

- **Sean Edgecomb**  
University of Queensland, Australia

# Inharmonious Pursuits: Performing Racism at the Olympic Games

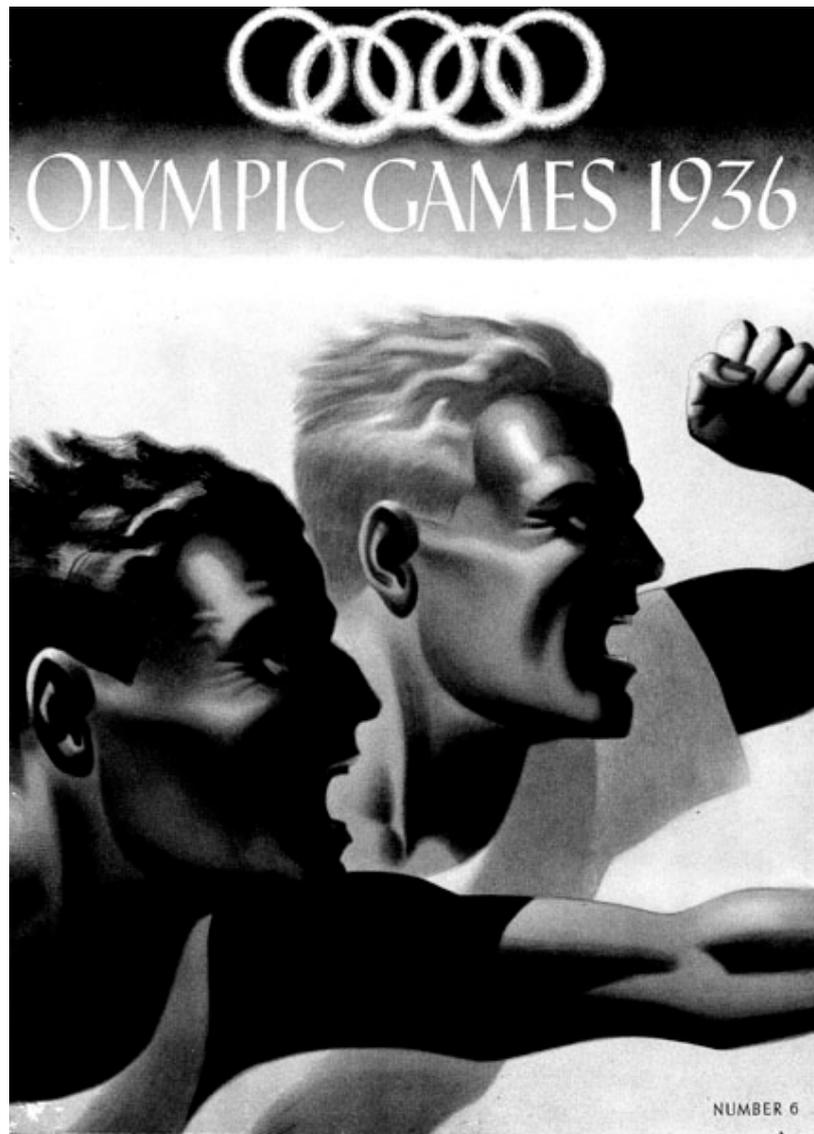
---

*In a 1935 radio address, Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic movement, elucidated his concept of the religio athletae when he stated, “the ancient as well as the modern Olympic Games have one most important feature in common: they are a religion.” By reconsidering Olympic ceremony as religious ritual, a new avenue of scholarship is opened whereby one may examine the dogma of Olympic performance in context to the history of popular entertainment. My study contrasts and compares the games of St. Louis 1904 and Berlin 1936. While the Berlin games or “Nazi Olympics” have long been remembered for their manipulation of the Thingspiel and nationalistic propaganda to promote white-supremacy, I argue that the often overlooked St. Louis games had a similar agenda, showcased in the performative competitions of “anthropology days” (which exploited “primitives” from around the world to support racial stratification). By engineering the religiosity and charisma of Olympism to support their own hegemonic ideologies, the organizers of the St. Louis and Berlin Games created a racist agenda in the midst of a celebration that was intended to be “a harmonious pursuit of physical, moral, cultural, and artistic excellence.” Sean Edgecomb is Convener of Creative Arts and a Lecturer in Drama at the University of Queensland. His research interests include Queer Theatre and Performance, Theatre Iconography and Reception Studies.*

---

*[the Olympics] bring us together and create peace and understanding among us.*  
-Lysias<sup>1</sup>

*Within the Olympic idea there inevitably develops [a]...conflict of the past  
with the future and of reality with the ideal.*  
-Carl Diem<sup>2</sup>



“Victorious Aryan Athlete”

*Official Publication of the Publicity Commission for the XI Olympics, No. 6., -  
Author’s collection*

### ***Introduction***

**T**hough the Olympic Games (both Ancient and Modern) have been immortalised as the zenith of achievement in sport since their inception in 776 B.C.E, from the beginning, art and performance have been essential counterpoints to athletic competition. When the Ancients hosted the sacred games on the lushly wooded plain of Olympia on the Peloponnese, the grand event was as dependent on religious ritual as it was athletic competition—for it was an endeavour in which homage to Zeus came before personal victory.<sup>3</sup> It was, after all, the Hellenic Greeks who revered the balance of *arete* (the perfection of physical performance) with *kalòk’agathía* (the perfect balance of beauty and goodness). Plato confirmed this idea in his *Symposium* when he stated, “from the love of the beautiful, has sprung every good thing in heaven and

earth.”<sup>4</sup> When the French pedagogue, Baron Pierre de Coubertin reinstated the games of the modern era when forming the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894, the nobleman and historian retained the aforementioned dichotomy of art and sport, naming the aims of the IOC as the “harmonious pursuit of physical, moral, cultural, and artistic excellence...regard[ing] the Olympic Games as the greatest expression of those values.”<sup>5</sup> It was, and still is, through the sweeping pageantry and theatrical presentation of the host countries, and not the actual athletic events, that the political ideologies and intentions of the nation are broadcast to the world through spectacle and design. In his seminal “Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle,” John McAloon suggests that this “ramified performance type [for] symbolic action” is, in fact, a hybrid meta-genre composed of “spectacle, festival, ritual and games.”<sup>6</sup> Through his analysis McAloon argues that the Modern Games and their spectacular ceremonies (opening and closing) should be read as festivals of nationalism on a global scale rather than simply as national festivals.

