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GENDERED OLYMPIC VIRTUALITY

According to Hogan (2003), the *interpretive program* component of recent Olympic Games opening ceremonies constitute an evocative stage for the ethnic and gender inflected performance of the *home* nation. These ceremonies are directed to internal and external audiences alike, and for contrasting purposes, including the advancement of specific political propaganda, corporate investment, or tourism marketing objectives. Given the global visibility of such national stagings (Hogan, 2003), it was perhaps surprising that the interpretive program for the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympic Games should have been so white and masculinist in its orientation. For instance:

> A key theme running throughout the interpretive program was humanity's relationship to and ultimate victory over nature. This was exemplified particularly in the "Fire Within" segments around which the interpretive program was structured. In the first of these segments, the "Child of Light," a young White boy struggled to make his way through a raging winter storm. A White man representing the fire within helped guide the boy to safety. The segment was a parable of humanity's (and America's) search for strength and meaning and the triumph of human will in the face of adversity. In this sense, the story was timeless and universal. Nonetheless, the fact that White males personified both humanity/America (the child) and its will and drive (the fire within) reveals the extent to which White male perspectives and experiences are still dominant in discourses of American identity. (Hogan, 2003, pp. 115–116)

Foregoing the opportunity to represent the US in more ethnic and gender inclusive terms, and in the context of the political and cultural tumult resulting from the events of September 11, 2001 (Falcous & Silk, 2005; Silk & Falcous, 2005), Salt Lake City's performance positioned a familiar sense of white "national manhood" (Nelson, 1998) at the heart of the nation's (and indeed of humanity's) origins.

At a time when the Olympic movement regularly congratulates itself for its move toward greater gender equality, usually expressed in terms of the growing numbers of female participants, the Olympic Games act as a context and mechanism for normalizing particular gender discourses and relations. The opening ceremonies are only the initial, yet one of the most visible, vehicles through which the Olympic movement could, if it were so inclined, choose to depict gender and gender differences in a more progressive light (hence, the disappointment of the Salt Lake City debacle). Regardless of the organization's proclivity—or indeed antipathy—toward a more emancipatory gender politics, the representation of the Games by the commercially oriented popular media habitually advances a more traditionally gendered Olympic reality.

As numerous researchers have shown, the various strands of Olympic Games media coverage routinely resonate with, and indeed advance, the essentialist and hierarchically ordered notions of differential gender identities, practices, and experiences, which reside all too comfortably within the popular imaginary (Billings, Eastman, & Newton, 1998; Borcila, 2000; Chisholm, 1999; Duncan, 1990; Higgs, Weiller, & Martin, 2003; Jones, Murrel, & Jackson, 1999; Urquhart, & Crossman, 1999). In seeking to make a contribution to this established body of work, this chapter concentrates on the NBC's coverage of the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta. Specifically, it examines how and why NBC consciously advanced traditionally feminine codes within, and through, the content and structure of its primetime televisual discourse. This involves appropriating elements of French cultural commentator Jean Baudrillard's provocative contemporary cultural theorizing as a suggestive framework for examining the nature and influence of the mass-mediated sport spectacles that dominate, and define, the representational politics of American sporting culture.

In 1991, Baudrillard wrote a series of articles in the French radical newspaper *Libération* focused on the Gulf War being "[p]romotional, speculative, virtual" (1995, p. 30). Published in English and collected in 1995 under the title *The Gulf War Did Not Happen* (Baudrillard, 1995), these writings created a welter of criticism even for an author thoroughly familiar with stirring intellectual controversy (see Norris, 1992; Rojek and Turner, 1993; Woods, 1992). Yet, Baudrillard's primary thesis was hardly controversial. His main thrust was not to deny that over 100,000 people lost their lives in this conflict, but rather that the "reality of the media Gulf War" (Patton, 1995, p. 16) deviated from the actual experience of events as they unfolded. It was in this sense that Baudrillard asserted that the Gulf War did not take place for, on the level through which the conflict was consumed by its global television viewership, it was "a masquerade of information: branded

faces delivered over to the prostitution of the image" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 40). Hence, in texts intended to problematize what Kellner (1992) described as the "Persian Gulf TV War," Baudrillard (1995) sought to intervene into the uncritical appropriation of the simulated televisual discourse that framed the conflict within the global popular imaginary.

