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Mass Choreography in Olympic Ceremonies: The Case of Turin 2006

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ABSTRACT



Since their first appearance in Olympic ceremonies, mass choreographies have played a significant role that has grown steadily over the years in terms of variety of images and organizational complexity. The use of choreographic language within them evolved in line with the aesthetic and social currents manifested in the major sporting events. Therefore, growth also occurred according to an internal logic of mutual influences between choreographers specializing in this type of mass movement. Mass choreography, which requires interdisciplinary study, has not yet been analyzed from the perspective of the history of sport, let alone with regard to the interrelationship between choreographers. The starting point for focusing on the evolution of this artistic element is the analysis of two choreographies by Doug Jack from the opening ceremony of the 2006 winter Olympics in Turin. The example of Turin is considered an important element in the search for a continuity of style with the past, as well as an influence on the productions that were presented in subsequent Olympic ceremonies.

KEYWORDS

Olympic ceremonies;
mass choreography;
body techniques;
media and digital
developments;
Turin 2006

The history of the Olympic ceremonies is marked by different changes. These are the consequence of the increasing importance of the sporting event in terms of participation and the interest that the public and the media have shown in it. Historically, the artistic component has played an impactful role on the image that each Olympic Games has conveyed to the public and the use of different choreographic resources is an established element. Each ceremony represents a choreographic style and language that identifies the close correlation with the historical period but also with the legacy passed on from previous editions.

The intention is to trace the correlations existing between the different styles of the mass choreographies present in the artistic part of the Olympic ceremonies. Use will be made of official International Olympic Committee (IOC) documentation, specific scientific literature, videographic material, and personal communications

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with some choreographers. Following the timeline is possible to highlight the main transformations that these types of mass choreographies have undergone over the years. Two narrative models from the 2006 ceremony, *The Mosh-pit* and *The Great Skier*, which mark a historic moment in the evolution of the style, will be explored. The development of new technologies, such as video projections, that followed the Turin Ceremony will also be looked at since these created new conditions for the implementation of mass choreography.

Narratives in Motion: The Ceremonies

The main elements of the structure of the opening and closing ceremonies are dictated in the three points outlined by Rule No. 55 of the Olympic Charter for both the winter and summer Olympic Games.¹ The required protocol component is detailed in the official documents of *The Technical Manual on Protocol & Protocol Guide* and *The Technical Manual on Ceremonies*.² In this last manual, space is given to the artistic component, but only for the purpose of giving some recommendations to follow: ‘The production of Olympic Ceremonies is multifaceted and detailed. Represent and maintain the host city, region and nation’s culture in the artistic programme, but engage and learn from the technical expertise from past Olympic Ceremonies. Preserve the purity of your cultural and creative programme but exploit the invaluable assistance of those experienced in producing prior Olympic Ceremonies.’³ Official IOC documents tell the organizing committees to take their cues from previous ceremonies. There is reference to history in that *Factsheet: The opening ceremony of the Games of the Olympiad* endorses and consolidates the presence of choreographic elements in Olympic ceremonies over the years. It is pointed out that ‘Usually, the content of the artistic programme is kept secret until the last minute. Over the years, Games organizers have managed to find creative ways to combine Olympic protocol with just the right amount of entertainment, cultural references, technological innovations and festive atmosphere.’⁴ All this highlights the importance of the history of past ceremonies, inviting the organising committees to create a link with future projects.

As Sylvain Bouchet points out, the staging of the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games encompasses two main characteristics: that of being presented to a large number of spectators in the stadium, and that of needing a large number of extras on stage.⁵ The use of large mass movements to reach distant audiences in large open spaces and to create moving images was therefore necessary from the very beginning. Claudia Carbajal defines these organised movements as monumental choreographies, calling them ‘a dance within a dance that follows clearly marked choreographic traces and defined geometric figures.’ According to Carbajal, their identification does not refer to the fact that they are composed of a specific number of people, but to their purpose, which is to create images which will be seen from afar, through sudden and exaggerated movements.⁶

This choreographic genre cannot be categorized into a single type of bodily expression. It is not dance, but a way of coordinating many people in space, through techniques that can differ considerably from one another. The organization of space through the movement of bodies has undergone considerable transformations over

the course of the various Olympic ceremonies. Over the years, the mass choreographies have been used to draw words, numbers, Olympic symbols or simple images that generate an amplification of the show's scenic effect. The body techniques used over time have been varied, ranging from mass gymnastics and folkloric dances to different types of modern dance, as well as simple body movements; accessible to non-professionals and designed to facilitate the movement of gigantic costumes or stage props.