The Olympic idea grew from a cult of the body which developed as a source of nationalistic pride in the latter half of the 19th century as imperialism began to spread from late-Victorian Europe and America in what John F. Kasson refers to as “[the] embodiment [of] an ancient heroic ideal of manhood that had been lost in the modern world” and “a reaffirmation of male identity.”<sup>7</sup> This rise of physical culture was, in part, a reaction to a sedentary nature that developed among the 19th-century leisure class, composed of affluent people who spent a good deal more time in salons and drawing rooms than engaging in physically strenuous activity. Consequently, across Europe, series of systemic exercise regimens were devised, each new form differentiating itself from its predecessors by pulling upon distinctive national/cultural trends such as dance, folk tradition, athletics and models of military training.<sup>8</sup> Coubertin, inspired by a raft of such movements, created his own doctrine of Olympism as “the fraternity between the body and the soul” and wrote of it in his *Mémoires Olympiques* as “a religion with church, dogmas, and ritual...but, most of all with religious feelings.”<sup>9</sup> From this vantage Coubertin additionally developed the concept of the *religio athletae*, which he defined in a 1935 radio address:

The ancient as well as the modern Olympic Games have one most important feature in common: They are a religion. When working on his body with the help of physical education and sport—like the [sculptor] at a statue—the athlete in antiquity honored the gods. By doing the same today, the modern athlete honors his race, his homeland, and his flag. I think, I was right, therefore, when reconstituting the Olympic Games to have connected them with a religious spirit from the beginning. It is transformed and even elevated by internationalism and democracy—the features of our time—but basically it is still the same as in antiquity when the Games encouraged the Greek to employ all of his strength for the highest triumph at the feet of Zeus...the religious idea of sport, [is] the *religio athletae*...<sup>10</sup>

Coubertin’s idealistic doctrine and vision of these modern Olympic Games, though long-lasting, has come under a good deal of harsh criticism. Neo-Marxists

have denounced the Olympics as “a capitalist and technocratic social phenomenon”<sup>11</sup> and as an institution of the bourgeoisie. In 1976 the *New York Times*, for example, condemned the modern Olympics, describing them as:

[...] some thoroughly distasteful displays of political chauvinism, money-grubbing hucksterism and misplaced expenditure of many ideals. How much longer will it take a youthful generation of athletes the world over to realize how crassly they are being exploited by persons and organizations paying allegiance to less than noble goals.<sup>12</sup>

While the intention of this article is neither to idolise nor condemn the application of Coubertin’s original vision over the past century, this study will compare and contrast the performance and pageantry of the St Louis Games of 1904 and the Berlin Games of 1936. While the rhetoric through which these Games were respectively framed (and performed) bespoke widely divergent political perspectives (namely Democracy versus Fascism), they are disturbingly similar in their manipulations of the Olympic ideal to promote racism: white supremacy and nationalistic dominance through a ritualistic, charismatic, and theatrical practice of Olympism that Avery Brundage referred to as “a religion with universal appeal which incorporates all the basic values of other religions, a modern, exciting, virile, dynamic religion.”<sup>13</sup>

In taking on the idea of race/racism as a discourse it is important to heed Jeffrey Sammon’s warning: “Race is at best a confusing if not worthless term, and, at worst, a dangerous one.”<sup>14</sup> It is, however, essential for this study to very briefly outline concepts about race that were circulating during the early years of the Modern Olympic Games. At the turn of the 20th century the concept of race differed greatly from later categorisations based primarily on melatonin and variations of skin pigmentation derived from distinct continental origins (namely black, white, yellow and red).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, some racial identities which prevailed during the period (such as Italian-Catholic or Jewish) have faded away and been replaced by “the elaboration of new ones (Latino, Middle-Eastern), and the invention of the racial category “multi-racial.”<sup>16</sup>

It was at the Paris L’Exposition Universelle (1900) that Coubertin attended the premiere Congress of Colonial Sociology, which helped him to develop his own ideas about racial stratification. Susan Brownell argues that Coubertin’s hierarchal ordering of races (with white Europeans at the peak) was based on a “Republican humanism” that had risen out of the development of sociology in France’s Third Republic (1870-1940).<sup>17</sup> Coubertin was undeniably a man of his times, and though his humanistic drive for goodwill was progressive for the period, harshly racist sentiments contradictorily litter his published works.<sup>18</sup> It was also during this period that organised movements of Nordicism and Germanicism, which favoured light-haired and light-eyed Europeans from the north and west of Europe over their Eastern European counterparts, fermented.<sup>19</sup> Madison Grant (1865-1937), an American lawyer, expounded these ideas with evangelical fervour in *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916).<sup>20</sup> Grant’s work argued for Nordic superiority and supported, in part, a culture of imperialistically driven American-Anglo-Saxon dominance and the development

of supremacist groups such as the KKK, Aryan Nations and the White Patriot Party. Because Grant's book was published and widely distributed throughout German speaking Europe in 1925, it may be employed as a corroborative source to illuminate the fact that its discriminative philosophies served as a source for Hitler's Aryan master-race during the rise of the Third Reich, and that these theories had been well established across the globe in a variety of political climates decades before.

