

NOTES FROM THE MEDIA EDITOR:
COMMENTARY ON THE SUMMER OLYMPICS AND MOVIE REVIEW
OF *TARNATION*

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**The 2004 Summer Olympic Games In
Greece, The Human Connection, And
The Danger Of Subjective
Interpretation: A Commentary**

I am not an athlete and I have never excelled in any sport; nonetheless, I have always watched the Olympic Games with great interest and enthusiasm. Every four years, as athletes from every corner of the earth and every kind of background come together to strive for excellence, the Olympic Games become a symbol of our ability to coexist in harmony and peace. International differences in language, attitudes, behavior protocols and food, to mention a few, are overshadowed by awesome athletic mastery and the blending of courage and competition for the Olympic gold medal. In addition to an occasion to admire athletic talent and mastery, I find that the "Olympic experience" provides compelling moments and regenerates my belief in our humanness and ability to accept, respect, and appreciate difference and diversity.

The 2004 Summer Olympic Games are over. These games took place in my birth country, Greece, the nation where they began more than 2,500 years ago in ancient Olympia, and where the modern Olympics were exhumed in 1896. They brought together a gathering of unprecedented athletic talent, illustrated the artistic and creative use of technology to produce spectacular performances during the opening and closing ceremonies, and concluded with no threatening security incidents despite unrelenting terrorism-related security concerns. My reflection on the coverage of the Games has sharpened

my awareness of my "dual" ethnic identity and of the need for those who comment upon the host country, as they report on the games, to do so sensitively, objectively, and from a broader cultural perspective.

In 1997, the International Olympics Committee in Lausanne, Switzerland, selected Greece as the host country for the 2004 summer Olympic Games. With this selection, the Olympics were to return to the place where they were born thousands of years ago and where they were reclassified as "modern Olympics." This selection also meant that in the course of seven years, Athens, the hub of the Games, needed to build a new airport, a new metro system, stadiums, and roads to accommodate thousands of athletes and visitors. Early on, concerns were raised both domestically and internationally about this small nation's ability to provide all that is required for an undertaking of such magnitude. The tragic events of terrorism in the U.S.A. on September 11, 2001, raised new concerns about the ability of the Greek security forces to be up to the now more enormous task at hand.

As in a self-fulfilling prophesy, preparations for the Games proceeded slowly. The chaotic construction sites in Athens and the still unfinished venues as the date for the commencement of the Games approached, both intensified the concerns of the International Olympic Committee officials and of the international community. Satirical jokes and photos about the slow progress with the preparations started appearing in the media. Mike Penner (*Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 2004)

described the situation in what he called “American sporting terms” as follows:

“Greek organizers spent the first three years sitting on the ball and the next three re-grouping before turning the last year into a two-minute drill...Reports of construction delays and operational glitches have become so commonplace, the Athens Olympics Organizing Committee has become an all purpose straight line, with no shortage of punch lines.”

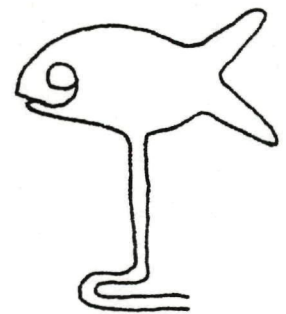
Though the media hailed Greece’s glorious past, it simultaneously criticized some of the country’s more contemporary cultural practices. Beverly Beyette (*Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 2004) described the transformation of Athens from an ancient city of monuments and artifacts to a metropolitan capital with expensive restaurants and deluxe hotels. “But what does not seem to have changed” she continued, “is the Greek mind set” according to which “Greeks do everything at the last moment.” Long before the execution of the games, the slow pace of preparations in Greece led to world-wide speculations and predictions that the venues would not be ready on time. Poking fun at long construction delays, the frequently raised question by the American press and media was, “Will Athens pull itself together for the Games?” Countries that had hosted the games in the past were offering to have the games come back to their soil. Predictions of disaster were abundant. The Greek work ethic was scrutinized and Greek life style practices were criticized relentlessly. “‘Now’ to the Greeks,” concluded Beverly Beyette, “means sooner or later, which tends to explain why only four months before the Olympics piles of rubble sat on partly laid tram tracks.”

I visited Greece in April 2004. The grounds of ancient Olympia, the site where the first Games were held in 776 BC, were covered with multicolored wild flowers. The

night before, the Olympic flame had been transferred from this site to Athens, a city that was indeed in a state of “construction fever.” No Greek, however, seemed to understand, let alone share, the concerns of the international community. They acknowledged the work that still had to be done, but they had no doubts that it would be done on time. They had competed for the honor to host the Games and they were confident that the venues would be completed by the date the Games were to convene. The Greeks that I talked to just could not understand why things needed to be done before that date. To them, it was the final product rather than the process that was important. I questioned their sense of confidence.

