

Rituals and Records: the Films of the 1924 and 1928 Olympic Games

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The title of Allen Guttman's landmark study of sports history, *From Ritual to Record*, captures the way cinematic treatments of the Olympic Games, Europe's most resonant sporting invention, developed in the early twentieth century. Projected film and the modern Olympic Games began in the same year, 1896, and the way the two phenomena have grown together demonstrates a progression from formality and ritual to an ever-increasing emphasis on individual, nation and achievement. This transition from ritual to record is demonstrated by two Olympic films from the European Games of Paris 1924 and Amsterdam 1928, *Les Jeux Olympiques Paris 1924* and *De Olympische Spelen*. These cinematic records are not only documentary records of the events they portray, but are an important reminder that modern sports are witnessed by most not as stadium spectators but as viewers – in the case of the 1924 and 1928 films, as members of a cinema audience. The film record is essential to our understanding of the popularisation of modern sports, while through their contrary impulses to document and to idealise (particularly through the use of slow-motion photography), the two films demonstrate what is meaningful about Olympic sport.

Introduction

The best-known work of sports historian Allen Guttman is entitled *From Ritual to Record*. This richly illuminating phrase, with its conscious echo of folklorist Jessie Weston's famous work *From Ritual to Romance* that so influenced T.S. Eliot, can be used to describe the development of cinematic treatments of the Olympic Games in the early twentieth century. Filmic accounts of the Olympics from 1906 to 1928 (which were held in the European cities of Athens, London, Stockholm, Antwerp, Paris, and Amsterdam) display a progression from ritual to record, from an occasion of pageantry and formality, where gymnastic displays

were predominant and a militaristic air hung over the event, to the emergence and foregrounding of individuals – and individual nations – as Olympic sport turned from public lesson to public entertainment. Much has been written about Leni Riefenstahl's filmic treatment of Berlin 1936, but an examination of two lesser-known films – the French-produced *Les Jeux Olympiques Paris 1924* and the Italian-produced official record of the 1928 Amsterdam Games, *De Olympische Spelen* – reveals an incipient but distinct structural dilemma between seemingly contrary impulses to idealise and to dramatise.¹

Since most spectators only experienced the Olympics on the cinema screen, an appreciation of these artistic tensions is essential for the understanding of international sports culture on European soil in the interwar period. The tensions reflect the Olympic movement's own conflict between idealism and contentious reality, a relationship between ritual and record that went on to characterise all of the subsequent Olympic feature films. In this struggle to master their subject, Olympic films recorded changing conceptions of modern sport, and this essay highlights the role of the film record in crystallising our perceptions of the emerging sporting form. Moreover, since most spectators continue only to experience the Games through screens – chiefly television but increasingly through computers and mobile devices – an appreciation of the Olympics as a screen entertainment is key to our understanding of the Olympic phenomenon overall.

Film and the Olympic Games 1896–1920

Projected motion picture film and the modern Olympic Games appeared in the same year, 1896. Part of the pleasure of watching early Olympic films is seeing how medium and event each develop and learn to accommodate one another. However, the inaugural Games of the modern era, held in Athens, were not filmed. Film of the intermediate Games of 1906, which were held in Athens at the same stadium as in 1896, has often been used to illustrate those original Games, but there is no record of any film company sending a cameraman to Athens in 1896, no such film in any known contemporary film catalogue, nor was there any native film production in Greece at that time.

The Games in Paris 1900 and St Louis Games in 1904 were so chaotically organised that concrete evidence is hard to determine, but it seems that no film was taken of either.² However, the French medical researcher Etienne-Jules Marey was greatly interested in the study of human movement, and wanted to make sequence photographs or chronophotographic studies of the athletes at the Paris Olympics. He managed to persuade some reluctant American athletes to come to his Station Physiologique prior to their events with the promise of copies of the photographs or film strips. The film strips – which capture around one second's duration of lateral action – were taken by Marey's assistants, Lucien Bull and Paul

Richer, and include studies of the great Ray Ewry in the standing high jump; Alvin Kraenzlein demonstrating the long jump and hurdling; and shot putter Richard Sheldon. American and British athletes were dominant in the track and field events, greatly to French chagrin, and the reasons why were clear to see in Marey's studies. The Americans' whole approach showed greater dynamism and flexibility of movement, in contrast to the correct military bearing shown by the unnamed French athletes in Marey's studies.³ Although not motion pictures as such, Marey's film strips can be animated, giving us the first records in motion of Olympic athletes.

