside the Olympic arena but ABC managed to create a huge television spectacle around the Games. Using new video tape machines, they developed the 'instant replay' to recapture that glorious moment of Olympic gold on the small, silver screen.

Following this, each Olympics saw a huge escalation of rights fees paid by American television: \$8 million for Munich in 1972 and \$20 million for Montreal in 1976. Then ABC paid \$225 million for the rights to the Los Angeles Games in 1984. ABC developed an entirely new branding and reinvented itself as 'The Olympic Network'. The network relentlessly sold the personalities who became Olympic stars – at least the American ones. They were lucky in that, with the Soviet boycott, a tit-for-tat for President Carter's boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games, the Americans won more medals than ever before. US viewers loved it. The IOC had to warn ABC to be more even-handed in its coverage. But the Olympics gave ABC a huge boost at a critical time in the television year. ABC emerged in the autumn of 1984 as the number one rated network. This was worth hundreds of millions of dollars to them. Their gamble had paid off spectacularly well.

In 1988, for the Seoul Games, NBC outbid ABC to seize the baton for American television and paid \$300 million to broadcast events, some of which were staged late at night or in the early hours of the morning in order to line up with

primetime in the US. Since then NBC has remained the US Olympic network, paying more and more for the privilege. NBC has paid \$1.2 billion for the rights to the London Games. Last year they outbid stiff competition from Murdoch's Fox and from Disney/ESPN/ABC to sign a huge deal for four winter and summer Games from 2014 to 2020 for an incredible \$4.38 billion. This now includes all platform rights, not just free-to-air television, including subscription television, Internet, mobile and hand-held devices.

While American television hands out the billions, the rest of the world contributes far more modest sums to the Olympic party. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) has traditionally kept rights payments low. All European public service broadcasters are members and hence there has not been the sort of auction between competitors that has set American television alight. The BBC, for instance, is paying \$100 million for the rights to the London Games this summer – a significant sum for the licence-fee payer but tiny by comparison to what the Americans are paying. However, at each Games the host broadcaster rolls out the latest in television technology to capture the event. From 'instant replay' in the 1960s, to computer graphics in the 1990s, to HD television in the 2000s, the Olympics have always been at the cutting edge. Now some of the stunning effects Leni Riefenstahl was able to capture in 1936 cannot only be seen live but by an audience of four billion in every part of the globe. At the London Games there will be experiments with the latest form of 3D television. Televising the Games has come a long way from London in 1948.

Who would be more amazed if they could look in on the 2012 London Games? The Lumière brothers, who began the story of the moving picture with simple images of trains coming into a station and workers leaving a factory? Or Pierre de Coubertin, watching the millions of dollars being offered and being made by the sponsors and the highly commercial television operators? One thing is certain. These Games will generate new legends and they will be seen by the biggest television audience yet, using the latest and most dazzling television technology available, as they have throughout Olympic history.

Taylor Downing's book *Olympia* on Riefenstahl's film of the 1936 Berlin Games has recently been republished by BFI/Palgrave Macmillan. He has filmed at two Olympic Games.