The 1936 Berlin Games have long been remembered for their role as the "first [games] overtly used as an instrument of ideological and nationalistic propaganda."<sup>21</sup> However, I argue that the performative aspects of the often overlooked St. Louis Games are equally important to consider in this context—not only in the history of politics and sport, but also for their noteworthy role in the history of popular entertainment as an expression of politically charged nationalism and patriotism. The Games of 1904 may, in fact, have been a warning sign and harbinger for what would take place thirty-years later in Berlin.

### ***I. Meet me in Saint Louis, Louis...***

*An exposition within an exposition: the greatest exhibition of the most marvelous Exposition in the history of the world.*

-William P Wilson, chairman of the  
United States Philippine Exposition Board<sup>22</sup>

At the centre of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of St. Louis in 1904 stood the colossal and majestic Festival Hall, which the Official Souvenir Publication of the Fair<sup>23</sup> referred to as "the central and crowning glory of the grandeurs of the World's Fair, no photograph and no pen can do justice."<sup>24</sup> High atop the gilded dome of this grand building stood Evelyn Longman's classically inspired statue "Victorious Athlete"—an appropriate symbol for the Olympics which were taking place as a definitive attraction within the World's Fair.

Initially the 1904 Olympics were intended to take place in the rapidly expanding, new, mid-western capital city, Chicago. After a visit to the Windy City during the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, Coubertin was enamoured with and inspired to reward Chicago with an invitation to host the games. Subsequently, however, the Company President of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, David R. Francis pressured Coubertin (with the support of the sports-crazed American President, Teddy Roosevelt) to move the games to the St. Louis World's Fair.<sup>25</sup> This "encouragement" was accompanied by a broad threat that if the Olympics were indeed held in Chicago as originally planned, the organisers of the World's Fair would create their own sporting events and competitions—stealing away both competitors and attendees from the true IOC-approved games.<sup>26</sup> Four years earlier the Parisian Olympics had notoriously played second fiddle to L'Exposition Universelle de 1900; thus Coubertin was justly afraid of a recurrent vulgarising of the Olympics due the fact that the Games were about to take place in the same context. Originally Coubertin saw the Olympics of 1900 as

the opportunity to bring the glory of Ancient Olympia to the nation of his birth, including the construction of a marble neo-classical city where all of the sporting competitions would take place and be highlighted as uniquely "Olympic." However, when a new committee was appointed under the larger planning body of the Exposition in 1898, these grand designs were scrapped, and the Olympic movement at the Exposition became unrecognisable, lost amidst hundreds of other sporting events and competitions. In order to try and avoid having his Olympic vision take a back-seat to the hoopla of the 1904 World's Fair, Coubertin demanded that all sporting events at the Fair should be labeled as "Olympic," which in turn prompted Games director and American Athletic Union president, James E. Sullivan to refer to any and all competitive contests (whether amateur, university, or pseudo-professional) as Olympian. This resulted in a spectacle that was as far from Coubertin's ideal of Olympism and the *religio athletae* as possible, leaving some modern scholars to declare St. Louis as "the worst in the history of the Olympic movement."<sup>27</sup>

Opening on July 4, 1904 and overshadowed by the patriotic frenzy of Independence Day, the third Olympiad had none of the theatrical pomp and circumstance of the contemporary Games. Instead, the sporting events of these Olympics were indistinguishable from the displays and exhibitions that composed the bulk of the Fair. American victory in the Spanish-American War six years earlier (1898) had led to a new sense of national pride based in the spirit of imperialism, paired with notions of Anglo-Saxon dominance. Thus, the exhibits, display halls, sculpture, and the Pike (midway) of the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis were constructed to reflect a catholic "manifest destiny" that was arguably even more poignant in 1904 than it had been one-hundred-and-one years before when the Louisiana Purchase was finalised.<sup>28</sup> Robert Rydell has referred to "the national cult of strenuous living, or 'the gospel of muscles'"<sup>29</sup> that developed from this newfound American pride and that subsequently promulgated the creation of a Department of Physical Culture (DPC) in the United States. While St. Louis World's Fair DPC director Frederick J.V. Skiff wanted to utilise the 1904 Olympic Games to reflect "America's preoccupation with sports and athletics,"<sup>30</sup> what did in fact dominate the games in popularity and financial success was the public's keen interest in the valuable spoils of the Spanish-American War: the human capital of "natives," "savages," and "barbarians." Therefore the most popular exhibit at the Fair was the Philippine Reservation, an ethnological village featuring twelve hundred Filipinos in a walled forty-seven acre village. In addition, the Filipinos, who drew a great deal of attention for their "savagery," scant garments, and appetite for dog meat from the local pound, also represented valuable resources and wealth that had been gained by American victory in the South Pacific. The Filipino display, as well as all of the other ethnological villages at the fair, (including Pygmies from Africa, Patagonians from Argentina, Ainu from Japan and dozens of Native American tribes) constituted a "Congress of Races."<sup>31</sup> In this context, the "Congress"

essentially became an "Olympic Congress," with all physical activities, exercises and competitions within the villages directly associated with the Games, as decreed by Coubertin in an effort to save the reputation of the International Olympic Committee after Paris in 1900.