As the time for the commencement of the Games approached, Greeks worked fiercely to finish the venues. They finished them under their own terms and at their own pace; practices that those who expected promptness and precision could not understand and were, therefore, eager to criticize. As a bicultural Greek with my own reservations, I felt that judgments by the American media were based more on the work orientation of the critics and less on an understanding and acceptance of the Greek way of operating. Heedless of the danger of subjective interpretation, journalists used language and made predictions that alarmed the world and offended Greeks in Greece and in the diaspora.

As we now know, Greece delivered in grand fashion. Most of the venues were completed on time. Those that could not be declared completed as initially planned, like the roof on the swimming venue, were brought to a state of construction that accommodated the athletes without the risk of jeopardizing their performances. At least no complaints to that effect were registered during and after the Games. Instead, the controversies were over judging mistakes, the fallout from illegal doping and other issues that did not bear a direct relationship to the manner in which the



country prepared for the Games. Finally, as Mike Penner (*Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 2004) put it, "after delays, glitches, gridlock and terrorism fears," and an outlay estimated at \$12 billion (1.5 billion for 70,000 security personnel) Athens was ready for the Games to begin. The theme was "Welcome Home."

The opening ceremony, a rich spectacle with olive branches and a warm welcome, presented Greece's history from 200 BC through the 20th century. The different phases of her glorious past were paraded in sequence. Technology was used in imaginative ways to create a pageant rich in color, history, promise, and drama. Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, head of the Athens 2004 Olympic Committee, welcomed the crowd with a promise: "You will be moved, you will be awed, inspired, exhilarated... Greece is going to fire the world's imagination." The procession of thousands of athletes, many in colorful native costumes, created the greatest ethnically diverse and brightest landscape in the new Olympic stadium the world had ever seen. The Olympians of ancient Greece would had felt, I believe, honored with the presence of so many athletes from all over the globe who had gathered in Athens to repeat what they had initiated centuries ago. "The Greek Olympic Committee," wrote Bill Plaschke, created an opening ceremony that "was humble in its welcome, bold in its history, and surprising in its ending" (*Los Angeles Times*, August, 14, 2004).

In the course of seventeen days (August 13 to August 30, 2004), 10,500 athletes from 202 countries, competed in 28 sports and 38 venues. Three hundred and one medal ceremonies took place. The humility of the athletes in an environment of intense competition was penetrating. The manner in which "the best against the best" turned around to congratulate a victorious competitor evoked overwhelming emotions. The closing ceremony depicted the way of life in modern-day Greece. The country's songs and dances,

the four-season activities at Greece's different regions, the way in which Greeks toil at work and the way they use leisure time were presented in creative, ingenious and artistic fashion. Athletes and spectators were asked to join in the celebration, dubbed "The biggest, fattest Greek wedding".

"We accomplished what we promised and erased seven years of doubt by delivering flawless Games, reconnecting the Olympic movement to its ancient heritage and introducing the world to the modern accomplishments of the new Greece," declared Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki at the conclusion of the Games. "These Olympic games have shown the world the great things Greeks can do," she continued. Jacques Rogge, the International Olympic Committee president, told the world that these were "unforgettable dream Games." Bill Dwyer (*Los Angeles Times*, August 30th) wrote: "Almost nobody thought they could. Almost every body predicted disaster. Greeks have shown the world the great things they can do." Peter Ueberroth, chairman of the Board of the United States Olympic Committee, declared that "the Greeks are to be congratulated... The first gold medal of these Olympics has already been awarded to the Athens organizers." Michael Phelps, the six gold medal United States swimmer, stated that "Everyone was asking is the place going to be ready? It has been nothing but a great memory." Many other American and international athletes talked of compelling moments they had experienced during their stay in Greece.

I felt pride watching the Americans, the largest contingent of athletes, excel and win the most medals. I also felt pride for the impressive and spectacular outcome of the Athens Games; a first class delivery. For seventeen days I experienced a rapid cycling between my Greek and American selves. I wept during the opening ceremony and during the course of the games. As a Greek, I kept my head high and let my chest thrust forward from

pride, the same way when, many years ago, my provincial grade school teacher had convinced me that Greece was the greatest nation on earth. My sense of pride, however, was deluded by guilty feelings for having allowed myself to join the ranks of the critics during the pre-game days and to question my compatriots' ability to meet their Herculean challenge. Nancy Franklin (*New Yorker*, September 6, 2004) reflecting upon the Athens Olympics concluded that "Like every Olympic fortnight, this one produced stories and images that will stay in viewers' minds for years to come." For me, this Olympic fortnight brought an overpowering feeling of pride and rekindled questions about acculturation, assimilation and biculturalism. It also triggered questions about a nation's right to accomplish an endeavor of international magnitude according to its own cultural practices, life styles, and self-expectations, rather than according to externally imposed deadlines. Can the product rather than the process be what really counts, I now ask?