The second and third Olympics were so poorly managed that some competitors were not always aware that they were taking part in the Games, and the Olympic movement stood in danger of collapse. The intermediate or intercalated Games of 1906, held in Athens, were not an official Olympic event, and are often excluded from the official records, but they were vital in putting the Olympic movement back on its feet. They were sufficiently prominent for the burgeoning film industry to take notice, and the French Gaumont and Pathé firms, the British company Warwick, and the American producer Burton Holmes each sent a camera team to Athens to shoot films that were exhibited worldwide. Films at this period were seldom longer than ten minutes, and each of these records offered no more than highlights, with neither athletes nor nations identified. Surviving Gaumont film puts the emphasis heavily on pageantry, notably the arrival of King Edward VII to the stadium, and there is further such emphasis with the military precision of gymnastic exercises.⁴ A separate film from 1906 (company unknown) shows the standing high jump competition, though sadly not with Ray Ewry, winner of two gold medals.⁵ The other films from 1906 are now lost.

The 1908 Games took place in London as part of the Franco-British Exhibition. They saw the Olympic movement settled at last and beginning to attract genuine worldwide competition and audience interest. Films of the Games naturally played their part in this global dissemination. For the first time, the local organisers allocated exclusive filming rights to one company, Pathé, although this was restricted to film taken inside the White City stadium, as external events were filmed by other companies.⁶ Pathé took around 3500 feet of film, lasting approximately 60 minutes, and released in five instalments. Around ten minutes survives today.⁷ Here, the events, and noticeably the competitors, are starting to take over from the ceremony. The surviving films record such events as the pole vault, high jump, tug o' war, discus, water polo and women's archery, although without naming the competitors, or indeed providing any titles to indicate who or what we are watching. Individualism is not foregrounded, although this is not just characteristic of Olympic film alone but rather of sports film and indeed actuality film overall at this early point in motion picture history. Particular coverage is given to the most notable contest of those Games, the marathon, with the ultimately doomed efforts of the Italian Dorando Pietri, crossing the line first only to be disqualified for having received

assistance, bringing drama and tension for the first time to the Olympic film. Coverage of the marathon would become the dramatic highlight of all succeeding Olympic films. The film's few titles do not identify Pietri nor give any explanation of the drama we clearly see unfolding, but one has to see the film as it would have been at the time, as a report on events past, with audience foreknowledge of those events, now illustrated without need for commentary.

Responsibility for filming the Stockholm Games of 1912 fell to the A.B. Svensk-Amerikanska Film Kompaniet, which was awarded the contract by the sub-committee for finance of the Swedish organising committee. The stipulations in the contract indicate the level of control now imposed by the organising committee in determining what could be filmed and from where, important elements to be considered when judging what the cinematographic record is able to show us:

The right of taking cinema-photographic pictures of the Games was disposed of by the Sub-committee for Finance to the Swedish-American Films Co., Ltd., ... subject to the condition that, in the opinion of these members of the Swedish Olympic Committee responsible for the technical arrangements of the Games, the taking of such pictures would not hinder the proper carrying out of the competitions, and on the understanding that the Company was assured such sole rights only when the local conditions prevailing at the places where the various competitions were held, enabled the Swedish Olympic Committee to take measures against the infringement of the rights in question. The agreement also covered the try outs that were to take place during the first days of June, 1912, in connection with the opening of the newly-finished Stadium, and permitted the Company to have on the ground not more than 6 apparatus at one and the same time, with 6 photographers and 4 assistants, 2 groundsmen and the necessary number of attendants. The apparatus were to be placed in such positions as were assigned them by the leaders of the various competitions after consultation with the representatives of the Company, for whom a room was reserved at the Stadium.⁸

A.B. Svensk-Amerikanska Film Kompaniet in turn commissioned Pathé to do the filming for them, recording a relatively wide range of events in footage that was eventually released in various forms according to national territory. As yet there was no thought given to a longer documentary – an anachronistic concept in any case for 1912 – and so the films were released in single reels of around ten minutes each.⁹ It is unclear how much was filmed, but most if not all survives in the archives of Sveriges Television and the Swedish Film Institute, while two reels are held by the BFI National Archive in London. Featured sports include an opening gymnastic display – a standard ritualistic feature of most early Olympic films – the javelin competition won by Sweden's Eric Lemming; Hannes Kolehmainen, first in that great tradition of Finnish Olympic distance runners, winning the 5000 metres; men's tennis, the football tournament won by Great Britain, Graeco-Roman wrestling, hammer throwing, the standing high jump, and the marathon was once again given relatively extended treatment. For the first time,

individual athletes are named in the intertitles, although this is limited to identifying the winners and some basic times, lengths or scorelines. The films, therefore, made the first steps towards becoming sports films, rather than interest (or documentary) films that display sport for its curiosity or purely symbolic value.