The display of these peoples in St. Louis was largely a success, and the key component to the demoralising of Olympism in favour of promoting a new wave of white supremacy that would encourage the eugenics movement: the corrupt crusade which manipulated Social Darwinism and Christianity to advance racial cleansing and would, in turn, ironically inspire Adolf Hitler only a few decades later. As Edwin Black suggests:

Only after eugenics became entrenched in the United States was the campaign transplanted into Germany, in no small measure through the efforts of eugenicists, who published booklets and circulated them to German officials and scientists. Hitler tried to legitimise his anti-Semitism by medicalising it, and wrapping it in the more palatable pseudoscientific facade of eugenics. Hitler was able to recruit more followers among reasonable Germans by claiming that science was on his side. While Hitler's race hatred sprung from his own mind, the intellectual outlines of the eugenics Hitler adopted in 1924 were made in America.<sup>32</sup>

Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler explicate the connection between the "racialist rhetoric of [ethnological] exhibits [that] fed into eugenics," as well as the anthropological support for the movement as a "Triumph of Progress [for] the emergence of white Americans as naturally superior world leaders."<sup>33</sup> In short, the anthropological displays that were wrapped up in Olympism in 1904, were unknowingly a link in an ideological chain that would appear two decades after the close of the St. Louis Fair.

The man responsible for the ethnological displays in St. Louis was WJ McGee (who preferred his abbreviated name without periods), a preeminent anthropologist and a strong supporter of racial categorisation and segregation. In an 1893 address he said: "It is a matter of common observation that the white man can *do* more and better than the yellow, the yellow man better than the red or black."<sup>34</sup> He also argued that "human culture is becoming unified, not only through diffusion but through the extinction of the lower grades..."<sup>35</sup> and proclaimed "it is the duty of the strong man to subjugate lower nature, to extirpate the bad and cultivate the good among living things..."<sup>36</sup> The World's Fair and Olympics of 1904 provided the perfect forum for McGee to exercise his vision of ethnic improvement. McGee (referred to as "the overlord of the savage world" in Fair publicity)<sup>37</sup> did not want to literally exterminate races of "lesser grades," but instead "believed that primitive people would become proficient in a short time if they were properly trained and instructed."<sup>38</sup> The culmination of performance, sport, "anthropological science," and Anglo-Saxon supremacy took place on August 12 and 13 in an event christened, "Anthropology Days" that also included events labeled "Savage Games" and "Barbarian Games." This bizarre display, using the methods and garnering the excitement of a traveling carnival sideshow included:

...standard track and field events, including the 100-yard dash, shot put, running broad jump, baseball throw, and 56 pound weight throw...The second day's activities included events supposedly geared to primitive sports. The day began with a telegraph pole climbing contest and included a javelin throwing contest, tug-of-war, a 1-mile run, and archery. The

pygmies concluded the day's activities with a demonstration of their "shinny" and then divided up for a "mud fight."<sup>39</sup>

"Anthropology Days" were organised by McGee and Sullivan who hoped the event would draw masses of curious spectators.<sup>40</sup> It proved to be a financial and critical success, merging a supposed scientific study that the *St Louis World* referred to as "a good example of what brown men are capable of doing with training."<sup>41</sup> While McGee had assumed that the event would prove an impressive example of the kind of physicality at which "primitives" had great prowess, the spectators instead viewed a group of untrained and disinterested participants whose physical skills had been lessened by the sedentary lifestyles they lived in their assigned quarters—the ethnological villages at the Fair. Other than their display of flesh, which must have been especially titillating in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (which still clung to conservative late-Victorian aesthetics and moral codes), the athletes were wholly unsuccessful and unimpressive. This led Sullivan to conclude that "primitive people had neither good natural athletic skills nor the intelligence to make team sports work," and the event was taken as scientific proof that Anglo-Saxons (and even more so Americans—whom McGee referred to as the only countrymen with "full blown enlightenment"<sup>42</sup>) were indeed the dominant race. Additionally, due to Coubertin's unfortunate mistake of requiring all athletic events within the Fair to bear the label Olympic, the average American viewer must have found it difficult if not impossible to comprehend the original purpose and true intention of the Games—a celebration of "peaceful internationalism."<sup>43</sup>

As a popular and financially successful component of the Olympics of 1904, the organisers of "Anthropology Days," McGee and Sullivan, manipulated the doctrine of Olympism to reflect their own vision of America. White bourgeois American spectators who made up the majority of attendees, were able to confirm their own racial and nationalistic supremacy over the pagan primitives they observed. In some sense each spectator took on the role of the *religio athletae*. As givers of democracy and Christian compassion, and bedecked in the laurels of world economic and military power, the high-buttoned fair-goers of 1904 were the visitors of the Olympic Games and the world, because the entire Fair (from which the Olympics were indistinguishable), watched over by Longman's perfect champion, was constructed to reflect and celebrate this very dominance. The most telling demonstration of this took place in the awards ceremonies for the "Anthropology Day" victors. While athletes in the standard sporting events were presented with the traditional gold, silver, or bronze medals, the "primitives" were given small American Flags—to make known the gift which they had been given: the opportunity to live, compete, and "improve" in the midst of their "scientifically"-confirmed superiors and one of the most powerful nations in the world. Coubertin did not attend the games. He was put off by the fact that his dream was going to be polluted by the economically driven World's Fair, and was even more disgusted when he was informed of the Anthropological Games. In his memoir he recounts, "As for that outrageous charade, it will lose its appeal when black men, red man and yellow men learn to run, jump, and throw and leave the white man far behind them."<sup>44</sup> While Coubertin's statement is poignant and prophetic, it also stands as a testament to

remind us of the Utopian vision on which he was dependent to promote the Olympics. As soon as they became a commercial entity and a forum for national and political propaganda through performance for the masses, the Games metamorphosed into a different organism all together. This would become all too apparent when the German precision of the Nazi party made the religion of Olympism fit its own politically motivated agenda in the rally-like opening ceremonies of the Berlin Games of 1936.

