

**Forcing the Fairytale:**  
**Narrative Strategies in Women's Figure Skating Competition Coverage**

The top three U.S. television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, compete every four years for the rights to broadcast the Summer and Winter Olympics, one of “television’s most prestigious events.”<sup>1</sup> When CBS won the rights to broadcast the 1992 Winter Olympics, the network decided to create an especially memorable program, investing \$243 million for U.S. rights alone and then \$100-\$120 million more in production costs.<sup>2</sup> The overwhelming notion within the industry, however, was that the network was taking on too huge of a risk. Predictors nagged that after a 32-year absence, CBS would not be able to sustain high enough ratings to actually make money out of the enormous 116-hour television event. Perhaps the network would have to back down from their \$250,000 30-second commercial rate. Perhaps the network wouldn’t be able to sell out at all. In the least, many speculated that they would fall far below ABC’s solid Olympic ratings four years earlier in Calgary.

While prestigious, the Olympics not always made money for the sponsoring network. In 1980, when the Winter Olympics were broadcast in real time from Lake Placid, New York, ratings were high. In 1984, when they were held overseas in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia--seven hours ahead of American time and therefore tape-delayed--the ratings were disastrously low. In 1988, when the Winter Olympics took place in Calgary, Canada, they were again broadcast live, and again generated high ratings. But in 1992, the Olympics were being held in Albertville France, another six hours time difference from American television audiences, and another potential for tape-delay disaster. At the end of the two-week broadcast marathon, however, CBS led the February television ratings sweeps so comfortably that, by most accounts, they were assured victory for the entire season.<sup>3</sup> Said one glowing CBS executive, “we’d have to go dark for the rest of the season to lose.”<sup>4</sup>

Why were ratings so high? The U.S. hockey team did better than expected but the rest of the events did not see a tumult of American success stories. As it turned out, the reason had to do with a significant shift in narrative strategy. Until 1992, however, the story of the Olympic Games had been told through the lens of Cold War antagonism. Narrative tension came from medal counts, or from the questionable competitive practices of Eastern Bloc countries. Adulation of specific (American) athletes was not

much more than descriptions of their performances and why they were doing well. There was already evidence that this storyline was being abandoned by the 1988 Olympics, as ABC began to build narratives around the athletes' personalities and personal histories. Four years later, CBS became determined to continue this trend and turn every competitive situation into a compelling story that effectively competed with all the other dramas, theatricals, and specials showing on other networks and cable stations during those two weeks in February everyone thought CBS would bomb. As CBS executive Neal Pilson had remarked before coverage began, "we think the Olympics are the best dramatic entertainment programming we could find for February, and I have a lot of confidence that these Olympics are going to make good television."<sup>5</sup>

This chapter analyzes CBS coverage of the 1992 Winter Olympics, and focuses specifically on the Women's Figure Skating Competition. From the American broadcasting perspective, this event has traditionally been the highlight of the Winter Olympics and was easily CBS' most highly rated Olympic event in the two-week broadcast, and up to that point, in the history of American Olympic broadcasting. As sportswriter Frank Deford aptly forecast, "This year the women's skaters are more important than ever. There are no big, bad Communists for athletic jingoists to root against, and that tired lightning-in-a-bottle U.S. hockey miracle of the '80s games just cannot be dragged out and flogged again."<sup>6</sup> Described by CBS commentators as "the hottest ticket in town" with "every seat in the auditorium filled," the 1992 Women's Skating Competition had all the implications of a Broadway musical sell-out before it even began. While CBS was the leading storyteller of the Winter Olympics, similar, supplementary narratives of the less immediate print media certainly enhanced the narrative process as well.

Besides creating a plethora of overlapping and underlying stories that dramatized and popularized the sporting event, the overall melodrama of Women's Figure Skating was told according to the comforting and familiar confines of a Western fairytale--in this case, Cinderella. Narrative success--translated into ratings success--was thus contingent upon the network's ability to position the 1992 crop of Olympic athletes as characters, not athletes, acting out the predictable plot of an age-old tale.