After the Games of the sixth Olympiad were cancelled due to the war (the 1916 host city was to have been Berlin), they were next awarded to Antwerp. However, the 1920 Games were hastily and cheaply organised, and poorly attended. Little film survives, and there seems not to have been any attempt to match the coverage offered in 1908 and 1912. All that survives is a handful of newsreel records, each a minute or two long. But by the Paris Games of 1924, ambitions had grown, and the first extensive film record of an Olympic Games would be attempted.

Les Jeux Olympiques Paris 1924

The French organising committee wanted to have complete control over photographic and cinematographic records of the upcoming Games. It made approaches to six leading film companies but was unable to agree terms. Consequently, it handed over responsibility to manage the filming of the Games to an organisation formed for the purpose, Les Films Sportifs, which in turn sold the filming rights to Rapid-Film, a company headed by Bernard Natan, which specialised in informational, instructional and advertising films, for the princely sum of 300,000 francs. The producer was Jean de Rovera.¹⁰

The resultant film, *Les Jeux Olympiques Paris 1924*, today exists in three different versions, and in its fullest incarnation it is three-hours long. This includes a prologue recreating the sports of the Ancient Games and extensive coverage of both Winter and Summer Games, with each of the 13 reels being devoted to a single sport, or related set of sports. However, it is unlikely that the film was ever exhibited in this single, full-length form. In France, it was premiered as three separate films: Summer, Winter, and a shorter film on the Ancient Games. The latter seems not to have been commissioned by Les Films Sportifs but was instead an independent Rapid-Film initiative. Thereafter, the Winter, and probably the Summer, Games films were shown as a series.¹¹ In Britain, the films were issued in serial form: in some parts of the country as 12 single-reelers, in others as six two-reelers.¹² The official report of the Games indicates that much hope was placed on the exploitation of foreign rights, but little evidence has been traced as yet for the films being shown outside of France and Britain.¹³ They were undoubtedly screened in some territories, but their presence was minimal, and most overseas audiences gained their moving picture of the Games from newsreels.

It is unlikely that Rapid-Film enjoyed much of a return on the 300,000 franc payment, but the point is that there was a complex, relatively sophisticated release strategy, which saw the necessity of adapting an extensive film record into

different forms according to market taste. A large camera team was employed, and the film itself shows a marked improvement in image quality, technical sophistication and attention to individual athletic achievement from previous cinematographic records. For the first time, the sport starts to shape the film that seeks to encompass it. We are moving from ritual to record – both film as commemorative record and film that delights in record achievement.

The film in its fully restored state brings together Ancient, Winter and Summer Games sequences.¹⁴ It opens with an extraordinary depiction of the Games ‘as they were originally practised in ancient Greece shown in living pictures’. A succession of sports – javelin, discus, wrestling, running – is shown first by a line of athletes in loin cloths striking different statue-like poses as though a frieze on a Grecian vase. The main action of each sport is then demonstrated by a single athlete, which is then repeated in glacially slow motion.¹⁵ Statically filmed in a plain interior setting, the stuffy sequence has little style and less imagination. Its most striking element is where a victor in a wrestling bout raises his head and arms aloft in triumph, intercut with adoring looks from a wide-eyed Greek maiden, in a sequence that points to the sacred roots of the Games while hinting at the profane. But it establishes the image of ritualised sport, of the sport of today being grounded in an idealised past where effort was all and contest irrelevant, an idealism exemplified by stasis and slow motion. Leni Riefenstahl likewise begins her *Olympia* with a cod-classical sequence, brilliantly filmed by Willy Zielke, which idealises the body framed in sporting poses, ostensibly establishing an ideological framework for what then follows.