## ***II. Ich rufe die Jugend der Welt!***<sup>45</sup>

*Hoist up our flags  
In the wind of the morning.  
To those who are idle  
Let them flutter a warning.*

-First verse of the *Flag March*,  
Olympic Opening Ceremony, Berlin 1936

Whereas the racist agenda recognisable at the Olympic Games of Saint Louis was due to contemporary imperialistic attitudes paired with a chaotic, turn-of-the-century, “more is more” exhibition aesthetic, the 1936 Games were marked by the operational precision and intentional functionality of the Third Reich. Berlin was originally selected to host the Games in 1916, but when they were postponed due to World War I, it was not until 1928 that the city was chosen again to host the Games of the XIth Olympiad. This selection took place five years before Adolf Hitler rose to the position of Chancellor of the Weimar Republic in January 1933. Upon coming to power, Hitler immediately realised the potential of this global event to project his propaganda-driven vision of the new National Socialist Germany. The use of art to manipulate the Nazi agenda at the Olympics was stressed in 1935 in a pre-games edition of the *Official Publication of the Publicity Commission for the XI. Olympic Games*, in which the Nazi propagandist, Dr. Kurt Biebrach stated, “the artist must be so filled with the [Olympic] that it becomes a part of him.”<sup>46</sup> Equally seductive, Coubertin’s ideal of the Olympic religion and the *religio athletae* was intoxicatingly appealing to Hitler. This concept was used to support a cultist idealisation of the Aryan youth, symbol of the Third Reich, and as Hitler considered it, the direct descendent of the Hellenic Greeks. To hyperbolise the persona of Aryan youth, the Nazi propagandists invented the idea of the Olympic torch run and lighting in order to “heighten last minute interests in the games... [and] to put the Nazis in line with the Greeks, seeing themselves as legitimate heirs of Sparta.”<sup>47</sup> This proposed genealogical tie to the Greeks, which was intended as a symbol of white supremacy, became the source of all aesthetic and performance aspects of the 1936 Games, culminating in the Berlin Games Organising committee chief, Carl Diem’s grandiose commissioned *Thingspiel*, entitled *Olympic Youth*, after the opening ceremony had taken place.<sup>48</sup>

The *Thingspiel* Movement in Germany grew out of a call for a new performance genre that would guide the spirit of Nationalist Socialist Reform on a grand scale. Eventually *Thingspiel* became the National Drama of Nazi Germany

when the party seized the opportunity to manipulate an already proven and effective form of alternative drama. Inspired by the assembly of pre-Christian Germanic tribes and by Germany's medieval and early modern theatrical heritage, Eberhard Wolfgang Möller, arguably the father of the *Thingspiel* movement, wanted this original theatrical genre to act as a new state theatre, which would in turn offer "official political and aesthetic guidelines"<sup>49</sup> to the German *volk*. Just as party rallies operated as charismatic and cult-like forums for the Nazi cause, the *Thingspiel* would act as a metaphor for the growing strength and immensity of the Nazi cultural-political machine, inspiring writers of grand pageants to work towards what Wilhelm von Schramm referred to as the penultimate exemplar of socialism, the "total authoritarian state."<sup>50</sup>

Before going into further detail of Diem's pageant, first it is necessary to examine the artificial environment that was so carefully constructed for exhibition to the world (and which supported Diem's *Thingspiel*) during the Berlin Olympics. Although Hitler's anti-Semitic campaign was widely developed by the summer of 1936, the Führer's Propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, was cautious about how the Nazi regime would be presented. Thus, on August 1, the anti-Semitic cause was suppressed with what Olympic scholar Arnd Krüger refers to as "the 'pause' on Jew-baiting."<sup>51</sup> On May 23, 1936 the Nazi Minister of Food and Agriculture, Walther Darré, sent a circular to the public which stated that:

In no case must Jewish provocateurs get a chance of creating incidents which will add grist to the mill of hostile propagandists abroad. For this reason all signs posted in the fight against Jewry must be removed for the period in question.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, under the overall command of puppet-master Carl Diem, the Games became a virtual masquerade "show[ing] Hitler's State not only as a peace loving host for the world's youth but also a refuge for physical fitness and home to a body cult..."<sup>53</sup> Public spaces that had been covered in Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda were now draped in yards of red, swastika-emblazoned banners and monuments were festooned with laurel wreaths. Iconographic images of the victorious Aryan athlete were numerous, not only in the fatherland, but all over the world. In response to rumours that the U.S. Olympic Committee would remove its athletes and boycott the Games due to Hitler's increasingly inhuman treatment of Jews, a series of publications in English were produced specifically for the United States. The purpose was to foreshadow the greatness that the games had in store for its world-wide audience, while also publicly broadcasting the Reich's intentions of international goodwill. Coubertin, only a year away from his death, was thrilled by the German commitment to the games, and in a radio address for the French Press stated, "...what is the difference whether you use the Games to advertise southern Californian weather for the sake of tourism, or a political regime? The most important thing is that the Games are celebrated in a decent manner."<sup>54</sup>

Though retrospectively it is easy to see that Coubertin had been duped by the Nazis' lies, it is inarguable that Diem's *Thingspiel* was nothing short of awe-

inspiring in sheer size and production. After the rather reserved yet commanding opening ceremony, which relied heavily on rituals in reference to the tie between the ancient Greek and modern Germany, German Olympic Committee president, Theodor Lewald, delivered the “torch speech”:

In a few minutes the torchbearer will appear to light the Olympic fire on the tripod, when it will rise, flaming to heaven for the weeks of this festival. It creates a real spiritual bond between our German fatherland and the sacred places of Greece founded nearly 4,000 years ago by Nordic immigrants.<sup>55</sup>