Within his Gulf War analysis Baudrillard adopted an interpretive method that fused the destabilizing influence of Brechtian paradox with the unsettling "fatal strategy" of taking radical notions to their [il]logical extremes (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 180). Such epistemological and ontological radicalism has proved distressing to mainstream academicians, many of whose careers, and thereby lives, have clung to the hope of developing theoretical understandings that will definitively represent and explain the complexities of social reality. Baudrillard, in contrast, has shunned the scholarly responsibility, and indeed legitimation, proffered by such lofty goals, and instead focused on producing texts that are less attempts at representing and more concerned with transfiguring, in the sense of radically transforming, the perception and experience of mediated reality (Patton, 1995). So, although Baudrillard's writings are intentionally exaggerated, contradictory, and often bewildering, this does not diminish their potential to offer insightful readings of societies increasingly dominated by mass mediated imagery. As a consequence, this chapter illustrates how Baudrillard's extreme strategy for interpreting the Gulf War's "instant history TV" (Patton, 1995, p. 6), provides a productive schema for analyzing the mass mediated spectacles that dominate American sporting culture. Taking its leads from Baudrillard's work, explicitly his interrogation of the mediated Gulf War narrative, this preliminary discussion problematizes the images emanating from another media event (Dayan and Katz, 1992), namely, that fashioned by NBC's coverage of the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta.

The content and structure of NBC's 79 hours of primetime coverage (of 171.5 hours total) demonstrated that, as with the Gulf War, so with the 1996 Summer Olympics, there is no guarantee as to the nature of the "event that it could be or that it would signify" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 29). Rather, the American viewing public was confronted with NBC's promotional, speculative, and virtual representation of Atlanta reality: an Olympic simulation manufactured to serve definite purposes. In the lead up to the Atlanta Games Dick Ebersol predicted people will get the "results from CNN or the Internet . . . but they'll get the stories from NBC" (Impoco, 1996, p. 36). This Olympic production strategy was certainly not new; it merely represented the latest, and perhaps most sophisticated, attempt to transform televised sport in such a way that it could better compete with other forms of mass entertainment (see Barnett, 1990; Blake, 1996; Rader, 1984; Whannel, 1992). This discussion focuses on unraveling the motives behind, manifestations, and consequences of, NBC's decision to review, massage, and repackage (Zipay, 1996) Olympic reality for a female audience. Of course, television coverage of sport has long been produced according to a philosophy that positions the male viewer as the intended "subject of consumption" (Goss, 1995). For this reason, mainstream American televised sport came to be imbued with an aura of essentialized masculinity. The importance of

NBC's 1996 Atlanta Olympics lies in that it was perhaps the first primetime *global* sport spectacle to consciously fashion its production to attract a larger female viewership. However, rather than blithely celebrating the Atlanta Games as "the Gender Equity Olympics" (McCallum & O'Brien, 1996, p. 17), this discussion problematizes NBC's *discovery* of the female audience, and thereby imitates Baudrillard's project by challenging the popular perception and experience of mediated Olympic reality.

According to Baudrillard, within the contemporaneous age of instantaneous and global communication, the order of appearance and representation—and therefore the constitution and construction of social reality—has become defined through an ever-proliferating economy of televisual simulations. Contemporary culture can thus be characterized as being hyperreal, because, in Chen's neo-Baudrillardian terms, "What is real is no longer our direct contact with the world, but what we are given on the TV screen: TV *is* the world" (1987, p. 71). Preempting the hackneyed and superficial criticisms of Baudrillard's hyperontology, it should be noted that Chen's proclamation is in no way asserting that material existence has been rendered obsolete within the era of all engulfing televisual simulations. Rather, the triumph of the televisual image—resulting from innovations and expansions in the realm of communications technology—has had a profound effect on the way people engage, understand, and experience their material existence (Rail, 1991). Such was the case during the Gulf War, when the American viewer's engagement, understanding, and experience of the conflict were mediated through a combination of the Pentagon's conspiratorial editorializing and the American media's populist programming. Although the Gulf War hyper-narrative, beamed via satellite into American homes, bore little or no resemblance to the experience of those on the battlefield, the images of the war nonetheless had real effects and became "enmeshed in the ensuing material and social reality" (Patton, 1995, p. 11).