This chapter will illustrate how CBS successfully sustained, for the first time in U.S. Olympic coverage, a full cast and range of characters in a fairytale melodrama, manipulating story structure, space, and time for full dramatic effect. It will also demonstrate how CBS, and as an outgrowth of the network coverage, other mass media storytellers within North America, continually restructured the narrative when the real-life skaters' behaviors or actions were incongruous to CBS's narrative plan. In doing so,

the network advanced traditional (and comfortable) constructs of femininity and the American female ideal as common sense.

## THE NARRATIVE

According to the narrative theories posited by Kozloff and Deming, narratives may be split into two parts; the “story,” meaning “what happens to whom,” and “the discourse,” meaning “how the story is told.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Story

In the case of the Women's Figure Skating Competition in Albertville, the story was the course of the event itself: Five major competitors, Kristi Yamaguchi, Nancy Kerrigan, Tonya Harding (USA), Midori Ito (Japan) and Surya Bonaly (France) vied for a gold medal depending on how well they skated according to nine judges who monitored and graded their original programs. The event happened over a two-day period in an ice rink.

### The Discourse

If the story is “what happens to whom,” the discourse, then, is the manner in which the story is interpreted and inflected through, in the case of CBS, the medium of television.

CBS sent a production crew of 800 to Albertville for the purpose of negotiating this Olympic discourse. Besides those operating the technical apparatuses--the Sony D-2 VTRs, the Grass Valley Switchers, the video cameras, graphic effects, computer systems and two-way communication channels--CBS relied on directors, writers and producers to manipulate the story according to a specified alignment of ideas.<sup>8</sup> They also relied on narrators to tell and interpret the story by establishing it intertextually within a certain historical, sociological, and psychological framework, translating episodes in the story for an implied American audience in terms of American mainstream ideology, or common sense.

The narrative process ended only when it reached a real audience who could then reinterpret the story interpretations and construct identities and realities from it. As Joan Didion describes this process, “we live by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmoria which is our actual experience.”<sup>9</sup> Richard Campbell further suggests that “narrative enables us to make sense of our phantasmoria because, in contrast to that experience, narrative is a familiar, concrete, and objectified structure. Narratives, then,

are metaphors, shaping and containing the bodiless flow of experience within familiar boundaries of plot, character, setting, problem, resolution, and synthesis.”<sup>10</sup>

If narratives are metaphors, the Women's Figure Skating Competition in 1992, a narrative with heroines, villains, character development and plot all motivated by the elaborate push and pull of cause and effect, was told through the metaphor of a fairytale. Kozloff notes that “American television is remarkably like Russian fairy tales--that is, that certain motifs, situations and stock characters may have a nearly universal psychological/mythological/sociological appeal and thus appear again and again in popular cultural forms.”<sup>11</sup> The 1992 women's skating coverage, a romantic fairytale about dreams coming true, a determination to succeed against possible odds, and a fight against the villains (skating judges, the pestering media, and each other) using the skills available of grace, luck, courage, and family support, was only too evident as a narrative process filtering through CBS and all mass media outlets. The opening paragraph of a *Newsweek* Olympic cover story said as much:

Surely there must be a fairytale that fits here -- the lost Aesop, the only Grimm that didn't get optioned. It'd be the one about the two stylish, gorgeous creatures -- swans or butterflies, take your pick, competing against the stronger, more daring beings for the favor of the gods. And, of course, the stronger, more daring beings are certain to win, because, spectacular is always better ever after. Only, the stronger, more daring beings reach for too high a sky, hoist too heavy a load, cross too deep a river, and so the stylish, gorgeous creatures glide to victory -- and, probably here comes a handsome prince or two, as well.<sup>12</sup>

The event was about skating, but just as much entailed the physical image and behaviors of the competing women who were metaphorically defined within the narrative as princesses. Princesses from every country competed for the “crown jewel” of the Olympic games. American princesses competed to become the appointed American “darling.” The narrative, it was further implied, was especially satisfying when the media-appointed darling also won the crown jewel. In 1992, the United States had three skaters who were in the coveted top five rankings and had a chance to bring home gold. That's when dreams--the American Dream--comes true.