Along with thousands of visible members of the *Hitler-Jugend* (selectively chosen for their Aryan appearances) the ceremony concluded at 6:00pm with a performance of Schilling’s *Hallelujah Chorus*, encouraging the spectators to file out in order that the stadium could be prepared for Diem’s “Pageant of Youth,” aptly titled, *Olympic Youth*, that was to commence at 9:00pm. As the clock struck the precise hour and night began to fall, the performance began as 10,000 adolescent children, clad in diaphanous garments as ancient Greeks, filed into the stadium illuminated by fire and search lights. The production, inspired in part by the religiosity of the Olympics, was also pseudo-religious, and undeniably cult-like. In his *Politik der Symbole—Symbole der Politik*, Rudiger Voigt wrote of the ceremony:

The magical circle of the historical old and the godly pious hovers over the modern incarnation of the Olympic games...the sound of bells, fanfare, oaths, flags, doves, symbols of light, signal consecration equal to that of a church festival without being the imitation of such, over everything rests a deep sense of emotion, comparable to a most religious hour.<sup>56</sup>

Additionally, Möller, as a spectator of Diem’s grand pageant, wrote:

The first night of the Olympic Games was given over to the performance in the Olympic Stadium of Dr. Diem’s *Olympic Youth*, a four part spectacular. The last episode, “Heroic Struggle and Death Lament” opens with the entry of two “phalanxes of dancing warriors...From their ranks emerge two leaders, encountering each other in a duel constructed as a dance. (Both die in the duel.) The fallen heroes are born away from the arena in a solemn procession, while at the same time a long procession of wailing women fills up the whole space and performs the ‘Lamentation,’ dancing slowly.”<sup>57</sup>

The pageant culminated as the choral leader sang over the wails of the mourners:

Of all games  
The holy purpose  
prosperity of the fatherland  
the fatherland’s highest command  
when in demand/ self-sacrifice.<sup>58</sup>

With the strains of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony the finale erupted as "High up in the sky [shone] the rays of the gigantic searchlights and form[ed] a vault-like dome...[as] flames of fire encircled the edge of the Stadium."<sup>59</sup> The audience parted, enchanted and brain-washed by what they had seen. One English observer noted, "It is impossible to recreate in words the effect of this production. Whoever has heard the bugle call, knows the particular emotional effect which is produced by pure mass movement, floods of color and echoing sounds..."<sup>60</sup>

The immense scale of *Olympic Youth* successfully accomplished what it had intended—a reorientation for the audience. Watching the performance in the round and surrounded by the patriotic propaganda of the fatherland, the audience became a part of the grand spectacle resulting in a celebration that combined elements of processions, cavalcades, assemblies, tableaux vivants, parades, dance, and festivals in order to create what Henning Eichberg refers to as "an eclectic *Gesamtkunstwerk* [and] a didactic political play."<sup>61</sup> Even anti-Fascist Berthold Brecht had prophetically commented on the power and purpose of such a *Thingspiel* in the shadow of athletic events ten years before the Berlin games and prior to going into European exile, stating, "Our hope is based on the sports public. Our sights are set—let us not deny it—on those huge cement arenas filled with 15,000 people of all classes and with the most varied facial features, the smartest and fairest public in the whole world...the old theatre, on the other hand becomes faceless."<sup>62</sup>

While the majority opinion of both participants and audiences of the games was initially overwhelmingly supportive, as the games pressed on for the first two weeks of August, 1936, foreign observers began to fear the intentions that were brewing amidst the spectacular theatrics and rampant propaganda. One British Foreign Officer eerily remarked:

The [Germans] are the most formidable proposition that has ever been formulated; they are in strict training now, not for the Olympic Games, but for breaking some other and emphatically unsporting world records, and perhaps the world as well.<sup>63</sup>

Long after they were over, the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games would remain infamous for their spectacular theatrics which were recorded in the cinematographically brilliant documentary *Olympia* by Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's favorite filmmaker. *Olympia* stands as an aesthetic example of the aforementioned marriage of sport and beauty with its two parts: *Fest der Volker* (Festival of Nations) and *Fest der Schonheit* (Festival of Beauty). Just as this dichotomy is apparent in Diem's *Thingspiel*, it also acts as a caveat for what Richard Mandell refers to as the "Olympic paradox," where the games are in a constant tug of war between "intensified patriotism while concurrently encouraging internationalism, two...diametrically opposed political components."<sup>64</sup> It was, after all, only four weeks after the Berlin Olympics had concluded that Hitler approved a "four year plan" outlining his preparations for genocide and war.

## Conclusion

The use of the Olympics, ritualistic Olympism, and the *religio athletae* to project nationhood and patriotism goes hand in hand with Coubertin's original Olympic Oath, which read "for the honor of my fatherland, and the glory of sport,"<sup>65</sup> though, in this case, the father of the modern Olympics obviously did not consider the irony and implausibility of these words calling for international unification in context to a world so disjointed in political ideology and intention. The games of St. Louis 1904 and Berlin 1936 are intriguing to study and compare in their projections of white-supremacy in performance and aesthetic, but they are, of course, completely different. The work of WJ McGee was perhaps as based on ignorance as much as it was on intolerance. Carol Diaz-Granados makes a poignant case for this when stating, "When we look at the St. Louis World's Fair [and games] we have to put on that turn-of- the century mentality to understand why people did what they did and said what they did and why things were as they were..."<sup>66</sup> The political climate of America in 1904 was one of dominant imperialism and surrounded by what I have coined as the "invisible veil of patriarchal history." This concept refers to "bigoted views of race and gender that were placed [unknowingly] on society."<sup>67</sup> The performance within the Nazi Olympics, on the other hand, while remarkable for its grandiosity, precision, and theatrical concepts was simply a polished veneer over a composition of Fascist manipulation. Just as we must continue to study the racism and intolerance that composes so much of the world history, we must also continue to study the darker side of the Olympics and its role in history as a popular entertainment for the masses. In turn, we may begin to better understand the power of this unique and hybrid form of spectacle/festival/ritual while attempting to metamorphose the Olympic Games in the pursuit of true international goodwill, even within a competitive forum.