Once turned into media information, the Gulf War became a virtual conflict fashioned from and thereby symptomatic of the contradictory sensibilities of a postmodern America dominated by the televisual (Baudrillard, 1988; Kellner, 1995). Even though American media culture is dominated by images of "expertly choreographed brutality" (Gerbner, 1995, p. 547), the American viewing public was spared graphic representations of the mass slaughter inflicted by American forces. Because of a fear of "adversely affecting public sentiment" (Patton, 1995, p. 13), the American public was provided with "No images of the field of battle, but images of masks, of blind or defeated faces, images of falsification . . . which rendered the [Iraqi] other powerless without destroying its flesh" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 40). According to the representational logic of this "'clean' war" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 40), the televisual absence of charred and mutilated remains of Iraqi soldiers and civilians allowed the fragile American psyche to rest easily with the self-evident superiority, yet reassuring humanity, of its forces. In this way, a made-for-TV Gulf War simulacrum was fabricated into "less the representation of real war than a spectacle which serves a variety of political and strategic purposes on all sides" (Patton, 1995, p. 10).

The scripted hyperreality of the Gulf War spectacle was mirrored by that of NBC's coverage of the Atlanta Games, which fashioned a virtual Olympics comparably designed to seduce the American masses, and thereby to serve a variety of primarily economic—but nonetheless political—purposes. During the latter half of 1995, NBC signed two contracts with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), amounting to $3.6 billion, securing the broadcast rights to the Summer Olympic Games in 2000, 2004, and 2008, and to the Winter Olympic Games in 2002 and 2006 (*The Economist,* 1996). For the foreseeable future, NBC had bought the rights to America's Olympic coverage. In doing so, Dick Ebersol, president of NBC Sport and more pertinently executive producer of NBC's coverage of the Atlanta Games, had purchased the right to creatively suture the network's trademark peacock logo to the accumulated and emotive symbolism of the Olympic rings. As Richard Pound, then IOC vice president, brazenly admitted, "If you owe them [the bank] $10,000, you're a customer. If you owe them $10,000 billion you're a partner" (Thurow, 1996, p. 14).

With the "thoroughly modern marriage" (Knisley, 1996, p. S5) forged between NBC and the IOC, in an American context the Olympic Games are as much about the advancement of NBC stock as about covering the event (Peterson, 1996). This was particularly true since NBC had *guaranteed* its corporate advertisers a 17 Nielsen rating for the Atlanta coverage (equating to roughly 16.3 million TV households). Should Olympic broadcasts fall below that mark, the network would provide advertisers with free air time, an unwelcome eventuality that would eat into the anticipated return on NBC's $465 million investment (Farhi, 1996). Clearly, NBC was substantially more than a channel of transmission for the Olympic event, and the Atlanta Games were destined to become an NBC-directed deceptive televisual subterfuge: a pre-fabricated Olympic spectacle and "highly artificial construct, designed for maximum sentiment and ratings" (Remnick, 1996, p. 27).

NBC's stratagem for molding their Olympic spectacle illustrated Baudrillard's concept of the postmodern condition as a cybernetic visual culture directing a simulated order of appearance: "Whenever we switched on the tube, we saw what Ebersol wanted us to see, when he wanted us to see it. . . . Whether we like it, we watched. But we weren't watching the Olympics; we were watching Ebersol's vision of the Olympics" (Knisley, 1996, p. S5). Ebersol even brazenly acknowledged his role and influence at the helm of NBC's Olympic culture industry: "I get to arrange how all these things are perceived in the world" (quoted in Goodbody, 1996, p. 21). Ebersol's perceptions, and thereby NBC's contrived manipulation of the Olympic spectacle, were significantly informed by more than 10,000 interviews carried out by network researchers with the aim of "trying to pinpoint what viewers like and don't like" (Impoco, 1996, p. 36). The results of these interviews provided the basis for what NBC's director of research, Nicholas Schiavone, identified as the five principles, corresponding to the five Olympic rings, that provided the foundational philosophy for NBC's Olympic television coverage:

> Ring I, Story: Viewers want a narrative momentum, a story that builds. Stories make connections with reality, among facts, and between the subject and the viewer. This is what the viewer takes away from the telecast.
>
> Ring II, Reality: Perhaps the major hook for Olympic viewers is the unscripted drama of the Olympics, the idea that anything can happen, both of an athletic nature and a human nature. People look for real stories and reliability, things that apply to them. They are looking for real life and real emotion presented credibly.
>
> Ring III, Possibility: This ring covers the feeling of self-realization. The audience experiences the rise of individuals from ordinary athletes and their humble beginnings to the company of the world's elite. This identification reinforces belief in their own ability to achieve. This embodiment of possibility gives the viewer a reason he or she can "make it through."
>
> Ring IV, Idealism: The Olympics are still viewed by a vast majority in the contexts of purity and honor. They appeal to what is best in us. This area summarizes the viewers' need to integrate the intellectual and the emotional.
>
> Ring V, Patriotism: Love of country is not just limited to an American viewer's love of the United States. National honor and Olympic tradition seem to go hand in hand. The viewer recognizes the love of his or her own country, but at the same time respects the international athlete's love of their nation as well. (Schiavone, quoted in Remnick, 1996, p. 27)