The origin of the choreographic organization of the mass is to be found in different areas and with different modes of expression. In the European context, the birth can be identified in the German schools of the early 19th century, where names such as Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852), or Adolf Spiess (1810-1858) developed forms of physical exercise performed in large open spaces, for school education but also for the preparation of the body for war.⁷ The nineteenth century thus saw the emergence of multiple mass gymnastic movements and alongside Jahn's Turner system was the Swedish Per Henrik Ling (1776-1839) whose method focused on synchronized team performances.⁸

In the same years, in the United States of America (USA), another scenario was present and already in the 1840s at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana marching bands made their first appearance, university bands whose drums, with large numbers of people, acted as entertainment at sporting events.⁹ In the entertainment scene at the end of the nineteenth century, a new concept of theatrical dance was introduced. In 1881, the *Ballo Excelsior*, choreographed by Luigi Manzotti, was performed in Italy at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, a performance that sought to express the triumph of progress through the involvement of a large number of extras on stage.¹⁰ A few years later, in 1897 in the same theatre, the *Ballo Sport* was presented, which ended with a multitude of dancers on bicycles entering the stage.¹¹

It was against this backdrop of the use of the masses that the Olympic ceremonies, to which Coubertin had immediately attached importance, appeared. Even more so after the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1889, thanks to which he understood the symbolic power that international public performances could have.¹²

In more than a century of history, the ceremonies devised by Coubertin have definitely changed their image. The protocol aspect, while holding firm to the principles dictated by the Olympic Charter, has developed and amalgamated with the artistic and scenic components belonging to the historical period and more recently to the entertainment industries of live shows.

Choreography as a Means to Convey Images

Choreographic elements can be traced in the history of Olympic ceremonies from 1908 onwards, to become firmly established in 1972. Although not officially recognized by the IOC, the Greek Olympic Committee organized an edition of the Games in Athens in 1906, which influenced subsequent editions.¹³ This opening ceremony played a key role in the use of mass coordinated activity as there were gymnastics performances by Greek, German, Swedish and Danish teams, and in the closing ceremony thousands of students filled the arena of the Panathinaikon Stadium with their choreography.¹⁴

From 1908 to 1952, performances with large gymnastics groups continued to be a constant.¹⁵ The most important choral event of these editions was in Berlin in 1936, when Carl Diem, general secretary of the organizing committee, presented a performance entitled *Olympic Youth* after the opening ceremony in the evening.¹⁶ This show required the presence of some ten thousand performers and presented a series of tableaux that intertwined Olympic, medieval and modern themes, anticipating the cultural content of contemporary opening ceremonies.¹⁷ However, there is no evidence of such gymnastic groups in close correlation with the protocol events. Identifying the artistic component within the ceremonies will have to wait a few more years.

With the introduction of satellite TV in the 1960s, the ceremonies began to gain prominence in the media of the time, creating significant opportunities for the cultural and promotional environment of the city, the organizing country and the International Olympic Committee. In 1960, the entertainment industry was involved for the first time in the production of the winter Olympics in Squaw Valley.¹⁸ The Walt Disney Company produced the ceremonies that brought them into a higher form of entertainment. This led to major changes over time, beginning with the introduction of a short artistic segment in the closing ceremony of the Grenoble winter Games in 1968 and the establishment of choreography and mass dance in the opening ceremony of the 1972 summer Olympics in Munich.¹⁹ The Munich organization, as Prof. Schantz states, wanted to move away from the militaristic style that had characterized the Berlin Olympics.²⁰ They wanted to focus on a more spontaneous and fluid style and to create a communicative relationship between the protagonists and the audience in the stands.²¹ It was in this edition, therefore, that mass movements made their definitive entrance in the opening and closing ceremonies, using elements of folklore and rhythmic gymnastics.

The 1980 Moscow opening ceremony recaptured the style of the great European mass gymnastic exercises, giving the impression of a monumental display of complete social control.²² This ceremony was characterized by mass choreographies occupying the entire space of the football pitch with the involvement of thousands of performers, including many children. The image was produced by the use of rigour in the execution of technical gestures and the structuring of precise and schematic formations. For the first time, card stunts were introduced, a kind of mosaic made up of '5000 Soviet army cadets were pressed into service performing one of the most intricate stunt card shows of all time'.²³ They moved coloured cards around the stands, creating lettering and images, a choreographic modality that would be used again in Los Angeles 1984. Professor Jean-Loup Chappelet, considered the Moscow ceremony rather kitsch, comparing it to the previous editions in Munich 1972 and Montreal 1976.²⁴ The Moscow ceremonies will also leave their mark for the gigantic image in the stands of the teddy bear Misha, the mascot of that edition.