---

<sup>1</sup> John D. Clare, ed., *Ancient Greece* (New York: Gulliver Books/ Harcourt Brace, 1994), 16.

<sup>2</sup> John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle, eds., *Historical Dictionary of the Modern Olympic Movement* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Though the Olympic Games are the most well-known due to their modern reinstatement, the Greeks of the Hellenic Age had a complete periodos or circuit of religious games, titled the Panhellenic Games, which all most certainly included ritualistic performance. These included: the Nemean Games held at Nemea in honour of Zeus, the Isthmian Games held at Corinth in honour of Poseidon, the Pythian Games held at Delphi in honour of Apollo, and finally the Olympic Games at Olympia also in honour of Zeus.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, ed. K.J. Dover (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Juan Antonio Samaranch, in an introductory letter entitled "The Founding Vision," in Susan Wels, *The Olympic Spirit: 100 Years of the Games* (San Francisco: Collins Publishers San Francisco, 1995), 6.

<sup>6</sup> John McAloon, "Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle," in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Ritual: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John McAloon (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1984), 241-280.

<sup>7</sup> Hungarian bodybuilder, Eugen Sandow rose to fame in Europe and America as the "perfect man" at the same time that Coubertin founded the International Olympic Committee. John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and The Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Such movements included British Muscular Christianity (which found its way across the Atlantic to Canada and the United States via dedicated evangelical followers), German Turnverein, Czech Sokol, the Swedish System, and several other systems which bore the names of their founders, including: Desbonnet in France, Macfadden in the U.S. and Bjelke-Peteren's "Physie" in Australia. Extensive scholarly attention has been given to these movements, including: Patricia Vertinsky and Jennifer Hargreaves, *Physical Culture, Power, and the Body* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006) and Jan Todd, *Physical Culture & Body Beautiful* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999). One of the largest repositories of scholarly works and material artefacts relating to physical culture may be found in the Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection housed in the Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports at The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre de Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques* (Lausanne: Payot, 1931), 102.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre de Coubertin, "Les assises philosophique de l'Olympisme moderne," *Le Sport Suisse* 31:7 (Aug 1935): 1.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Segrave and Donald Chu, eds., *Olympism* (Champaign IL: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1981), xix.

<sup>12</sup> "The dying flame..." *New York Times*, 2 August, 1976, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by A. Guttman in *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Game* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey T. Sammons, "Race and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination," *Journal of Sport History* 21:3 (1994): 203-78.

<sup>15</sup> The understanding of race at the turn of the 20th century was largely derived from polygenism, which became the primary system for pluralistic, racial categorisations of peoples with origins made distinct by global zones and climate. The theory of polygenism was disseminated in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and America with the rise of ethnography, archaeology and anthropology as distinct scientific disciplines. Supported by Darwinism, polygenism was debated as the counterpoint to monogenism, the belief that all peoples were derived from one race (Adam and Eve in the Judeo-Christian tradition). In support of polygenism, Karl Vogt (1817-1895), the German-Swiss scientist, posited that each race had evolved from a distinct simian ancestor. Recent critical studies of polygenism and 19<sup>th</sup>-century racial categorisation include: John P. Jackson Jr. and Nadine M. Weidman, *Race, Racism and Science* (Piscataway NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), David N. Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion and the Politics of Human Origins* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), and Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery and the quest for human origins* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Marks, "The Growth of Scientific Standards from Anthropology Days to Present Days," in *The 1904 Anthropology Days and Olympic Games: Sport, Race and American Imperialism*, ed. Susan Brownell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 388.

<sup>17</sup> Brownell, *The 1904 Anthropology*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> As a journalist, amateur historian and supporter of sport as a key component to educational reform, Coubertin was a visionary for his time, but also a supporter of late-19th century attitudes which might be read in retrospect as racist and elitist. Otto J. Schantz presents a compelling analysis of Coubertin in context to the social trends and political movements his time, analysing all relevant documents in which Coubertin spoke on the subject of race from 1888 to 1937. Otto J. Schantz, "Pierre de Coubertin's Concepts of Race, Nation and Civilization," in Brownell, *The 1904 Anthropology*, 156-188.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>20</sup> Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916).

<sup>21</sup> David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 15.

<sup>22</sup> *World's Fair Bulletin* 4, October, 1904 (St. Louis: Sam'l F. Myerson Printing Co., 1904), in the Freer Collection of World's Fair Memorabilia in the Rare Books Department of the Boston Public Library.

<sup>23</sup> *World's Fair Bulletin* 4..

<sup>24</sup> Robert A. Reid, ed., *The Universal Exposition Beautifully Illustrated: Official Publication* (St. Louis: Sam'l F. Myerson Printing Co., 1904), 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> The St. Louis World's Fair took place to celebrate the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase (1803), but after a series of delays, the exhibition took place a year late in 1904. The Louisiana

Purchase had taken place when the United States purchased a large tract of land (now fifteen states and parts of two Canadian provinces) from France for 15 million dollars. The sale, which was the result of an economically struggling Napoleonic France, was considered to be one of the most important events of Thomas Jefferson's (1743-1826) presidency. Geographically and ideologically it helped seal America's place as a world power by opening the American West and claiming the Mississippi River as an internal American governed trade route, and doubling the size of the infant nation.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 155.