NBC's formulaic Olympic production was a prime example of mediated texts as imploded, reformulated, and bastardized interpretations of the real. For, as Baudrillard (1980, p. 141) noted, any information that "reflects or diffuses an event is already a degraded form of the event." Given the influence of interviewees' responses in shaping programming philosophy, what was presented as NBC coverage of the 1996 Summer Olympics was, in a Baudrillardian sense, the generation of a model of a real situation (Atlanta Games coverage) through reference to models that had already been reproduced (televisual simulations of previous Olympic Games). According to NBC's new Olympic reality logic, the "real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is already reproduced. The hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1983, pp. 146–147). NBC was thus responsible for creating a hyperreal Olympics that were "more real than reality itself" (Baudrillard, 1980, p. 139).

Driven by the economics of the marketplace, Ebersol freely admitted "ratings are the yardstick by which it [NBC] will judge its Olympic Games coverage" (*The New York Times,* 1996, p. 26A). As a result he had to "keep in mind appealing to the widest audience" (quoted in Sandomir, 1996a, p. 14B). For Ebersol, ensuring a wide audience meant capturing and sustaining the interest of women viewers (Zipay, 1996). Women were of particular interest to network executives because, through its ongoing research into the Olympic television audience, NBC had *deduced* that "men will watch the games no matter what" (Gunther, 1996, p. 43). This research also identified that, unlike other sporting events, the Olympics appeal to women in roughly equal numbers as men (Impoco, 1996; Remnick, 1996). Consequently, the size of NBC's female viewership would determine the difference between commercial success and failure, between reaping the financial benefits of charging up to $700,000 per 30 seconds of advertising, and being forced to offer

free advertising time as a way of alleviating corporate customer dissatisfaction with poor ratings. Hence, NBC's brief involved packaging the Olympics in such a way "that women will stay glued" (Gunther, 1996, p. 43).

Atlanta represented the third consecutive Summer Olympics broadcast by NBC. So, in effect, the network was re-engineering the Olympic commodity-sign based on its accumulated knowledge of the processes of popular cultural production and consumption. During the 1988 Seoul Olympics NBC relied on live transmissions and, it has been asserted, floundered in the ratings due to the network's decision to adhere to a journalistic style of coverage that involved "hiring print reporters to investigate stories, splitting screens to show more than one event, stressing live coverage, results, and controversies" (Gunther, 1996, p. 43). Reflecting upon the Seoul debacle, NBC's coordinating producer David Neal opined that the mistake was "treating the games like a two-week Super Bowl" (quoted in Impoco, 1996, p. 36). Such a testosterone-rich Olympic reality was thought to have alienated female viewers who, according to NBC's audience research findings, tended "to be more interested in stories than in scores" than their male counterparts (Impoco, 1996, p. 36).

In order to accommodate the perceived masculine *and* feminine sides of its viewership, for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, NBC relied on two differing production designs which created two distinct Olympic realities (Sandomir, 1996a). First, in conjunction with Cablevision Systems and designed primarily for the male portion of the sports viewing public, NBC offered its "Olympic Triplecast," which incorporated three channels of comprehensive live coverage for the 15-day duration of the games, and charged between $29.95 a day and $125 for the entire event. Second, designed for the high ratings demanded of primetime network television, NBC produced a female-friendly Olympics that relied almost exclusively on taped programming in order to massage "what has already happened in Barcelona . . . into a storytelling package with natural commercial breaks" (Sandomir, 1992, p. 11). Despite high ratings for its primetime telecasts, NBC was hampered by the financial outlay required of the "unmitigated disaster" (Albert Kim quoted in Edwards, 1996) that the triplecast became, and ended up losing $98.6 million on the games (Gunther, 1996, p. 42). Nevertheless, Barcelona proved a useful learning experience for NBC Olympic producers and provided the blueprint for the gendered strategy that framed coverage of the Atlanta Games.