The change to the actuality of the Winter Games in Chamonix comes as a jolt, and as a relief. We are in the here and now. Establishing shots introduce us to the Alpine town, followed by the parade of nations and some modest opening ceremonies. The sports that follow are simply but delightfully portrayed. We see skating (on a rink in the open air), speed skating, ice hockey, skiing and ski-jumping. The camerawork for the latter is noteworthy, with the rapid shots from different angles employed to record the moment the skier rises into the air. One has little sense of competition (a lively ice hockey match between Canada and the USA excepted), but rather of individual grace and endeavour. Slow-motion footage emphasises the tendency towards encapsulating the sporting ideal. But militating against this are the intertitles, which turn our attention to plain matters of achievement. ‘When the ski jumper comes down on the snow, he is travelling at the rate of nearly 60 miles an hour...’, one title informs us. ‘Both distance and depth are counted in ski-jumping. The jumper travels from 120 to 150 feet in the air’, says another, followed by, ‘Haugen, the winner, who made a jump of 163 ft. 6 in’. Speed, distance and depth tell us that we are watching records being made.

The Summer Games section begins with dignitaries entering and seated at the stadium, including the Prince of Wales, the Papal Nuncio, and the subject of

especial fascination for the film, Haile Selassie. The march past of the national teams is filmed with attention to variety and strikes a judicious balance between pageantry and informality. If the shots of the crowd are hardly of the close-up variety that we enjoy today, there is nevertheless a clear picture given that this is a spectator event, that the spectators give it meaning as much as do the athletes. Speeches, explosions in the air, the release of masses of carrier pigeons, and the national teams marching out of the stadium conclude a sequence that establishes the Olympic formalities without being too formal about it. A montage follows of some of the sports we are to witness, the shots selected as examples of courage (a staggering cross-country runner trying to climb a slope), agility, strength and discipline (a gymnastic display, an echo of the non-competitive demonstrations that characterise earlier Olympic films).

And then the sports begin. The film is divided up into individual disciplines, which take up a reel (ten minutes or so), indicating the producers' intention to release it in serial form. Some of the sports would seem to have offered little appeal as single attractions, however. The reels showing wrestling and polo make for tedious viewing on their own, while the swimming sequences provide little more than frustration for the viewer, who sees only distant turmoil in the water without any idea of who the competitors might be (unfortunately this applies to the great Johnny Weissmuller, the future screen Tarzan, seen only submerged and in long shot). There seems to have been a conscious effort on the part of the filmmakers to give equal treatment to all sports, an attitude commendably Olympian but less advisable commercially.

But while some events are a challenge to the viewer, the majority is never less than efficiently portrayed, and occasionally marvellously so. Particularly thrilling is the football, where the Uruguayan gold medal winners demonstrate a level of technical accomplishment against their Swiss opponents light years ahead of the sturdy endeavours of the European teams. It is as though the two competing teams were each playing a different sport. The rugby union final, though not easy for the viewer to follow, owing to a relatively small camera team positioned at ground level, documents one of the exceptional upsets in Olympic history, when France was beaten 17-3 by the United States; although the fans' disturbances which later caused the International Olympic Committee to remove the sport from the programme go unrecorded.

Inevitably, however, the highlights mostly come from track and field, and it is here that the camerawork best displays the transference taking place from idealism to individual, from ritual to record. The 100 metres, won by Harold Abrahams, is a model example of the new kind of Olympic filmmaking. While the race itself is not particularly well filmed – a camera shot from the rear as the runners hurtle into the distance, then a camera positioned almost directly in front as they pass the finishing line – it nevertheless builds up atmosphere very well,

with such eye-catching details as the athletes digging holes in the track for their heels, and titles that compare the competitors to greyhounds straining at the leash. No slow motion is used for this or any other of the sprint events; instead it is employed for the field events (the winner of each such event is invariably the one selected for the slow-motion treatment) and in a particularly artful manner for the 3000 metres steeplechase: the runners landing in the water to set off slow-moving plumes of spray. The emphasis throughout is on the record and the individual. Lengths and timings are given for each winner, usually with a reminder of the world record in that event. Images of the leading athletes in the Games – the British trio of Abrahams, Liddell and Lowe, the ‘flying Finn’ Paavo Nurmi running with metronomic efficiency (periodically checking his watch) and the weather-beaten features of his long-distance running compatriot Ville Ritola – linger in the mind and demonstrate the increasing emphasis on personality. The viewer wants to know the names, to read faces, to recognise achievement, to know who won (and for which nation).