### **THE NARRATIVE'S HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The princess metaphor evolved out of eighty years of mass media coverage of women Olympic skaters. Sonja Henie, the Norwegian champion who won her first gold as a 14-year-old in 1928 and went on to win two more in 1932 and 1936, was the first figure skater to be idolized beyond her technique by popular culture. Dubbed the

“Kewpie Doll” of the American public,<sup>13</sup> Henie transcended skating to star in Hollywood movies and “trailed only Shirley Temple and Clark Gable in box office draw.”<sup>14</sup> While Henie and her contemporaries were known to use more muscular strokes (and risk “linebacker leg”),<sup>15</sup> Henie was also marketed as a sex symbol--prized for her dimples and blond hair. As a successful skater she established an image of Northern European beauties on ice that would be sustained by popular culture and the skating world.

Although American skaters Tenley Albright and Carol Heiss won Olympic gold medals in 1956 and 1960 respectively, skating was not televised until 1962 when ABC Sports covered the World Championships in Prague. Six years later American Peggy Fleming would skate in the 1968 Olympics, marking the first time American audiences would see their own skater compete for (and win) gold on live, color television. ABC’s coverage of Fleming, while idolatrous, was once again descriptive metaphor. Fleming, who was younger than most of her competitors, was characterized as a teenage beauty, a heartthrob, and a girl next door. One ABC commentator described Fleming’s 1968 Olympic performance as “dashing, beautiful, comely...in short she’s Peggy Fleming, coming into your homes live and in color via the satellite.” Taking the cue from ABC, *Time* described Fleming as “a raven haired Colorado College coed,”<sup>16</sup> and *Newsweek* called her “a trim, 109-pound package that keeps its cool on and off the ice. A shy, Bambi-like teen-ager...the lithe, 5-foot 4-inch Peggy flows into her movements with the fragile grace of a Fonteyn.”<sup>17</sup> While Fleming was noted for her technical proficiency, she was also applauded for keeping her hair in place (“she buys cans of Sudden Beauty hair spray by the half-dozen”)<sup>18</sup> and for signing a \$500,000 contract with NBC.<sup>19</sup> Fleming’s portrayal was one of innocence, glamour, sexual availability, and upward mobility, but she remained the sole object of adoration and description, not the subject of a full-blown narrative.

Clearly, however, it was thin, unmarried, pretty girls like Fleming who won favor in the skating establishment and the American media. This was all too clear in 1972 when the stocky, modest skater Beatrice Schuba from Austria consistently outperformed her “pixie” American rival Janet Lynn. Schuba excelled in school figures, which at the time held a higher percentage in the overall skating score, and won the gold medal. As Olympic medalist and veteran skating announcer Dick Button explained it in a skating compilation tape entitled “Magic Memories on the Ice,” “The skating world, having watched Trixie Schuba win the gold medal, decided it was time for a change. A short program was added. The long program given 50 percent of the scoring and the school figures just 30 percent”<sup>20</sup> (Magic, 1990). With this change, school figures could no longer give stockier skaters a potential advantage, and because the free skate also allowed

for a more showy and provocative television program, figure 8s were eliminated altogether in 1988.

Now that the thin, lithe body type was strategically positioned to dominate in skating and the more visually appealing free skate would be the highlighted portion of Olympic figure skating, media producers began to see the potential for creating more complex narrative structures to increase the popularity of the Olympic event. The 1976 Olympics saw a rise in television Olympic coverage overall, greater network investment in the Winter Games, and large chunks of airtime to fill. Luckily, the 1976 Olympic skating event featured American hopeful Dorothy Hamill. In their self-conscious effort to create “the most riveting spectacle for U.S. viewers,”<sup>21</sup> ABC assigned Hamill the starring role and interpreted her skating ambitions for the first time in terms of a fragile princess ascending a throne.