To some commentators, 1996 witnessed the *discovery* of women as an important, and hitherto largely neglected, market segment: "From the Summer Olympics to the political conventions to car ads on TV, the marketers who shape our tastes tuned in to the sensible, compassionate, nonideological women who run so much of the country" (Alter, 1996/1997, p. 32). Just as political pollsters identified the hypermythologized "soccer moms" who were to become the sought-after voters in the 1996 US presidential campaign (Davies, 1996; MacFarquhar, 1996; Safire, 1996), so NBC's research of the Olympic audience identified women as its key constituency of viewers. NBC thus predetermined that, despite the merit or otherwise of the forthcoming exploits of female Olympians, the Atlanta Games would

be a celebration of Olympic womanhood. Within the battery of promotions that prepared the American audience for the upcoming spectacle, NBC openly declared that its focus would be on women's sports (Schulian, 1996). The network's power to direct the popular articulation of the Atlanta Olympics was subsequently evidenced in the popular media's faithful replication of this female Olympic theme. NBC's female orientation was intertextually augmented by myriad media sources. The US women's basketball team was featured on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* (July 22, 1996) double issue Olympic preview, and the front cover of *The New York Times Magazine* introduced the Atlanta Games as the Olympics in which "Women Muscle In" (June 23 1996). Before the ceremonial flame had been lit, and despite the fact that male athletes continued to outnumber female athletes (63.5 percent to 36.5 percent [Becker, 1996]), a complex illusion of Olympic gender equality and emancipation was already artificially piloting the popular signification of the Atlanta Games.

NBC's representational strategy for the actual coverage of the Atlanta Games involved manufacturing a stereotypically *feminine* Olympic spectacle. In creating this primetime "Oprah Olympics" (Gunther, 1996, p. 42), NBC manufactured its own Olympic reality centered around events deemed appropriate to female viewers and infused with sentiment intended to resonate with the female psyche (Remnick, 1996). According to production executives, NBC's conscious manipulation of the content and structure of Olympic reality "was based on a scientific campaign to shape their broadcasts to a feminine sensibility" (Remnick, 1996, p. 26). NBC appears to have followed a wider industry trend, which involves presenting market research data as "scientific" without fully considering "the assumptions built into its research procedures." Moreover, such research designs fabricate "more reified and more concrete" constructs of the consumer "despite the rather flimsy practical and pragmatic origin of the information being processed" (Lury and Warde, 1997, p. 95). Thus, it could be argued, NBC was complicit in unscientifically simulating traditional feminine sensibilities within and through its broadcasts. NBC's crude interpretation of its Olympic audience research findings exteriorized interiority, or objectivized the subjective (Goss, 1995), by reducing the complexities of consumer motivations and predispositions to a binary and essentialist model of gender norms and differences. In accordance with this reductionist model, NBC's manufacturing of its Atlanta Olympic reality was based on an understanding of gender identities, practices, and experiences, as unitary, stable, and fixed entities, to be engaged by providing programming that resonates with the essential features of our gendered beings. Certain sports are viewed as being popular among women simply because they incorporate and celebrate traditionally feminine traits such as bodily beauty, grace, and expression. Conversely, some sports are deemed to be unpopular among women because their embodied masculine characteristics are viewed as an anathema to feminine sensibilities. In an Olympic context, this point was succinctly expressed by Ebersol: "If you put boxing in the middle of the greatest family entertainment in all of sports, you're going to drive people away. . . . Women and children won't stand for it" (quoted in Gunther, 1996, p. 43).

NBC sought to hail, or interpellate (Hall, 1996), female members of the television audience by proffering essentialized feminine subject positions within its primetime Olympic discourse. NBC's Atlanta Olympic coverage highlighted events that represented women in ways that the network deemed would be gender appropriate for a middle American audience. Predictably, NBC's primetime coverage focused on the overdetermined hyper-femininity (Feder, 1995) of gymnasts (Shannon Miller, Dominique Dawes, Dominique Moceanu, and Kerri Strug), swimmers (Janet Evans, Amanda Beard, and Amy Van Dyken), and divers (Mary Ellen Clark and Becky Ruehl). Of course, there is nothing inherently *feminine* about these sporting activities, or any other activity for that matter. However, all of them have long been culturally coded as signifying the vulnerable, aesthetic, and hetero-sexualized embodied femininity around which NBC chose to center its Olympic reality (Duncan, 1990; Ryan, 1995; Whitson, 1994).

