



Moving Toward and Away from Horror

100 Years of Olympic Films, 1912–2012

BY LINDA C. EHRLICH

It is sadly ironic that the Criterion Collection's release of the new restoration of Ichikawa Kon's *Tokyo Olympiad* (1964)—which is also included as part of the label's massive box set *100 Years of Olympic Films, 1912–2012*—followed closely on the heels of the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now optimistically rescheduled for 2021, the Games are scheduled to reuse some of the same sites as the '64 edition (the Budokan for judo, the Tange Kenzo-designed Yoyogi National Gymnasium for handball, the Baji Koen Park for equestrian events), and the proceedings are once again to be filmed by a noted Japanese filmmaker, Kawase Naomi. Kawase had originally conceived of her Olympic film as a testament to Japan's recovery from the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and the resulting meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant—a threefold tragedy that she had previously addressed in her con-

tribution to *3.11 A Sense of Home* (2011), an omnibus project made in reaction to the disaster that also featured episodes from Jia Zhangke, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jonas Mekas, Patti Smith, Victor Erice, and Bong Joon Ho, among others. In the new context of the pandemic, however, she stated in a recent interview with the *Financial Times* that she will now be approaching the theme of “recovery” with a focus on “all humans and the entire world”—a daunting but necessary response to an event that has shaken the world to its economic, physical, and psychological core.

As the Criterion set attests, Olympics films have often been haunted by spectres of horror and catastrophe even as they celebrate hope and triumph. Most notoriously, Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1938) captures the fascist atrocities already occurring offscreen in the very act of glossing them over; conversely, Ichikawa’s *Olympiad*—which begins with the torch being carried into the stadium by Sakai Yoshinori, the “Hiroshima baby” who was born the day the first atomic bomb was dropped on Japan—marks a remembrance of and an attempt to move beyond the devastation of the Pacific War. The omnibus film *Visions of Eight* (1973) ends with a dedication to the murdered Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Games; *Hand in Hand* (1989), Im Kwon-taek’s record of the 1988 Seoul Games, invokes memories of the Korean War and the preceding era of the country’s subjugation under Japanese colonial rule; while Carlos Saura’s *Marathon* (1993) uses the 1992 Barcelona Games as a means of celebrating Spain’s progress since

the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975. While we wait to see how Kawase will frame the 2021 Olympics as we (hopefully) move beyond our current world-crippling crisis, it’s instructive to reconsider some of the exemplary films that have been made about the Games. And even as Tokyo is on our minds now, it’s almost impossible to avoid moving back past Ichikawa’s 1964 masterpiece and beginning this selective survey with Riefenstahl’s monument to the 1936 Berlin Games (which, like Ichikawa’s *Olympiad*, is presented in the Criterion set in a new restoration).

As ever, we must be careful when talking about *Olympia*, which could well serve as the limit case of Walter Benjamin’s famous dictum that fascism tends towards an aestheticizing of politics. There are undoubtedly many striking artistic decisions made in the filming of several events in *Olympia*: the fencers who are introduced to us by their shadows on the floor; the divers who seem to be touching the clouds; the silhouettes of naked athletes running through the mist. Rather than exploring the contrasts and differences between the competitors, Riefenstahl emphasizes their uniformity, celebrating the body as geometric object—a seemingly decontextualized idealization that she later used as a cornerstone of her argument that the film was in no way ideological, much less Nazi propaganda. However, as British historian and columnist Alex von Tunzelmann noted perceptively in a 2012 article in the *Guardian*, “Though these sporting images might in themselves have been neutral, their compilation in Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*



Tokyo Olympiad

subtly underlined a tenet of all authoritarian regimes: that individuals must be turned into machines that act as required, but do not think—an echo of Susan Sontag's declaration, in her famous essay "Fascinating Fascism," that "a utopian aesthetics (physical perfection; identity as a biological given) implies an ideal eroticism: sexuality converted into the magnetism of leaders and the joy of followers."