In the eyes of the world, the 2004 summer Olympic Games in Greece, the 28th Olympiad, ended triumphantly. These games also set global TV viewing records, with nearly 4 billion people tuning in. I want to believe that the spirit of human unity that characterized these Games will have a long-term global effect. Furthermore, I want to believe that the "Greek experience" will help increase our trust and confidence in a nation's ability to accomplish Herculean tasks in its own terms.

Movie Review: *Tarnation*

Tarnation debuted at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival as the first feature to be edited completely with Apple's Movie software. It is a movie unlike any other that I have seen. Jonathan Caouette, the 31 year old director, has assembled a lifetime of family photographs, Super-8 home movies, and video diaries to present the cruel absurdities in the life of his trans-generational family, the intensity

of his emotional connection to his mentally challenged mother, and his disabling fear of generationally transmitted mental illness.

The movie opens with a distraught Caouette, a resident of New York City, on the phone with an unidentified individual who had called to inform him of his mother's Lithium overdose in a Texas psychiatric hospital. During the following ninety minutes, pictures interwoven with clips from TV shows and various films create a compelling documentary of the director's experiences during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. We enter his psychologically turbulent world, and witness his confusion over personal identity, sexual orientation, and betrayal in interpersonal relationships. In an environment full of unpredictability, what remains stable is Caouette's passion for creative expression and his desire to record his life script on film.

By the time Caouette was born, his biological father had left home without ever knowing that his young wife, Renee, was pregnant. We are presented with numerous pictures of Renee from babyhood to middle adulthood. In a series of images we witness Renee's transformation from a beautiful young model to a middle-aged woman in psychotic states, in and out of mental institutions, walking around disheveled and uttering incoherent statements. Paralleling Renee's changes are Caouette's transformations from an infant in foster home placement to a young adult in a stable homosexual relationship but haunted by the fear of inescapable mental illness.

Several scenes can have a chilling effect on the viewer. Such is the experience when Caouette appears, at the age of 11, in a dramatic monologue as the abused wife of an alcoholic husband. The words he chooses reveal an upbringing in a world of harrowing experiences and disregard for human dignity. His physical presentation transcends his dramatic talent and gives the impression of a troubled youth affected by hatred and vio-

lence. The ferocity with which he loses himself in the act seems to be his way of coping with his life's circumstances that are major deviations from a normal childhood.

The systematic way in which Couette films, from a young age, the interactions among his family members and focuses his camera on their idiosyncratic behaviors, becomes our window to possible unconscious or intentional plans to create a documentary in some future day. A plan to use his voluminous filmed material to expose the disabling effects of mental illness, demonstrates the power of love to transcend feelings of abandonment and rejection, and discloses how the fear of genetic predisposition to mental illness haunts him perpetually.

With camera in hand, Couette follows the toothless Rosemary Davis, his maternal grandmother, and records her often non-conventional dress, senseless statements and outbursts of laughter. He asks Arnold Davis, his maternal grandfather, inquisitive questions about family events and provokes angry reactions and denials. He insists on documenting exchanges with his mother even when the latter is in her psychotic states and finds the task too taxing. One wonders if Couette's obsession to record intra-family scenes was a plan to eventually create the compelling family epic that *Tarnation* indeed is. The young director's statements in reference to his mother at the conclusion of the movie, "I am scared. I don't want to turn out like my mother. At my age she seemed better..." might be reflections of his internal demons of mental illness. Documenting his life in a dysfunctional family might have been the director's attempt to show us how inextricably embedded he believed mental illness was in his life.

In New York City, Caouette succeeds in bringing some normalcy to his existence. He forms a loving and stable relationship with his partner, David Sanin. The two share an apartment where Renee, brain damaged from invasive treatments during her 100 psychiatric

hospitalizations, spends time as their house guest. We are touched by Caouette's concern and affection for his mother. "She lives inside me; I cannot escape her..." he utters at the end of the phone conversation when he is informed of Renee's Lithium overdose.

This movie is not entertaining; instead, it is depressing. It is the product of a creative but novice director, who ventures to disentangle a 31-year life experience scathed by violence, perplexity, mental illness, and a perpetual sense of danger. Scenes with this content, in combination with the images of troubled, real-life characters, can make the ninety-minute confinement to a theater seat feel too long. I stayed to watch *Tarnation* from beginning to end because of the promising talent and creativity it reflected in the use of photos and home made videos, the choice of music, and the use of the written dialogue. What captured my interest, however, was Couette's perseverance in the midst of so much aversion, his passion for acting and filming, and his strong emotional connection to a mother who had lost her capacity to reciprocate a long time ago. *Tarnation* is an unconventional and disturbing movie, but worth seeing. I recommend it.

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