Judy Chabola and Doug Jack: A Link between Two Periods

A new aesthetic can be seen in the 1984 Los Angeles edition. A series of technological developments for the transmission of images led to a departure from previous choreographic styles and gave rise to subsequent transformations. Thanks to the

introduction of hand-held cameras and video footage from helicopters, the image that this ceremony conveyed took on a different form, wanting to address the home audience as well. The opening ceremony was transformed and made into a real TV show, and the official protocol was enhanced by a complex artistic programme.²⁵ Repeating the Sarajevo model of the same year part of the show was added at the beginning of the ceremony.²⁶ The edition of Los Angeles opened with a large choreographic segment before the athletes' parade, offering the audience a renewed spectacle of performing arts. The opening ceremony offered more than three hours of entertainment with more than one thousand dancers representing the role of dance in America in its entirety.²⁷ Hundreds of American marching band musicians created articulate formations and eighty-four pianists played *Rhapsody in Blue* in synchrony, bringing American symbols reflected from Hollywood and its musicals. This ceremony, therefore, appeared almost as an artistic competition in response to the mass spectacle in Moscow, even though both events included an operation to promote the country's culture.²⁸

It was in the 1984 Los Angeles edition that the US choreographer Judy Chabola, a pioneer of mass choreography in large stadium sporting events, took her first steps by helping to bring about radical changes.²⁹ Chabola was a professional in the field of school education but also brought with her experience as a drill team instructor, an American tradition for the creation of spectacle with synchronized movements.³⁰ These two characteristics led to her full cooperation in the US ceremony, moving and organizing hundreds of drill team performers, working as an assistant to Kay Tee Crawford who was the founder of national drill team competitions. She participated in the following years in major events, such as Singapore's 25th Anniversary of Independence in 1990, and in the ceremonies of two other Olympic Games.³¹ Chabola in Los Angeles revived the style in use before the Moscow ceremony, emphasizing the scenic and spectacular component of the mass choreography. An example is the opening segment where hundreds of drill team members construct the 'Welcome' sign with white and gold balloons.³²

Although Chabola passed away prematurely, with her vision of space and the organization of large numbers on the playing field, she created a type of working form and methodology that is still used by contemporary choreographers. The use of choreographic writing with so-called 'charts' is still the working tool of a mass choreographer today. This notation, initially handwriting on paper, allows the transfer of images to all the professional figures involved in the transmission of the event, it is a sort of story board of the choreography.³³ Nowadays, thanks to the use of digital graphics programmes, there are more possibilities for writing and shorter planning and rehearsal times in the field.³⁴

Judy Chabola was also known for her relationship with volunteers, by whom she was much loved and admired.³⁵ Her vision of organizing volunteers through auditions and numbering was the basis for the creation of a complex system that brought enormous resources to subsequent ceremonies.³⁶ Chabola's ability to build a great team spirit and always have excellent control over projects, finding solutions to every problem, earned her the nickname 'big brain' from her co-workers.³⁷ Chabola's professionalism gave the choreographer a central role in the creation and coordination of the mass choreography of the Olympic ceremonies.

This profession, which was becoming more and more developed and consolidated with the increase in live performances, led to the birth and development of a generation of mass choreographers. Chabola was working in 1990 in Singapore for the Jubilee Spectacular for the 25th anniversary of independence when she met choreographer Doug Jack. He had recently worked for the 1987 Pan-American Games opening ceremonies big show. Chabola brought him on her team for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics together with choreographer Ron Mangham. She was also with Jack for the Atlanta 1996 ceremony as well as other important events in the American entertainment industry.³⁸

Chabola was called in to choreograph the entire mass of the opening and closing ceremonies of Barcelona 1992. In the opening ceremony she left images such as the 'Hola' inscription in the opening segment of the event or the staging of hundreds of volunteers in large colourful costumes in *The Mediterranean, Olympic Sea*.³⁹ The choreographic structure of these segments begins to highlight the importance of the individual performer as part of a whole. The movements of the bodies and their correlation with the others give form to the image. The body is no longer accentuated with its technicalities and perfection, as in mass gymnastic performances, but the human body is emphasized with its simple props and large costumes.