This is no mere projection on Sontag's part. Premiered on April 20, 1938, to coincide with Hitler's 49th birthday, and awarded the top prize at Mussolini's Venice Film Festival four months later, *Olympia* indissolubly links the Nazi state and Nazi ideology with both the events on the field and the audience in the stands. In the opening parade, the Greeks, Austrians, and Italians stick their arms out in the *Sieg Heil*, while the US team puts their hats over their hearts. Images of cheering crowds dissolve to Hitler giving his odd variation on the Nazi salute; when a German athlete wins, the Führer grins like a schoolboy. Dai Vaughn, in a comparison of the Riefenstahl and Ichikawa films in *Sight & Sound*, reinforces Sontag's claim when he contrasts Ichikawa's treatment of the spectators as "individual to the point of quirkiness" with *Olympia*'s depiction of "cliques of people respond[ing] to their cheerleader, i.e., to properly constituted authority."

Even more than its depiction of "the masses," it is in its depictions of athletes of colour that *Olympia* reveals its true ideological precepts. At the start of the 800-metre race, the film's narrator declares that "two Black men are competing against the strongest of the white race." (Those two men—American John Woodruff and Canadian Phil Edwards—took home the gold and bronze medals in the event, respectively.) The British India field hockey team scored an amazing 36 goals in five games, with only one goal scored against them, yet little of this astounding performance made it into the film. (Rumour has it that there is a 70-minute compilation of the event stowed away by Riefenstahl's family.) And even though the film's recording of Jesse Owens' four gold medal-winning performances is almost inevitably singled out in hindsight—in a 2016 article for the BBC, Nicholas Barber blithely declares that "No other athlete in the film makes anywhere near as much of an impression"—it is difficult to join Barber in claiming that Riefenstahl's treatment of him is "entirely positive" (or even "subversive") when Owens receives far less screen time in this lengthy film than several less talented German athletes. (Rather than giving credit to Riefenstahl, it would be more fitting to single out an act of "subversiveness" that took place beyond the gaze of her cameras: the German long-jump champion Luz Long, whom Owens beat in the final round of that event, gave his African-American competitor a valuable tip in advance of his jump, and the two men formed a friendship that Owens later wrote he valued even more than his medals.)

Thin, latter-day apologetics cannot dispel the stigma that Riefenstahl's film rightfully bears. *Olympia* is a horrific film; behind its images of "perfect" white bodies lie mountains of corpses. In its reactionary idealization of "beauty," *Olympia* foretells the horror already taking place behind the scenes in Europe. By contrast, *Tokyo Olympiad*—made nearly 20 years after the end of World War II, and 12 years after the conclusion of the Allied occu-

pation of Japan—was intended by its government backers as a testament to a modernized, reinvigorated Japan rising like a phoenix from the ashes of war. Kurosawa Akira was originally approached to chronicle this first-ever Olympics to be held in an Asian country; when he demanded full control over the opening ceremonies as well, Ichikawa (who had earned himself the nickname "the Fixer" within the industry) was called in instead. The veteran director was outfitted with over 100 widescreen Daiescope cameras operated by somewhere between 68 and 164 cameramen (numbers vary according to different reports) along with 57 sound recordists, producing 70 hours of footage.

What the film's sponsors received back from Ichikawa was something far different from the nationalistic pomp they desired, however. While the director does occasionally employ official national symbols—the ladies in kimono holding the trays of medals, a few notes of the national anthem, the rising-sun motif at the beginning (a red sun in a white sky), in the cross-country race sequence (a half-setting sun), and at the conclusion (a reverse image of a white sun in a red sky)—Ichikawa makes it clear that this is not the point of the film. "I tried to grasp the solemnity of the moment when people defy their limits, and to express the solitude of athletes who, in order to win, struggle against themselves," Ichikawa stated. This focus on the individual over the mass produces what James Quandt (who authored the essay accompanying the film's Criterion release) deems "an idiosyncratic, formally innovative [and] surprisingly intimate film" that turns on "the director's penchant for the lone figure and the determined outlier."

Comparing the respective techniques of Riefenstahl and Ichikawa in his *Sight & Sound* essay, Dai Vaughn notes how *Tokyo Olympiad* largely eschews *Olympia*'s frequent use of slow motion and low-angle camera placement, which grants the athletes a larger-than-life, even mythological aspect (and is, unsurprisingly, most often used for German athletes). Rather, Ichikawa turns his attention to the seemingly mundane, from homely, human-interest details about the competitors (one is identified as a car mechanic from Warsaw, another as a 31-year-old police officer, and so on) to the powerful physical reality of top-flight athletics. In the lengthy marathon sequence centred on the Ethiopian runner Abebe Bikila, who was seeking (and won) his second Olympic gold medal after winning at Rome in 1960 whilst running barefoot, Ichikawa celebrates the intense focus and inward gaze of a superb athlete even as he captures the gruelling toll that fells so many of Bikila's competitors.