The marathon is a *tour de force*, a real drama in itself. Surprisingly, but in line with the treatment of all running races with the exception of the steeplechase, slow motion is not employed. The viewer is never taken out of time to consider the poetry in motion. Instead we have the record of a race, skilfully dramatised by judicious shot selection and carefully observed human details, notably the anxious looks of a flustered official at a drinks stop, trying and failing to maintain some sort of control over events. The contrast between petty officialdom and the indifferent athletes solely concentrating on the race (and their refreshment) makes for a delightful vignette, pinpointing both the absurdities and the nobility of sporting endeavour.

A review of the film in a British film trade journal picks up on ritual versus record in a way that suggests that it was a real dilemma for some:

A record of the Olympic Games, this series contains first-rate views of the opening scenes in the Stadium, the arrival of distinguished visitors, the march past of competitors and the taking of oaths of sportsmanship. The various events are shown from different points of vantage – with now and then a little too much emphasis on winners as distinct from the way in which they won – and these pictures are supplemented at time by slow-motion photography.¹⁶

The film indeed puts emphasis on winners, the coverage of most events ending with shots of the winning athlete in action, concluding with a close-up of them smiling for the camera, with titles recording the metrics of their achievement. The reviewer seems to be rebelling against this encroachment of the individual, preferring the pageantry and process on display. It is a view of sport not so much to be enjoyed as honoured. *Les Jeux Olympiques Paris 1924* captures a particular point in the popularisation of the modern Olympic Games, a moment that film was well placed to capture, with its eye for incident, conflict and character. It is where classicism starts to fall away and modernism begins.

De Olympische Spelen

1928 saw the production of two Olympic feature films, one for each of the Summer and Winter Games. The serial form was abandoned; now a single feature-length film would attempt to capture the essence of a single Games, a model that would persist for the next five decades at least. That covering the Winter Olympics of St. Moritz was *Das Weisse Stadion*, made by Dr Arnold Fanck. Given official backing by the International Olympic Committee, the Ufa production was hampered by using only two cameramen, and the result is reported to have been perfunctory at best.¹⁷ Fanck, however, provides the link between silent Olympic filmmaking and the greatest of all sports films, as it was he who, when looking for a heroine in 1924 for the latest in his series of mountain adventure films, found Leni Riefenstahl. She, for her part, found her inspiration and learned much of her craft working on Fanck's films, going on to produce *Olympia*.

The Summer Games were held in Amsterdam, but the feature film that was made of them had a troubled history. In 1927 the Dutch Olympic Committee made a number of approaches to film companies concerning the production of a feature film record of the Games. The extent of these approaches and money they were seeking for the exclusive rights caused problems. At the same time as they were making approaches locally to a federation of Dutch film importers and exhibitors, the Nederlandsch Bioscoop Bond, the Committee was attempting to negotiate a deal with foreign production companies in Switzerland, Germany and Italy. In each case money proved the stumbling block, until, in May, the Committee announced a deal with the Italian company Istituto Luce. Luce declined to meet the Committee's high asking price but agreed to pay half its revenue from the film to the Committee, which evidently had to agree on a compromise as time was running out.¹⁸ Unfortunately there was such ill-feeling caused by the Dutch Olympic Committee's mishandling of the whole affair, particularly the overlooking of local film concerns, that the official Olympic film – entitled *De Olympische Spelen* – was boycotted by Dutch cinemas. The Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs intervened to halt the boycott, but renewed conflict between the Olympic Committee and the Nederlandsch Bioscoop Bond caused the boycott to be reinstated. *De Olympische Spelen* remains one of the least known and least seen of all Olympic feature films.¹⁹

The man selected to produce the film was neither Italian nor Dutch. He was Wilhelm Prager, a German who had in 1925 directed the renowned Ufa *kulturfilme*, or documentary, *Wege Zu Kraft und Schönheit (Ways to Strength and Beauty)*, a celebration of physical culture and the body beautiful illustrated by examples taken from gymnastics, dance and athletics. A Ufa publicity leaflet claimed that the film pointed the way to the 'regeneration of the human race' but, despite its retrospectively suggestive title, in practice it had little to do with the tenets of incipient National Socialism and was simply a promotional film for

healthy living that resonated with the concerns of various groups in German society since the turn of the century.²⁰ The film's considerable success may have owed more to its liberal display of nudity than any audience thirst for exercise or proto-Nazi ideology. Prager was the first in a long line of directors with artistic pretensions given an Olympic film contract on which to stamp their cinematic identity: Leni Riefenstahl in 1936, Kon Ichikawa in 1964, Alberto Isaac in 1968, John Schlesinger, Mai Zetterling, Arthur Penn and others in 1972, and Carlos Saura in 1992 among them. Intriguingly, it was recently discovered that Leni Riefenstahl appears as a Roman maid in one of the film's cod-classical sequences, giving her a connection with both Olympic films of 1928.