The story involved Hamill’s shaky nerves, her dependence on her father, and her gutsy and lyrical skating in the face of adversity. Because of a misunderstanding before she skated her final program, Hamill gave the network (and other media storytellers) a serendipitous piece of drama that likely set the stage for subsequent network choices and story manipulations. *Time* described the incident this way:

The drama began as Dorothy, who battles almost uncontrollable jitters on the brink of each performance, waited at the end of the rink to be introduced for her free-skating program. As the points awarded to the previous skater flashed on a scoreboard, the crowd erupted in an explosion of boos and catcalls, protesting low scores. Dorothy thought they were jeering her, and her already fragile composure collapsed. In tears, she ran off the ice into her father’s arms.<sup>22</sup>

Hamill’s father quickly became a regular feature (and supporting actor to Hamill’s leading role) in the televised broadcast, appearing multiple times in close up and medium shots. As ABC commentator Dick Button reported during the live coverage, “They said she could take a rest period, and she said ‘oh no,’ burst out, away from her father, and now the crowd is cheering for Dorothy Hamill.”<sup>23</sup> After Hamill’s victorious skate, Button referred to an extended close up of Mr. Hamill, saying “there’s her father...if ever there was a proud man.” Hamill’s overall story, largely told through television’s manipulations, was such a compelling one that even Hamill’s haircut became the most prominent hair fashion throughout the late seventies. Hamill still represented beauty and commercial success, but now she was also portrayed, however sketchily, as a captivating and complex character acting out her emotions and reaching for her dreams in a modern fairytale. As *Sports Illustrated* later reported, “Her jumps were high, her landings light,

and she crackled with championship poise. She had smoked them all off earlier in the compulsory school figures and her crown was secure.”<sup>24</sup>

After two Olympics without an American champion, ABC was ready by 1988 to begin spinning an even more complex narrative around American hopeful Debi Thomas and her rival (and Olympic veteran) Katarina Witt. The Olympics were in Calgary, which seemingly benefited the network because they could broadcast the event in real time and ensure larger audiences, and ABC set to work creating an embellished story of American dreams and ascendance to the thrown.

There were some problems that had to be overcome however. Although Thomas was poised to win a gold medal, she didn’t allow herself to be characterized in a princess role. It is not clear if ABC was prepared to put her in that role in the first place. First, as the first African-American woman ever to advance so far in figure skating, Thomas’ darker skin stood in contrast to the white Northern European ideal of beauty that remained predominant in figure skating. “In a sport so subjective and judgmental, not to mention whiter than several shades of snow blindness,” *Time* admitted, “a black child might be excused for factoring in racism into indecipherable marks.”<sup>25</sup> “In a world of lily white princesses,” remarked Ian Austen of *Macleans*, “Debi Thomas stands out.”<sup>26</sup> Second, as a self-described tomboy who actually gave momentary consideration to playing hockey before taking up figure skating,<sup>27</sup> Thomas was critical of figure skating and the limiting image the sport promoted.

Indeed, here was an interesting character with guts and brains who could have taken skating culture to a new level of social critique. Instead of working a story around the refreshing novelty of Thomas’ persona, however, ABC and other conventional media were more comfortable spinning a narrative featuring Thomas as an outsider and spoiler, and chose East German skater Katarina Witt as the princess-in-the-making--the feminine, heart-stopping Iron Curtain seductress who dreamed about (and deserved) the crown jewel. Having already won a gold medal in the 1984 Olympics, Witt was already a known entity to American audiences and, in fact, easily negated any old-fashioned, Cold War storylines by openly embracing Capitalism and American values.

To increase dramatic effect, the stories surrounding Witt and Thomas began to extend beyond the skating event itself, with expository video segments before and after the competition to develop the characters and contrast the two skaters against each other. ABC handily positioned Witt and Thomas as artist vs. athlete respectively, but also very nearly as female vs. male, showing Witt languidly dreaming of success while positioning Thomas as one with incredible drive, independence, and willpower (it was rarely mentioned that Witt was similarly driven). Described in terms of “steely resolve,”

depicted lifting weights, unballing her fists and muttering to herself, Thomas was the intimidating antagonist to Witt's aesthetically-minded, media-friendly girl next door.

Accordingly, ABC built Witt up as a traditional, but sexually available girl, dwelling on the dependent, mother-child relationship between Witt and her coach, and the fan letters that came from a huge number of gaga American men. This plot line was made more vivid when a photographer caught Witt during a workout spin as her skating top loosened, exposing her breasts. Meanwhile, the network positioned Thomas as an isolated, asexual Stanford pre-med student who was perhaps over her head with ambition and work load. One segment showed Thomas driving solo across America in her Toyota and described her as having an "out of fashion perspective," implying that her independent lifestyle did not make common sense. Thomas was not only deglamourized, she was cast as so out of touch that she was, in effect, made to be inaccessible and even unlikeable. Interestingly, in the effort to force a Western fairytale narrative, American nationalism was abandoned early on and a woman from a Communist country was embraced as the American feminine ideal.