In both its intense physical realism and its almost anthropological study of human overcoming, the marathon sequence recalls *Alone on the Pacific* (1963), Ichikawa's docudrama about the 23-year-old Horie Kenichi's 94-day solo journey from Osaka Bay to San Francisco in a small, homemade vessel. Yet where Horie and Bikila's ordeals are ultimately vindicated by triumph, Ichikawa finds a different kind of heroism in Ahmed Issa, a 22-year-old runner and Olympic debutant from the newly independent Central African nation of Chad who places second in the first round of the 800 metres, but fails to qualify in the second round and is thus excluded from the final. Ichikawa celebrates Issa's stoicism in dealing with the overwhelming feelings of displacement and



Tokyo Olympiad

disorientation that occur when one is whisked from one's home and plunged into a high-pressure situation that demands maximum performance. Blinded by the bright lights upon his arrival in Japan, isolated from others with whom he can converse, eating alone, Issa becomes a figure of stillness and pathos in the midst of the Olympic whirlwind.

Elsewhere in *Tokyo Olympiad*, Ichikawa takes a more assertively formalist approach. The women's hurdles is depicted in almost complete silence, until cheers break out at the end. During the rain-drenched shot put, Ichikawa seems just as interested in the explosive crater that the ball makes in the muddy ground as in the efforts of the athletes (and he also devotes sympathetic screen time to those working on the field in these soggy conditions). The gymnastics events are rendered with a striking asymmetry that recalls Ichikawa's strategies of figure placement in such films as *An Actor's Revenge* (1963) and *The Makioka Sisters* (1983), while the arcing flight of a pole vaulter is broken up sequentially as if it were a Muybridge motion study. Ichikawa's disregard (if not disdain) for easy nationalistic sentiment is evident even in his treatment of one of the most celebrated Japanese triumphs at the Games, the victory of the women's volleyball team over the Soviets, a David-vs.-Goliath match-up that was watched by most of the country: cutting short the concluding awards ceremony, Ichikawa transports us into the abstract universe of the rowing event, where the sculls seem to be gliding across a brilliant pane of reflecting glass.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Tokyo Olympiad's* idiosyncratic approach brought disapproval from the ranks of officialdom that had backed the project, from the country's Olympics Organizing

Committee—whose representative declared that they wanted more of a straightforward film instead of such an “artistic” (*geijit-suteki*) work—to the Ministry of Education (which refused to endow the film with a “Recommended” status, thus denying it circulation to the large school audience), to the Imperial family, which discreetly expressed its dislike of the film after a private screening. When the Organizing Committee demanded that he reshoot the film, Ichikawa drily responded by noting that the cast had already left town. The funders then undertook to make their own “proper” Olympics film from Ichikawa's footage, even as *Tokyo Olympiad* was released in March 1965 to immense critical and commercial success (it became the highest-grossing domestic release to date in Japan, took second place in the prestigious *Kinema Junpo* poll of the best films of the year, and won the FIPRESCI prize at the Cannes Film Festival).

The result of the Committee's efforts was *Sensation of the Century* (1966), credited to Taguchi Suketaro and Kawamoto Nobumasa, which indulges every stereotype that Ichikawa had so studiously avoided: standard-issue picturesque ruins of Greek columns, scores of flags, the Emperor and Empress, panoramic shots of cheering crowds, the Japanese national anthem (needless to say, played in full this time). Bikila's extraordinary run is banalized by a lilting, childlike melody on the soundtrack, while the range of emotions on the faces of the women's volleyball team as they receive their medals is ruinously undercut by the narrator's redundant reference to their *utsukushii namida* (beautiful tears), not to mention the pointed close-up on the word “Nippon” on the jacket of the team captain. Sakai, the “Hiroshima baby,” is intro-



duced, but there is no mention of the real significance of his presence as an emblem of the horrors of World War II, although care is taken to specify the number of steps he has to climb to reach the torch (613). In short, *Sensation of the Century* is a textbook in boring filmmaking.