This choreographic vision will also be carried over into Doug Jack's methodology in his later experiences. The choreographer was the director of choreography for the Sydney 2000 and Salt Lake City 2002 ceremonies. His work for the 2002 opening ceremony earned him an Emmy Award for field choreographer.⁴⁰ In Athens 2004, he will be mass choreographer for the athletes' parade and will collaborate with Bryn Walters, Nikos Lagousakos and Claire Terri, whom he brought with him to the ceremonial project for the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin.⁴¹

In agreement with the researcher Javier Ramírez, it is worth emphasizing that part of the continuity in the aesthetic and technological revolution of the ceremonies of those years is precisely due to the fact that there were several professionals who brought their experience to the events that followed, such as the Australian Ric Birch and the choreographer Judy Chabola.⁴²

The ceremonies have now become the most important cultural and creative moment of the Olympic Games. Despite the fact that the technologies were not yet as developed as they are now, it is possible to consider choreographer Judy Chabola as a pioneer of mass choreography in sports stadium events.

Opening Ceremony Turin 2006

For the Opening Ceremony of the 2006 winter edition, Doug Jack and his team realized two mass choreographies built on two different stage spaces. The 480 volunteers from all over Piedmont formed a first choreography (*The Mosh-pit*) in a stage space called the 'Piazzetta' and a second one (*The Great Skier*), which was to become the symbol of the Turin 2006 edition, performed on the central stage, called the 'Piazza'.⁴³

The inspiration for 'The Mosh-pit' was born in Athens 2004, when the choreographer attended synchronized swimming competitions.⁴⁴ Doug Jack therefore designs a space where performers can move, making them hide or reveal body parts, just

as if they were coming out of the water. The project takes shape with the creation of a large 2,000 square metre pit named 'mosh-pit', an area inspired by the stalls of rock concerts.⁴⁵ This space will be transformed, in the second part of the ceremony, into the place that will welcome the Olympic athletes after their entrance into the stadium. For the realization of this project, a miniature structure was built and then a computer simulation was carried out.⁴⁶ The pit consisted of a cover with long elastic bands put under tension to cover the benches underneath, thanks to which the performers were able to perform leg and arm movements using illuminated stickers.

The creative process, coordinated by Marco Balich, required close collaboration between Doug Jack and the technical staff. The development of the project required different decision-making processes. The height of the benches and wedges to support the backrest and the correct tension of the elastic bands had to be measured to achieve the correct stage space.⁴⁷ This stage space had never before been designed in an Olympic ceremony, so many adjustments had to be made even a few days before the ceremony.

The choreography was part of a larger section that opened the Turin ceremony, 'The Rhythm of Passion.' The scene around is animated by 300 professional dancers, skaters and percussionists, with choreography by Giuseppe Arena.⁴⁸ The Mosh-pit, with its movements in synchronous and rapid succession, reflects the principles of large-scale choreography. The resulting image is linear, schematic, with defined geometric shapes and dynamism created by the movements of the limbs and sticks. The geometry used, given by the static position of the performers on the benches, is predominantly that of concentric rhombuses. Reference to this structure can be found in some passages of the 'Trançado', presented a few years later by choreographer Bryn Walters in the Rio 2016 closing ceremony. This style is reminiscent of the vision of the mass that Judy Chabola had already begun to introduce in the Los Angeles ceremony and that Jack will carry as a hallmark of her style. Doug Jack, with the few technological means then available, made a contribution to the performing arts, acting as a precursor to future choreographies. A reference to the use of illuminated chopsticks can be found in the opening ceremony of Beijing in 2008. The mass choreography of 'The Countdown' incorporates the use of hundreds of chopsticks like those used in the mosh-pit.

The second choreography presented by Doug Jack was inspired by a sports magazine that featured all the frames of a ski jumper in one image⁴⁹. This led to the idea of creating the figure of the skier that would reproduce all the phases of his jump, from the descent at speed to the flight and landing. The goal was to create an icon, an image that encapsulated the spirit of all athletes and the Olympic values associated with them.⁵⁰ This was achieved by creating the likeness of a human body with 500 volunteers and moving it through space. Each performer wore a coloured poncho and was connected to the others to maintain the closeness and compactness of the image. The resulting impact is of a large human form enclosing many colourful pixels, represented by all the performers. The close-up shots enhance the humanity of the image, even in its inaccuracy, which, as the choreographer states 'must be part of the choreography so that the audience sees the human aspect of the show by identifying with it.'⁵¹ The image produced by the ensemble is clearly visible to

the audience in the stands but even better represented for the audience at home. This form of moving mass is called 'Human Animation' and involves observing from a distant point of view, the 'bird's-eye view' that creates an illusion and shows what is not there.⁵² A reference to the origin of this mode in image creation can be found in the photographs of Arthur Mole. The Anglo-American photographer, during the First World War, made huge figures, 'living photographs' as he called them, composed of thousands of soldiers. Mole's desire was to create a visual spectacle from the theatre of war.⁵³ This mode did not differ much from the cinematic strategies of 1930s American filmmaker Busby Berkley.⁵⁴ Both artists had a penchant for design formations and living images shown from a bird's eye perspective. Many mass choreographies in Olympic ceremonies, from Los Angeles 1984 onwards, will use this point of view to enhance their images.