ABC successfully orchestrated a dramatic story by playing the two skaters off of each other and expanding the narrative beyond the context of the event itself. In an unfortunate coincidence (although not for ABC), the story climaxed with the two athletes skating their final programs to the exact same piece of music, Bizet's *Carmen*. Thomas faltered, and Witt glided to a flourishing victory. With the American media clearly supporting Witt, one wonders if the negative coverage of Thomas influenced her skating performance, or what ABC would have done with Thomas if she had won. In confining the story to a fairytale narrative where only feminine, Northern European ideals were reinforced and legitimated, ABC chased a familiar storyline while sacrificing perhaps better, or more important narratives. Even so, this same strategy was the very one duplicated by CBS's Olympic team four years later in 1992--only CBS would add more characters, create more tension, and further manipulate the spatial and temporal aspects of the narrative. In short, they would do it better.

## CHARACTERS AS DISCOURSE

According to Bordwell and Thompson, "the conception of narrative depends on the assumption that the action will spring primarily from individual characters."<sup>28</sup> Although the five major competitors in the Women's Figure Skating Competition were real people competing in a real event, they were conditioned and defined through the text to inhabit a narrative framework. Their identities, consequently, were related through camera shots, editing, body language, and costume, and were then interpreted to match a

predetermined storyline. Here is how the mass media depicted/cast the top five characters in 1992, Kristi Yamaguchi, Midori Ito, Nancy Kerrigan, Tonya Harding, and Surya Bonaly:

#### Kristi Yamaguchi (USA)

A definite medal contender who had a near lock on the gold medal before the Games began, Yamaguchi was 21 years old, five feet tall, 93 pounds, and an exceptional skater--perhaps the most refined in the history of the sport. A Japanese-American, Yamaguchi came from Fremont, California where her father was a dentist (her mother's occupation was not disclosed). As CBS built her character up for their purposes, viewers learned that Yamaguchi used to be a pairs dancer, was formerly considered an athletic skater, but suddenly “developed” a very welcome gush of grace. Her artistry compensated for her inability to hit a triple axle like two other competing women skaters (Ito and Harding). In fact, as CBS' Zahn pointed out, “her strength is that she can combine artistry with athleticism.” Striking a non-extremist, non-threatening persona because of her ability to mediate (between art and athleticism, Japan and America), Yamaguchi was also consistently labeled with the word “focused,” a word that was complementary enough but lacked effusiveness in its application. As CBS sideline commentator and former men's figure skating champion (1984) Scott Hamilton phrased it, “her concentration is really incredible, that's the key to her consistency.” Yamaguchi effortlessly and predictably won the gold medal in the competition. While ABC and other media actually used terms like “American darling” to describe Yamaguchi’s status in the early stages of the drama, she was quickly dropped from her starring role once Kerrigan began to skate better than expected. Yamaguchi, it became clear, did not look enough like the part to belong in the heart of CBS’ fairytale.

#### Midori Ito (Japan)

The Japanese “hope” and main rival to Yamaguchi, Ito was 22 years old, 4 feet 7 inches, 98 pounds, and came from Nagoya, Japan where she lived with her coach (an adopted mother after her parents were divorced). Known as “the jumper” and the first woman ever to hit a triple axle, Ito was short, athletic, and lacked the graceful skating lines of Yamaguchi. As the narrative related, she was actually envious of Yamaguchi’s taller, more pliant frame, although it was not a malicious sort of envy. Indeed, if Ito was a threat, she wasn’t an evil one because the skater was, according to CBS, sweet, self-deprecating, and media-friendly. Ito, CBS told viewers, “won the hearts of the skating world” when she collided with the camera stands during a world championship a year

earlier, got back up, and finished her program (this video footage was played numerous times). Her “courageous” character also had difficulty withstanding pressure, however. “This morning she was surrounded by cameras and was missing combinations,” CBS’ Scott Hamilton remarked. “I think it’s taking its toll.” Although her athleticism provided just the right amount of narrative tension, Ito’s character was that of the clumsy princess and lovable foil to the throne. Ito played her part as CBS hoped, landing a gutsy triple axle at the last moment, but she still could not gain enough artistic points for the gold. She ended up with a silver medal in the competition.