Feminizing the content of the primetime Olympic schedule was aided by the economic leverage held by NBC over the IOC, which allowed for, among other measures: the expansion of the gymnastics competition from 7 to 9 nights of primetime coverage; the inclusion of a made-for-TV champions gala as an audience-grabbing finale to the gymnastics competition; the enlargement of the swimming program from 6 to 7 days; and, the incessant promotion of the diving program within the Olympic schedule. Presumably because they were deemed not to have exuded the appropriate feminine aura, the highly successful US women's basketball, soccer, and softball teams received nothing like the same primetime coverage. Meanwhile, even less telegenic "boxers, wrestlers and weightlifters—hairy, sweaty undesirables" were left to compete in the "daytime ratings wars" (Schulian, 1996, p. 112).

The structure of NBC's Atlanta Olympic production was similarly framed by an essentialist understanding of gender as a binary category, within which the rational sports-loving male was positioned against the emotion-driven sentiment-loving female (Carlson, 1996; Gunther, 1996; Remnick, 1996). In one sense, NBC was corroborated Baudrillard's assertion that contemporary popular culture has become a domain of the affective: "They [the masses] delight in the interplay of signs and stereotypes and in any content, as long as it results in a dramatic sequence" (Baudrillard, 1980, p. 143). Whereas Baudrillard (1988) views the triumph of affect as seducing the American population en masse, NBC clearly perceives it as a particularly feminine attribute:

> while men enjoy sports "from the outside in"—that is, they want the event itself and then, possibly, some connection with the people involved—women come to sports "from the inside out." Before they get interested in an event, they need to know the characters and sympathize with them. (Dick Ebersol, quoted and paraphrased in Remnick, 1996, p. 27)

NBC felt it would "lose this special [female] audience" by treating "the Olympics as a normal, results-driven sporting event on TV" (Ebersol, quoted in Hruska, 1996, p. 9). Consequently, in an affective sense, NBC's strategy for hailing the female

viewing subject revolved around producing sentiment-laden Olympic narratives designed to seduce the habitually empathetic female psyche.

The goal of fashioning the Atlanta Games into a feminine product designed to bring "a tear to the eye and bullion to the coffers" (Remnick, 1996, p. 26) necessitated NBC manipulating the structure of Olympic reality, akin to what occurred during the Gulf War. CNN's made-for -TV "Gulf War movie" (Patton, 1995, p. 13) was a "programmed and always delayed illusion of battle," a war "amplified by information . . . the systematic manipulation of data" and "artificial dramatisation" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 58). The goal of this contrived media orchestration was to "control the production and meaning of information" in order to promulgate a "kind of affective patriotism" among the American viewers (Baudrillard, 1995, pp. 13, 50). In order to create the same type of affective link between the Olympic media spectacle and the desired female audience, NBC adopted a "highly elastic style narrative" (Remnick, 1996, p. 26) that artificially dramatized the event through the preprogrammed, and frequently delayed, manipulation and amplification of Olympic televisual discourse.

It has been noted that sport's unique quality over other forms of televised popular entertainment is the immediacy and uncertainty of sporting spectacles (*The Economist,* 1996, p. 17). Recognizing, yet subverting, the primacy of the *live sporting event,* NBC's Olympic televisual spectacle was consciously fashioned into a timeless and unreal space that, to the casual observer, *appeared* to be live even though up to 40 percent of it was not (Hruska, 1996). According to Dick Ebersol "In our minds, we'll be live at all times" (quoted in Sandomir, 1996a, p. 14B), and certainly the network's announcers expressed nothing that indicated to the contrary (Impoco, 1996; Levin, 1996a; *The New York Times,* 1996). In actuality NBC's nightly broadcasts were considerably more complex:

> Within NBC's broadcast of the Games, there are three types of production. The first is purely live, when something is shown in real time. . . . The second is called live-on-tape. . . . What viewers see is called live by the announcers but is shown several minutes or several hours later. . . . The third is taped coverage, which is usually easy to distinguish because there are breaks in continuity. A feature may be thrown in and special effects added. (Sandomir, 1996b, p. A1)

The motive behind the intermingling of purely live, live-on-tape, and taped coverage under NBC's deceptive rubric of being "plausibly live" (*The New York Times,* 1996, p. A26) was plain: "Its job was to build interest and drama in the unfolding panorama of the Olympic Games" (Crain, 1996, p. 15). The adoption of multiple programming formats allowed NBC's Olympic production team to artificially heighten and intensify the dramatic content of its broadcasts. This degree of creative flexibility simply does not exist in "purely live" production. The network utilized "pausibly live" programming to mold seamless and engaging narratives that invariably built to a suspenseful climax, but whose relation to unfolding real-time events was largely irrelevant. NBC simply chose to blur "reality in the name of a

good story" (*The New York Times,* 1996, p. A26), with the rationale that if you "tell them stories . . . they will watch" (Impoco, 1996, p. 36).