Doug Jack's mass choreography is a novelty within an Olympic ceremony. The choreographer was both the first and the last to represent a human body in movement through the ensemble of a multitude of bodies. The introduction of video projections from Vancouver 2010 onwards will bring effects and constructions of projected images that are not yet present here.⁵⁵ These new technologies have produced images and colours replacing free stadium spaces from the presence of performers. In the past, this role was given to the large number of performers. In Barcelona '92, set designer Peter Minshall and Catalan designer Chu Urozdi produced gigantic costumes for the choreography 'The Mediterranean, Olympic Sea', filling the stage space of this choreographic segment.⁵⁶

The video mappings are now the product of an 'orchestra of creativity, with lighting and special effects, producing real video choreography around people'.⁵⁷ An example of this is the choreography 'The Art of Burle Marx' that choreographer Bryn Walters staged at the Rio 2016 Olympic closing ceremony. Here the projected images were in effect part of the choreography, designed to be integrated into it by the choreographer himself.

From Turin to the Future: The Influence of the Choreographic Images of the 2006 Olympic Games

Mass choreographies are the product of the work of an entire team of professionals and not the project of a single person. They are now the result of a relationship between the performing, choreographic and visual arts, and are produced to amaze and reach the general public. Although they have shown diversity of style over the decades, the mass choreographies can be defined as the result of the union of several bodies who lose their individuality in favour of the birth of a single figure in which these bodies become part of a whole, almost as if they were a pixel within a digital image. This image is itself the final product, as the visual impact is the central element. Their anti-narrative aspect thus allows a communication that wants to excite, creating awe and wonder in the audience.

Connections are evident in the historical period analysed. By tracing this timeline, it has been possible to establish that in the artistic component of the Olympic ceremonies, and especially in the mass choreographies contained within it, an evolutionary line can be recognized, parallel to the history of the ceremonies. The

influence can be seen through a comparison of the images transmitted, for example is the transition from the organisation of the 1984 Los Angeles mass ceremonies, by the choreographer Judy Chabola, to the Turin 2006 opening ceremony under analysis. Since the Vancouver 2010 ceremonies, the intellectual property of collaborating choreographers has been augmented by the development of technologies that have allowed the creation of new choreographic products such as those of Bryn Walters in the Rio 2016 ceremony. The story of the evolution of the style is composed on two levels. For the creation of the images of mass choreographies, in addition to the influence on an aesthetic level, it was possible to identify relationships on a methodological level. The need to find increasingly effective methodological resources has brought choreographic notation from the manual to the digital. Collaboration between choreographers has enabled its development.

The figure of Doug Jack provides a link between past and future methodologies. The line of study is not intended to be rigid but it is necessary to highlight these cases in order to have a point of observation. The connecting line drawn between these mass choreographers represents a historical juncture, which allows the beginning of a new research in the field of Olympic history. The Olympic ceremonies, which had at their origins a rigorous, military style with the use of an artistic component related to the traditions of European gymnastics, have gone through several phases and today they constitute a unique form of spectacle and entertainment.

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42. Ric Birch was born in 1945 in Sydney. Producer and executive director of major Olympic events and ceremonies such as Los Angeles 1984, Barcelona 1992, Sydney 2000, Turin 2006, Beijing 2008, Rio 2016; Ramírez Javier, 'La danza en las ceremonias olímpicas. Análisis de las interacciones entre imagen y danza en la retransmisión de las inauguraciones olímpicas (1972–2018)' (Phd diss., Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2018), 244. Further citations to this work are given in the text.
43. The stage was created in the shape of an anatomical heart, which was situated under a large theatre stage where part of the ceremony took place. This particularity allowed a wide range of possibilities for using the stage space. This video demonstrates the peculiarity of the stage of the Turin ceremony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB-Mk4YRssvE> (accessed October 22, 2022).
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48. See note 45 above.
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51. See note 33 above.
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53. Louis Kaplan, 'A Patriotic Mole: A Living Photograph', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 1, no. 1 (2001): 107–39, DOI:10.1353/ncr.2003.0040. For additional information about this article, see <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ncr/summary/v001/1.1kaplan.html> (accessed November 13, 2021).
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Authors' Contributions

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