By contrast, Claude Lelouch and François Reichenbach's refreshingly breezy *13 jours en France*, a non-official record of the 1968 Winter Games at Grenoble, appears to have learned some of the lessons conveyed by Ichikawa. While the '68 Games produced at least two superstars—figure skater Peggy Fleming, who took home the only gold medal for the US, and triple-gold-winning French skier Jean-Claude Killy—this is not a celebration of “gods.” Rather, it is a whimsical, gently sardonic portrait of globalized spectacle (these were the first Olympics to be broadcast on colour television) sharing space with laid-back localism. The tone is set from the credits themselves, which assign the film's direction not only to Lelouch and Reichenbach, but also to 27 others, in a collective recognition of all those who aided in the shooting. It's an early indication of the primacy placed on the communal and casual rather than the competitive in this Olympic film, which proceeds with a whistled rendition of Francis Lai's theme song and a rather offhanded rehearsal of the torch-lighting ceremony. The directors seem as fascinated by a dachshund leaping through the snow and by marching-band conductors of all sizes and shapes as they are by the athletes. Prior to the skiing events, long lines of people, linked arm in arm, trudge along the slopes like a chorus line to flatten down the snow; after the races, rambunctious crowds of kids (and some adults) slide down the hill on their backsides. Meanwhile, Lai's theme song satirically denounces the American “love of dol-

lars” (though it counters this rebuke with a smitten tribute to the graceful gold medalist Fleming, declaring, “You swept that aside with a gesture”) and cautions the dashing Killy about the perils of sudden fame. This film exceeds Ichikawa's in its sense of playful irreverence, but shares with its Japanese predecessor a love of spontaneous images of children, the eccentric adult spectator, and the off-moment.

13 jours en France ends with the declaration that “after 13 days, France gets back to its old way of life.” That ironic final disclaimer was superseded by a greater irony, however, when the film's planned premiere at Cannes was cancelled, along with the remainder of the Festival itself, in response to and in support of the student uprisings and labour strikes of May '68—a sign that the “old way of life” was not something that the country could just passively sink back into. In an admittedly very different way from Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, *13 jours en France* is thus another Olympic film that inadvertently bears witness to national and global upheaval through absence. This trope largely continues in *Visions of Eight*, which briefly acknowledges the “shadow of tragedy” looming over the Munich Olympics—the murders of 11 Israeli athletes in the Olympic Village by eight members of the Palestinian Black September movement, five of whom were subsequently killed (along with a German police officer) prior to the start of the Games—but, like the Olympics themselves, proceeds to go on with the show.

Taking the intimate, individualistic focus of Ichikawa's *Tokyo Olympiad* even further, *Visions* gives eight international directors free rein to focus on a single aspect of the Games and render it according to their own inclinations. The film opens, appropriately,

with Yuri Ozerov's "The Beginning," focusing on "the tension of waiting" in the moments just before the start of competition. Ichikawa himself contributes "The Fastest," a segment on the 100-metre race (which the director calls "a metaphor for human existence") that captures the runners sprinting towards the camera at four times slower than normal speed, as if we in the audience were the finishing line, while the narration by noted poet Tanikawa Shuntaro comments on the enigmatic expressions and remarkable breathing patterns of these athletes for whom ten seconds is an eternity. Another Olympic-film veteran, *13 jours'* Lelouch, focuses on the dignity and resignation of "The Losers"; Miloš Forman's "The Decathlon" comically intercuts the track and field events with sequences of Alpine musicians; Arthur Penn's "The Highest" echoes the above-mentioned hurdles sequence in *Tokyo Olympiad* by depicting the pole vault in almost complete silence, apart from the sound of the fiberglass pole striking the ground and the roar of the crowd after a successful jump. Michael Pflieger's "The Women" offers a somewhat dated look at the Games' female competitors, ending with an exquisite performance on the uneven parallel bars, while the only woman filmmaker represented here, Mai Zetterling, singles out the impressive, if somewhat bizarre, rituals of weightlifters in "The Strongest."

Centred on British marathon runner Ronald Hill (and the only episode to explicitly mention the Olympic Village massacre), John Schlesinger's "The Longest" offers one of the most detailed looks at the inner workings of an athlete that any Olympic film has yet given us. A 34-year-old senior research chemist, Hill himself provides the segment's voiceover, while Schlesinger beautifully and unsettlingly crosscuts between images of the terrorist stand-off and Hill's exertions in the 26-mile marathon (including blurry images of the crowds lining the route that mimic his point of view), his thoughts of his small son back home, and his memories of training on lonely country roads. Hill ultimately places sixth in the event, but the segment ends not with his Munich accomplishment but footage of him running up to his house back in England, sitting on his front steps, taking off his running shoes and going inside, to (presumably) return to his everyday life.