Prager produced a full-length documentary (originally around 110 minutes but only 60 minutes long in the form available on DVD) that gave ample coverage to all the stars of those Games: Paavo Nurmi and Ville Ritola; Boughèra El Ouafi, the first North African marathon champion (Algerian-born but competing for France); Japan's triple jumper Mikio Oda, the first Asian athlete to win an Olympic gold medal; and Britain's colourful Lord Burghley, winner of the 400 metres hurdles. Sadly Johnny Weissmuller is not featured, nor indeed any swimming sequences. An event now famous in Olympic history is the women's 800 metres, the first women's running event allowed in the Games, and one where the apparent exhaustion of some of the competitors caused the event to be withdrawn until, amazingly, 1960. Viewed now it is hard to imagine how what looks to our eyes a well-fought, routine race could have occasioned such shock and led to such a dramatic decision (just the one runner collapses at the end of the race). Film can elevate, but equally its matter-of-factness can bring things down to commonsense reality – but the alarm was caused more by the reported nature of the incident than by anyone examining the documentary record that the film provided.

De Olympische Spelen is not a work of any high artistic merit, but the sports are each documented competently enough, with good use of dynamic panning shots for the track events, some creative camera angles, and one notable innovation – on-screen titles to identify individual runners in some of the distance races. The record of the 10,000 metres, for example, shows a marked advance of all that has gone before, with a pleasing variety of camera angles and lengths, steady panning shots following the athletes around the track, striking use of low level shots, and intertitles that not only identify the runners but describe points of the action, such as Paavo Nurmi's burst of speed at the end of the race to beat Ritola.

In terms of ritualism, however, the transition is almost complete. The film is almost entirely unceremonial. The opening ceremonies are covered in the traditional manner, as is the arrival of Queen Wilhelmina halfway through the film, but almost as much attention is devoted at the start of the film to the spectators making their way into the stadium, while crowd shots recur throughout the film. The use of slow motion is minimal, used more for variety than for its emblematic

qualities, and sporting reportage comes to the fore. Every field athlete is identified, every winner is called to the camera for their triumphal close-up. Also notable is the strong emphasis on track and field. There is no longer the attempt as in 1924 to treat all sports equally in terms of screen time. Popular taste now determines, for the most part, what is shown on the screen (non-track and field events featured include boxing and fencing). *De Olympische Spelen* still has elements that connect it to what has been seen before, but its stronger connection is with a kind of sports coverage that we recognise now, one that builds up the individual and structures itself around the tensions inherent in the event itself, as we yearn to learn who will win. Nonetheless, it is a record of records. We saw not who will win, but who won – the semblance of a live record, but in fact a document of what is past. At root it remains a commemorative spectacle.

Seeing who won

What do we see in these records of past sporting events? As has been argued, both films reflect a tension between idealism and drama, between ritual and record. There is the desire to depict a classical, statuesque conception of sport, where the athlete is anonymised, the endeavour depicted as beyond the particular time and space of the Games in question. The frequent use of slow motion in the 1924 film focuses the eye on form, stylising the athletic moment. But then there is the need to document actual achievement, with the names of competitors, the times and distances taken, the details of past records and records now broken. But this latter impulse is challenged by the inevitable nature of the film as past record. These are not live events; and they never were shown as live events. There is none of the tension we expect of the live motion picture sports broadcast of today, where we wait to see who won. What other reason is there to watch sports except to see who will win? But the sports film in the cinema – and this relates not just to these major Olympic films, but to the newsreels that were the commonest form in which audiences saw sports on a screen in the era before television – denied audiences any such expectation. They already knew the result.

We know frustratingly little about the reception of sports films from this period, and nothing at all about the 1924 and 1928 Olympic Games films – indeed, as has been pointed out, the 1928 film was barely seen by anyone at all. Sports film at that time must have had a confirmatory character, bringing illustration of events to an interested audience that already knew the score, just as in 1908 when it was assumed audiences would know something of Dorando Pietri from earlier news reports and were now being invited to witness documentary confirmation of the event. This was how newsreels of sports in the 1920s engaged with their audience, as fans caught up with how their team had played the previous Saturday. But did the Olympic Games have the same popular

appeal? Individual athletes had their following of course, but the 1924 and 1928 films allow little space for partiality. Viewers might have caught a glimpse of their national team or individuals, but then they were invited to enjoy equally the pleasures of other nations competing against yet other nations. The films – particularly 1924 – continually draw us away from the excitement of the moment to the idealised moment, to sport as spectacle for its own sake.