<sup>27</sup> Findling and Pelle, *Historical Dictionary*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> The term "Manifest Destiny" was introduced in 1845 by John L. O'Sullivan in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. Originally a concept supported by the Democratic Party, it argued that the United States was fated (by a Christian God) to expand westward across the continent to the Pacific. By the end of the 19th century it came to represent the spread of American democracy and socio-political ideology across the globe, particularly through colonisation and imperialism (such as the Spanish American War (1898)). The meaning of Manifest Destiny has continued to transform throughout the last century. Julius Pratt, "The Origin of "Manifest Destiny," *American Historical Review*, (July 1927): 795-98.

<sup>29</sup> Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 155.

<sup>30</sup> George Matthews and Sandra Marshall, *St. Louis Olympics: 1904* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 11.

<sup>31</sup> Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* (Washington D.C.: Dialog Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology goes to the fair: the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 401.

<sup>34</sup> W.J. McGee, "The Trend of Human Progress," *American Anthropologist* (July 1899): 401-47.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *World's Fair Bulletin* 4.

<sup>38</sup> Findling and Pelle, *Historical Dictionary*, 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> While various accounts have different interpretations of the success of the event—it did in fact draw 30,000 spectators over two days.

<sup>41</sup> *St Louis World*, "Anthropology Games," 14 August, 1904, 2.

<sup>42</sup> McGee, "The Trend of Human Progress," 425.

<sup>43</sup> Findling and Pelle, *Historical Dictionary*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques*, 122.

<sup>45</sup> This call is still a required protocol of the Olympic Closing Ceremony: "I declare the Games of the ... Olympiad closed and, in accordance with tradition, I call upon the youth of the world to assemble four years from now at ... to celebrate with us there the Games of the ... Olympiad." It has been part of the Olympic closing ceremonial tradition since the advent of the Modern Games. International Olympic Committee, *The Modern Olympic Games* (Lucerne: The Olympic Museum, 2007), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Kurt Biebrach, "The Olympics Art Competitions," in *Official Publication of the Publicity Commission for the XI Olympic Games*, No. 5, ed. Friedrich Richter (Berlin: Buch und Tiefdruck, 1935), 1-7.

<sup>47</sup> Jim Riordan and Arnd Krüger, eds., *The International Politics of Sport in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: E. and F.N. Spon, 1999), 14.

<sup>48</sup> "During the four years of its life (1933-1937), the Thingspiel, in both visionary theory and unfulfilled practice, was a grandiose dramatic work whose guiding spirit was National Socialism...The word "Thingspiel" itself was chosen with regard to the political and era evoking aims: "Spiel" in this context means simply a dramatic work, a play; "Thing" is derived from the archaic word "Ding" meaning "assembly" and connoting the sacred assembly of the pre-Christian Germanic tribes, where the racially unified people (das Volk) passed judgment. Translated in its purest sense, "Thingspiel" means "play of Volk judgment." Glen Gadberry, "The Thingspiel and Das Frankenberger Würfelspiel," *The Drama Review: TDR* 24:1 (March 1980): 104-114.

<sup>49</sup> Gadberry, "The Thingspiel," 104.

- 
- <sup>50</sup> Wilhelm von Schramm, *Nebau des deutschen Theatres* (Berlin: Ergebnisse und Forderungen, 1934) trans. Henning Eichberg, *New German Critique* 11 (Spring 1977): 133-150.
- <sup>51</sup> Arnd Krüger, "Germany: The Propaganda Machine," in *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s*, eds. Arnd Krüger and William Murray (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 25.
- <sup>52</sup> Walther Darré, official circular, 23 May 1936, in Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games: The 1936 Olympics* (New York: Harper and Roe, 1986), 124.
- <sup>53</sup> Findling and Pelle, *Historical Dictionary*, 84.
- <sup>54</sup> Riordan and Krüger, *The International Politics of Sport*, 15-16.
- <sup>55</sup> John Robert Gold and Margaret M. Gold, *Cities of Culture: Staging International Festivals and the Urban Agenda, 1851-2000* (Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 170.
- <sup>56</sup> Findling and Pelle, *ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> Eberhard Wolfgang Möller, in Gadberry, "The Thingspiel," 113.
- <sup>58</sup> Findling and Pelle, *ibid.*
- <sup>59</sup> Gadberry, "The Thingspiel," *ibid.*
- <sup>60</sup> Geoffrey Evans, "Towards a New Drama in Germany: A Survey of the Years 1933-37," *German Life and Letters*, 2:3 (April 1938): 188-200.
- <sup>61</sup> Henning Eichberg, "The Nazi Thingspiel: Theater for the Masses in Facism and Proletariat Culture," *New German Critique*, No. 11, (Spring 1977): 134.
- <sup>62</sup> Eugen Berthold Brecht, "Mehr guten Sport," *Schriften zum Theatre* 1 (Feb 2, 1926): 81-84.
- <sup>63</sup> Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games*, 227.
- <sup>64</sup> Richard Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 287.
- <sup>65</sup> Karel Wendl, "The Olympic Oath a Brief History," *Citius, Altius, Fortius: The Journal of Olympic History*, (Winter 1995), 4-5.
- <sup>66</sup> Carol Diaz-Granados in *The World's Greatest Fair: World's Fair Saint Louis, 1904*, produced and directed by Scott Huegerich and Bob Miano. 113 min., Civil Pictures and Technisonic Studios, 2004, DVD.
- <sup>67</sup> Sean Edgecomb, "It was simply human": *Gender Subversion in Children's Performance* (Zagreb: CESI, 2006), 112.