#### Nancy Kerrigan (USA)

At 22 years old and from Stoneham, Massachusetts, Kerrigan was a relatively new face to the skating world. A tall, thin brunette of Irish descent with a large smile, model-like features, and long legs, Kerrigan was quickly characterized by the media as the “Peggy Fleming of the 90s” (Fleming won the *gold* in 1968)--even though she was still shaky on the ice with nowhere near the skating ability of Yamaguchi. While Yamaguchi was characterized as graceful (an adjective attributed to her skating only), Kerrigan was graceful *and* beautiful in face, figure and form. Indeed, the level of excitement rose in Olympic commentators’ voices every time she took to the ice. “This original program is mature and sophisticated,” CBS’ Hamilton eagerly stated during Kerrigan’s program. “Look at that spin! Beautiful!!!” As Kerrigan completed a jump Lundquist similarly gushed, “...that brings a radiant smile from the lovely lady.”<sup>29</sup>

Idealized because, unlike Yamaguchi, Kerrigan physically resembled the fair-skinned, Western-oriented princess image mass media had imposed on the Women’s Figure Skating Competition, she embodied everything an Olympic skater (and an ideal woman in this common sense narrative) should be: Northern European and Peggy Fleming-elegant, with technical skill and artistry to compensate for a lack of athletic ability. As CBS discovered (and exploited for maximum potential), Kerrigan also had a personal history to match. Approximating a New England Cinderella with a welder father and a legally blind mother, Kerrigan more than any other skater was shaped as a rags-to-riches beauty who was all too ready for a prince. Luckily for CBS, her entire family--two brothers and her parents, made up a regular cheering squad (and consistent photo opportunity) in the stands, and were easily portrayed as protecting her from the evil elements in the skating world. Kerrigan’s designer white skating costume sealed her princess image: the virgin next door with a hint of sexuality.

Kerrigan’s character was further glamorized through a tangential story detailing her adolescence in Stoneham, Massachusetts. In a mini-documentary during CBS’ main

coverage, viewers learned that Kerrigan, who grew up playing hockey with her brothers, was very nearly “a tomboy.” The story detailed her thankful feminization into the “elegant beauty” Kerrigan had become. CBS and other media coverage couldn’t applaud Kerrigan’s princess qualities enough. Indeed, Kerrigan, and not Japanese-American gold medal prospect (and winner) Yamaguchi had in many ways secured the American darling media label and became CBS’s dramatic star, a characterization supplemented by notes on the skater’s physical appeal. Kerrigan looked the part, had the background for the part, and played the part, skating better than originally expected to win a bronze medal. All this, and not the supposedly requisite gold, was enough for CBS and other mass media outlets to vault Kerrigan to the thrown. CBS did this so convincingly that some print media reports actually implied she should have won Olympic gold.

#### Tonya Harding (USA)

The third American contender (from Portland, Oregon) and in the beginning a definite contender for the gold medal, Harding, 21, was not given the status of a main character in CBS and print coverage of the Women’s Figure Skating Competition. For necessary narrative variation, Harding was cast early on as a reckless, shattered and thoughtless princess: the ne’er-do-well stepsister. Coverage more or less blamed Harding for arriving in France only two days before the competition and for consequently suffering from jetlag. In one CBS update viewers learned that Harding’s late arrival was due to her weakness for being “a homebody,” hardly a characteristic for a princess. *Newsweek* echoed the disparagement of the skater, noting that because Harding wasn’t even punctual for practice and missed part of her music session, she was “a victim more to her own careless and desultory ways...it was hardly any surprise, then, that she missed her triple axles on both Wednesday and Friday. She was lucky to sneak into fourth place.”<sup>30</sup> Blond, ponytailed, and athletic, with--like Ito--the foreboding triple axle in her repertoire, Harding was consistently portrayed by CBS as tainted, a characterization that was even further maintained through unsympathetic reports of her “problem marriage” that hinted towards a physically abusive husband. To be a true princess, and thus the mass media feminine ideal, it was clear that skaters not only had to look the part, but had to exhibit sexual availability and uprightness; marriage, like athleticism, spoiled the path to the kingdom in the sky. Without an imaginary prince in the shadows (e.g., one of the players on the U.S. hockey team), there was no story.