If distance from the events was built into the films even at the time, how much greater is the distance to us as observers now. The films of course have a basic documentary value: we see the names, we see how they moved, we learn how they dressed, how the officials operated, how well attended the Games were or were not, and so on. That documentary record is, naturally, partial: we see what was thought most likely to appeal to an audience at the time, and what could be most easily captured by the cameras. Very little is filmed indoors, owing to the need for strong lighting, and events such as swimming offer no spectacle at all. And of course it is in black-and-white, and there is no sound – no roar of the crowd. The films leave us struggling to capture a sense of the reality.

Yet if we bring to the films the same imaginative sympathy as we should to any historical artefact, and if we understand something of the means of their production, then they do illuminate the past. They demand commitment of us as viewers if we are to experience them at their richest. In the end, they reflect the Olympic movement's own conflict between idealism and contentious reality. That same confused relationship between ritual and record went on to characterise all of the subsequent Olympic feature films, which felt that by demonstrating art they could overcome the plain reality of contests that were now over. Art and actuality do not sit easily together. The Olympic film – by which is meant any documentary film about the Games released after the event – is unsure of the pleasures that it should offer us, but in that uncertainty lies its particular interest. It documents the urge towards idealism while at the same time the championing of individualism.

Allen Guttman argues that the rise of athletic achievement comes with the secularisation of society:

When qualitative distinctions fade and lose their force, we turn to quantitative ones. When we can no longer distinguish the sacred from the profane or even the good from the bad, we content ourselves with minute discriminations between the batting average of the .308 hitter and the .307 hitter. Once the gods have vanished from Mount Olympus ... we can no longer run to appease them or to save our souls, but we can set a new record. It is a uniquely modern form of immortality.²¹

But equally, what more uniquely modern form of immortality is there than that provided by the motion picture? Nurmi will always be battling against Vitola; Uruguay will always be outfoxing Switzerland on the football field; Boughèra El

Ouafi will always be bravely triumphing in the marathon; Harold Abrahams will always just edge ahead of Charley Paddock in the 100 metres final, then stand, breathless but obliging, to meet the request of the cameraman for a close-up. Along with the statistics and the histories that tell us who won and how they won, film preserves the moment – or at least the illusion of the moment. In that moment it captures not only the action but its visually commemorative significance. When considering Europe's sporting heritage as captured on films such as *Les Jeux Olympiques Paris 1924* and *De Olympische Spelen*, we need to recognise that their value is not purely as photographic record but as symbolic record too, and that these twin qualities are indivisible. We will never tire of seeing who won, because we see not only how they did so, but why.

References and Notes

1. This essay builds on arguments originally put forward in my article L. McKernan (1998) *Lo Sport Nel Cinema Muto / Sport and the silent screen*. *Griffithiana*, 64, pp. 80–141. The leading studies of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* are C. Graham (1986) *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia* (Metuchen, NJ/London: Scarecrow); and T. Downing (1992) *Olympia* (London: British Film Institute).
2. A thorough examination has been made of surviving film catalogues from the period and archival sources. Several films exist of the Paris and St Louis expositions, but none shows any of the Olympic events. Footage on the International Olympic Committee's website (<http://www.olympic.org>) claimed to show athletics events from 1904, but the location was clearly not Francis Field (the main athletic venue) and the film has now been removed from the site (accessed 3 May 2010).
3. M. Braun (1992) *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904)* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press), pp. 204–212. Surviving examples of the chronophotographic sequences from the 1900 Games are held by the Cinémathèque Française, Paris, and at the National Media Museum in Bradford, UK.
4. The Gaumont film is held by the BFI National Archive. A 1906 cinema programme supplies this description of the film: 'Arrival of H. M. King Edward, Entry of Royalties into Arena, Royalties Taking their Seats, Grand March Past of Competitors, The Danish Teams including ladies, The Swedish and Germans Teams, Heavy Weight Lifting, Rope Climbing Extraordinary, And other events.' Details from a programme for the Daily Bioscope cinema, 23 May 1906, reproduced in H. White (1993) *The Pageant of the Century* (London: Odhams Press), p. 147.
5. This is held by the BFI National Archive under the rather unhelpful title of *Athens 1896 [sic]*.
6. The non-Pathé films were *Olympic Marathon Race* (Charles Urban Trading Company) 425ft; *The Marathon Race* (Gaumont) 375ft; *Olympic Regatta at Henley* (Charles Urban Trading Company) 319ft; *Olympic Sports at Henley* (Charles Urban Trading Company) 300ft. See D. Gifford (2000) *The British*