Where *Visions of Eight* mostly relegates its recognition of political violence to a concluding montage (the Israeli team marching into the stadium during the opening ceremonies, a funeral, a wreath of flowers, and a final dedication to the slain athletes as "tragic victims of the violence of our times"), Im Kwon-taek's *Hand in Hand* plunges us into it at the very beginning, with a map of a divided Korea, images of barbed wire, and graphic black-and-white footage of the Korean War. As did Japan in 1964, South Korea viewed the 1988 Seoul Games as an opportunity to advertise itself as a modern, economically vibrant country ready to take its rightful place in the community of nations, but *Hand in Hand* is more focused on remembrance than triumphalism. Near the beginning of the film, a Korean interviewer speaks to an Australian spectator in the stadium stands, a former journalist who had reported on the Korean War: "Korea underwent great suffering," the Australian man reflects, as past and present overlap via a stark crosscut that juxtaposes stunt planes flying overhead, emitting smoke trails that

match the colours of the Olympic rings, with images of bombers pounding buildings and fleeing, terrified civilians. The legacy of the country's three-and-a-half decades under the grip of Japanese rule is also movingly evoked by the presence of Sohn Kee-chung, who had won the gold medal in the marathon at the 1936 Berlin Olympics filmed by Riefenstahl, but had been forced to compete as part of the Japanese team and under a Japanese rendering of his name (Son Kitei). In an emotional tribute at the beginning of the '88 Games, Sohn carried the Olympic torch into the stadium under his real name, while the narrator muses comments that this Olympics is an attempt by the "Land of the Morning Calm" to be "redeemed from its tormented past."

Dedicated "*al pueblo y a la ciudad de Barcelona*" (to the people and the city of Barcelona), Carlos Saura's *Marathon* feeds into the 1992 Olympics' own redemption narrative of a resurgent post-Franco Spain, particularly in the reassertion of Catalan and Basque culture, which had been suppressed under the dictatorship. Saura conceived of the film as a musical, and the exuberant opening ceremonies put his intentions on full display. Following former king (and recent fugitive) Juan Carlos I's announcement of the official opening of the Games (delivered partially in Catalan), hundreds of gymnasts and theatre artists take to the stadium floor to create a tableaux of an ancient sea battle against monsters watched over by a huge metallic puppet of Hercules—the kind of magnificent spectacle that can't help but invite nostalgia in our current world of "social distancing." In a more contemplative mode, Saura drops the diegetic sound from the end of the final marathon event and the closing ceremonies and scores them to the slow, poignant tones of "El cant del ocells" ("Song of the Birds"), a song made famous by Catalan cellist and anti-Franco exile Pau Casals, who opened all his concerts (including his famous 1971 performance at the United Nations, at age 95) with this Catalan lullaby as a signifier of the resilient spirit and long struggles of Catalonia.

It remains to be seen what course Kawase will follow in her film of the 2021 Games, just as it remains to be seen if the Games will occur at all. "As an optimist, I want the Olympics to be a unifying force that enables people to enjoy getting together in the same place beyond barriers and differences," Kawase said in a recent interview with the *Nikkei Asian Review*—a universalist sentiment that may have sounded like empty cant in another context, but which has an all-too-specific meaning in light of a global upheaval that cannot possibly be consigned to the past, the background, or the margins in this Olympic film. (In the same piece, Kawase also expressed her concern about possible discrimination against those, athletes and spectators both, who have been infected with COVID-19.) Based on Kawase's stated intentions in a television interview—which include a focus on the persistence and dedication of the people behind the scenes, footage culled from spectators' cell phones, and a spotlight on the Refugee Team (which first competed at the Rio Games in 2016)—it appears as if she will be following in Ichikawa's footsteps by unveiling the common humanity that links athletes, volunteers, staff, and viewers, and in that discover what Ichikawa identified, in a 1964 interview on Nippon Television, as an underlying theme of the Olympics: "a peace that is wished for equally by all humanity."