The most conspicuous example of NBC's plausibly live strategy centered on the delaying, rearranging, and massaging (Sandomir, 1996b, p. A1) of Kerri Strug's final vault in the women's gymnastics team competition. The *historic* vault actually took place in the late afternoon, but it was not shown on NBC until almost midnight Eastern Time. Seizing on the emotive narrative of the injured athlete, NBC's primetime programming intensified the drama surrounding this heroic, triumphant, yet ultimately irrelevant vault. (The US had already won the gold medal prior to the vault.) The result was NBC's "highest, most emotional, most poignant moment" of the Olympic coverage, garnering a phenomenal 27.2 Nielsen rating (Sandomir, 1996b, p. A1). Despite the notoriety of this particular event, the repackaging of Strug's vault was indicative of NBC's production strategy throughout the Games:

> To NBC, the Olympics are episodes or segments in a prime-time show. It is all about stories, tales to be told, athletes to admire. Results are incidental. The events need not be presented on television in the linear fashion in which they unfold in real life. (Sandomir, 1996b, p. A1)

As well as creating a "zone of fictional time" (*The New York Times,* 1996, p. A26) an equally significant, and related, element of NBC's narrativizing of the Olympic schedule involved the strategic insertion of taped personal profiles as a means of creating emotional attachments between the television audience and certain athletes and their events (Levin, 1996a, p. 21). The influential Roone Arledge (see Rushin, 1994) developed "Up Close and Personal" profiling for ABC's groundbreaking coverage of the 1972 Munich Olympics. For the Atlanta Games, Ebersol (a longtime Arledge protégé) enthusiastically appropriated this technique, and commissioned 135 two- to three-minute emotionally charged segments featuring various athletes, personalities, countries, and events drawn from the televisual archives of Olympics past, present, *and* future. These syrupy examples of "formulaic hagiography" (Carlson, 1996, p. 48) focused on a broad array of athletes; from predictable features on high-profile American hopefuls such as Michael Johnson and Janet Evans, to stories on foreign notables such as the Belorussian gymnast Vitali Scherbo, the British triple jumper Jonathan Edwards, and the Canadian rower Silken Laumann, to more bizarre features such as that on the failed thoroughbred race horse, Nirvana II. These humanizing—sometimes anthropomorphizing—segments personalized "the competitors with feature stories that emphasize[d] family tragedies, childhood physical ailments and heartbreaking disappointments" (*The New York Times,* 1996, p. A26). By narrating contests through the stories of particular individuals, NBC framed the coverage of events in order to influence the way they were consumed. These "motivational infomercials" (Carlson, 1996, p. 48) acted as semiotic anchors for the audience by attaching an affective signifier to certain events and orchestrating viewers' emotional investment in the simulated

narrative unfolding before their eyes. As in the Gulf War, the real-time Olympics were lost (Baudrillard, 1995) in the carefully scripted production of these "soap opera games" (Carlson, 1996, p. 48). NBC's fabrication of highly emotive narratives framed the Olympics into a "17-day marathon 'Melrose Place'" (Sandomir, 1996a, 14B) for women, who, according to the network, are "addicted to melodrama" (Zipay, 1996, A60). In this sense, NBC's *Olympic show* imitated the "army's television show" during the Gulf War, with entertainment the "leading character," and female support for the Games was the desired "discursive effect" (Poster, 1995, p. 160).

Mirroring the American media's strategic manipulation of the Gulf War, NBC's generation of a hyperreal Olympics produced a markedly different kind of event from that which actually occurred in Atlanta. The most striking difference was NBC's conscious decision to fashion the Games into a distinctly feminine televisual spectacle. This gendered Olympic strategy was seemingly vindicated by averaging a 21.6 Nielsen rating (translating to roughly 20.7 million TV households), an impressive 41 percent share of the television audience, which equated to a weighty 25 percent increase over the viewing figures for the Barcelona Games (Shapiro, 1996). In the coveted 18-to-34 female demographic segment, NBC's ratings improved 16 percent from the Barcelona figures, and a staggering 69 percent from Seoul (Levin, 1996a). These ratings far surpassed the guaranteed mark set for securing full payments for advertising air time. As a consequence, and even after sharing 10 percent of its profits with the IOC, NBC made a $70 million profit on its initial $465 million Olympic investment (Farhi, 1996; Levin, 1996b).