#### Surya Bonaly (France)

At 18, Bonaly was the youngest and most intriguing figure to round up the narrative. Another athlete (she preceded her skating career with gymnastics), Bonaly was said to come originally from the Island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean but had been adopted by two white parents, who gave her an Indian first name (meaning sun). Oozing multinationality, Bonaly was too far from white, Western, American darling status to be easily interpreted by the media as genuine princess material. She was therefore cast as the anti-princess, an event spoiler with poor judgment, like Harding, but with the added dose of pernicious intent. More than any other character she was presented in many ways as a villain and was carefully distanced, like Harding, from “the fairest of them all.”

Back flips are not allowed as legitimate jumps in the Olympics, but during a morning warm-up Bonaly performed a flip--supposedly part of her usual warm-up routine--while Ito practiced to her music. The crowd applauded, Ito lost her concentration, and the media narrative turned into a lambasting of Bonaly for her calculating role in destabilizing Ito. Grace, poise, and above all, modesty, were all implied to be beyond Bonaly; her ability to even dress appropriately became a factor in her character's anti-princess configuration. Outfitted in lavish sequins by fashion designer Christian Lacroix, Bonaly's costumes were subtly translated into being some kind of joke. “That's a brand new outfit she's skating in,” Lundquist slyly said as he introduced each skater. “She'll be skating to a Spanish song in a rendition of a matador and a bull tonight...”

Other media storytellers fueled the characterization with sexual commentary. A *Newsweek* article compared Bonaly's matador costume to “outfits that appeared to come from a garage sale at Hugh Hefner's mansion,” a portrayal that denounced Bonaly's style and sexuality at the same time. Even if Bonaly got high skating marks, she was nevertheless characterized as a resolute, conniving jumping jack who “stalked the ice rather than addressed it.”<sup>31</sup> Critical attention was even given to Bonaly's mother who visibly argued with Bonaly's coach. Bonaly's own “bad manners,” the narrative suggested, originated from her belligerent and tactless mom. Bonaly's mother could be easily contrasted with Kerrigan's mother, the one cheering from the sidelines and responsible for pushing Kerrigan towards the “right direction.”

### Looking the part

Besides figure skating, gymnastics is the only other women's sport that factors in artistry, music, and scoring subjectivity. Unlike the 1992 Olympic Women's Figure Skating event, gymnastics has long been dominated by 14-year-old girls, who are not quite in the realm of sexual desirability.<sup>32</sup> “What appeals to the sports audience,” Deford

said of Women's Figure Skating, "is whatsoever is most beautiful, whatsoever is most lovely, whatsoever is most sexy."<sup>33</sup> Women's Figure Skating is so easily welcomed into the sports world--and the real world--as a premier jewel in Olympic sporting events because the beauty contest/fairytale metaphor through which CBS could explain it remains non-threatening to the largely uncontested notions of beauty and gender roles in our society. Because the more athletic (code masculine, aberrant) skaters are also not as elegant, and because artistry continues to carry more weight in the judging process, CBS conveniently used elegance and artistry as a narrative ploy used to judge a skater's moral character.

The sport has also, at least until recently, attracted only women from Northern European countries, making the practice of highlighting the Euro-American skaters and casting them as princesses seem normative. Indeed, character similarities and differences within the skating narrative helped outline a whole array of narrative judgments that motivated the narrative structure. The top five skaters may all have had a shot at the gold medal, but only one, according to CBS and common sense notions of feminine beauty and achievement, could be a star.