- Film Catalogue Volume 2: Non-Fiction Film, 1888–1994* (London, Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn) cat. nos. 03597, 03598, 03605, 03606.
7. The Pathé series was issued in the UK as *The Stadium Sports* series in five parts: 1. (unnamed) 1,088 ft; 2. (unnamed) 824 ft; 3. (unnamed) 538 ft; 4. *The Marathon Race*, 445 ft; 5. *Distribution of Prizes*, 445 ft. Gifford, *The British Film Catalogue Volume 2*, cat. no. 03595.
 8. E. Bergvall (ed.) (1913) *The Fifth Olympiad: The Official Report of the Olympic Games of Stockholm 1912* (Stockholm: Wahlstrom & Widstrand), p. 35. Cinematographic arrangements are not mentioned in the official report for 1908.
 9. There are six episodes in the Pathé catalogue, under the title *Jeux Olympiques de Stockholm*, the individual lengths being 110 m, 170 m, 105 m, 130 m, 92 m and 165 m. Details from the Pathé catalogue available at <http://filmographie.fondation-jeromeseydoux-pathe.com> (accessed 3 May 2010).
 10. Comité Olympique Française (1924) *Les Jeux de la VIII Olympiade Paris 1924, Rapport Officiel*, pp. 798–799.
 11. The Winter Games film was premiered in Paris on 11 March 1924 and the Summer Games film on 1 July 1924. *La Cinématographie française*, no. 279–280, March 1924, *Ciné-Journal*, no. 759-760-776-778, March–July 1924. There is an indication in the latter report that the Winter Games films were exhibited as a series in France, as was the case in Britain. Information from Robert Jacquier, Information Management Department, International Olympic Committee.
 12. In Britain the films were released in October 1924 as *The Olympic Games, 1924*, issued by Sports Film Co. (Rapid), combining Summer, Winter and Ancient Games sequences. (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 25 September 1924, p. 42.) The following month a series was issued under the title *The Olympic Games* by Unity Films as 12 single reels, released weekly, in London and the home counties. This series does not appear to have featured the Ancient Games sequences. (Trade News. *The Bioscope*, 2 October 1924, p. 388; Film Reviews. *The Bioscope*, 9 October 1924, p. 55.)
 13. *Les Jeux de la VIII Olympiade Paris 1924*, pp. 798–799.
 14. I am grateful to Adrian Wood of Inkulla Media and Robert Jacquier of the International Olympic Committee for granting me access to the film during the process of restoration.
 15. It is to be assumed that when the films were originally shown they would have been projected at a uniform speed throughout, probably between 16 and 18 frames per second. Today audiences would probably want to see the slow motion sequences speeded up slightly to match modern taste, and this is the policy being followed by the IOC restoration for its transfer to DVD.
 16. *The Olympic Games, 1924*. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 25 September 1924, p. 42.
 17. Currently *Das Weisse Stadion* is considered to be a lost film.
 18. L. McKernan (1998) *Lo Sport Nel Cinema Muto / Sport and the silent screen*. *Griffithiana*, 64, pp. 133–135.
 19. The film is available on DVD from the Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, where the film is preserved. The film on its original release was 3593 metres.

20. S. Kracauer (1947) *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (London: Dennis Dobson), 142–143.
21. A. Guttmann (1978) *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 55.

About the Author

Luke McKernan is Lead Curator, Moving Image at the British Library. He is an historian of silent film with a particular interest in curating and contextualising early sports films for live audiences. He has presented archive film shows on the Olympic Games, boxing, football, cricket, horse racing and tennis in the UK, USA, and Italy. His print publications include *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema: A Worldwide Survey* (British Film Institute 1996, co-edited with Stephen Herbert) and *Yesterday's News: The British Cinema Newsreel Reader* (BUFVC 2002). His substantial essay 'Sport and the Silent Screen' was published in *Griffithiana* 64 (Cineteca del Friuli 1998). He manages several websites and web resources, including an early and silent cinema blog, *The Bioscope*.