Given the economics of the television industry, Ebersol has already announced that, in regard to the network's Olympic production strategies, money talks, so "Get used to it. The ratings were so high that NBC will take the same tack into Sydney and beyond" (Knisley, 1996, p. S6). The complexities and contradictions of media consumption patterns have been rendered irrelevant by NBC's money hungry media machine, which directly and uncritically attributed the reasons for higher Olympic viewing figures to its innovative production strategies. No other explanation was even plausible. As a result, the widespread skepticism and resistance to the NBC Olympics expressed by many consumers was neutered, and became wholly submerged, under the symbolic weight of the network's increasingly reified, strategically concretized, and *evidently* satisfied "imaginary consumer" (Lury and Warde, 1996). Moreover, NBC's lucrative Olympic simulacra have become the hegemonic sport media production aesthetic, influencing the production of sport events by its rival networks (*USA Today,* 1996, p. 2C; Unger, 1996). Certainly, and despite disappointing ratings at the time-zone-challenged Sydney 2000 games, Ebersol continues to extol the importance of the Olympic Games as a commercial media spectacle:

> I don't care what people say about Olympic ratings—it's the last single event that puts the whole family together in front of the television set. Normally, in the case of Dad, his favorite team is on regional cable. Mom is watching a prime-time soap opera like "ER." The kids are down the hall watching MTV or playing video games. . . . The Olympics, at one time or another, grabs all of them.

Under Ebersol's domineering influence, coverage of the 2004 Athens Olympics was molded to the new dictates of an expanding television landscape (comprising 1,210 hours of broadcast coverage over General Electric's various cable and satellite outlets: CNBC; MSNBC; Telemundo, USA, Bravo and HDTV feed), while retaining its preoccupation with the production of primetime entertainment for the NBC network. As Ebersol himself acknowledged, "I live more than anything else to produce the Games" (quoted in Wise, 2004, p. C1).

In conclusion, and as evidenced by NBC's Olympic coverage, female athletes, and the very notion of female sport participation, are becoming more prominent in American popular culture practices and experiences. Conversely, the politically progressive potentialities of an increased female presence in the Olympic spectacle were neutered by the demeaning way in which NBC chose to represent women. In spite of, or perhaps even because of, being the focus of NBC's Olympic reality, female athletes and consumers were portrayed and engaged in ways that subtly devalued their existence. Fabricated "with Mrs. Six-pack and the kids in mind" (Gunther, 1996, p. 42), NBC's clean, face-lifted, and affectively engineered spectacle was modeled on stereotypical and demeaning models of women as both the *objects of production* (the fetishization of athletic hyperfemininity), and as the *subjects of consumption* (the affective interpellation of the hypersensitive female consumer). NBC's marketing, promotion, and mediation of Olympic reality served as a kind of electronic surveillance (Bogard, 1996; Goss, 1995; Lyon, 1994) that normalized hierarchically differentiated representations, embodiments, and experiences of gender, within and through the coded circuitry of its televisual discourse.

As it became absorbed into the depthless, timeless, and aestheticized reality of Baudrillard's third order of simulacra (see Baudrillard, 1983; 1993b; Featherstone, 1991), NBC's gendered Atlanta reality became a constituent part of the hyperreal media culture that surreptitiously directs and defines everyday American existence (Chen, 1987; Denzin, 1991; Kellner, 1995). As Knisley noted, "He [Dick Ebersol] manipulated us, and for better or worse, he manipulated the Games, the single biggest sporting event in the world" (1996, p. S5). If the aggressive inclusion of women in the promotional circus of the American sport media continues in such a regressive fashion, the result will be the further accentuation of the essentialized, stable, and hierarchically ordered gender categories which reside all too comfortably within the popular imaginary. In light of such eventualities, rather than celebrating Dick Ebersol "for adapting NBC's approach to today's world" (Knisley, 1996, p. S6), we would be well advised to heed Baudrillard's advice to "resist the probability of any image or information whatever . . . and to that end re-immerse the war [in this case, mediated sport spectacles] and all information in the virtuality from whence they come" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 66).