### Playing the part

Behaving dreamy, nervous and courageous, as Dorothy Hamill proved in 1972, has been an important factor in the discourse of Women's Figure Skating coverage, as well as in advancing princess and feminine ideals. Whether or not the skaters had dreams or nightmares about their very real Olympic performances, viewers were told that the skaters, especially the gold medal hopefuls, fell into frequent reveries about their prospects for success. "I asked her this week if she had dreamt about going to the Olympics," a CBS interviewer said before the broadcast turned to the taped interview of Yamaguchi. "I haven't had a dream about podiums or medals, but I have dreamed about the performance," Yamaguchi obliged. "How does the dream come out?" Yamaguchi said she didn't know. Phil Hersh of the *Chicago Tribune* also quoted Yamaguchi as saying "I dreamed of [going to the Olympics] since I was a little girl and I first put on skates. That it is true is still sinking in."<sup>34</sup> Yamaguchi wasn't only dreamy, she was, according to Hersh, the "embodiment of a million little girls' dreams,"<sup>35</sup> and for the entire nation, an embodiment of the American Dream. This concept of dreaming for success, a passive undertaking, absolved these women (as ideal women) from ambition and drive, characteristics the mass media traditionally award to men. Indeed, the women skaters' male counterparts were characterized as being driven by ambition, with their success a matter of pure intelligence on the ice.

As the discourse continuously highlighted feminine passivity and positioned the women as little girls, CBS also continued the historical tradition of referring to the Women's Figure Skating competition as a "ladies event" to more comfortably couch the competition in terms of princess ideals. The word "lady," implying high breeding, social grace and femininity, implies a throwback to traditional attitudes regarding women's roles. When CBS' 1992 Olympic host and commentator Tim MacCarver remarked "Tonight the stage is set for the crown jewel of figure skating, the ladies' competition," he was not suggesting a competition but a beauty pageant; attention was drawn to costumes and designer labels, "lovely" smiles and stylish allure. The notion of "Ladies' Night" in general also suggests a night at a bar, traditionally a male domain, when women are invited in to be the centers of attention and receive drinks for free. The sexual connotations of "Ladies' Night" in this discourse is unmistakable: As ladies on Ladies' Night the skaters are not only the center of attention but the subject of male desire. Their desirability is therefore contingent on their availability, and a thematic element in the story of their success.

The characters in the 1992 Women's Figure Skating narrative were also cast as frilly vessels who tragically fell on their bottoms rather than missed competitive jumps. In one pre-edited introduction montage, CBS insinuated how terrifying skating is (for women) by following a skater's feet (in skates) as she walked through the cold, intimidating underground hallways of the stadium to the sound of a beating heart, and entered the arena. Over the audio of a beating heart, a male voice says "A lifetime of hard work. An Olympic dream begins tonight. 2 1/2 minutes on the ice, ALONE...as the world looks on." Yamaguchi's impressive precision, professionalism, and lack of many visible nervous cues did not leave much room for this thematic device. CBS initially tried to juxtapose her "focused" face with her mother's nervous expressions in a televised interplay of concern and doting. Backstage, as Yamaguchi waited with her coach, a close-up revealed that they were holding hands. And even though CBS frequently commented on Ito's nervousness as a way to make her personable and accessible, Kerrigan, along with her throbbing, hoping, teeth-clenching family, played up the nervousness best. The newcomer consequently looked the most fragile in the arena, and when she skated without falling CBS gushed with relief.

Close ties with family and strong family values were also, as illustrated by CBS and derivative print narratives, a factor in representing a princess ideal. Along with a preoccupation with firm family bonds came an emphasis on the skaters' level of dependency; somehow being childlike and under continuing maternal influence was contingent to maintaining a feminine, princess-like identity. While the other skaters'

parents (except Harding's) were present, it was Kerrigan, viewers learned, who had the closest relationship with her mother and her family in general. During her practices and performances, legally blind Brenda Kerrigan was constantly shown pressed up against a rink side television set (gallantly supplied by CBS), watching the outline of her daughter's every move, and hugging her husband Dan when she sensed her daughter doing well. CBS carefully documented this "special" bond, reiterating a few times how it was her mother who steered her away from becoming a permanent tomboy and pushed her towards figure skating, where, her mother was quoted as saying, "girls belong." CBS also glamorized the entire Kerrigan family as a healthy American nuclear family (the network's subtle testament to its success) by consistently identifying the skater's parents and two brothers in the stands and showing them frequently embracing each other on close-ups-- love pouring all around. The success of American individualism was also sneaking into the narrative; here a working class family, Massachusetts dialects and all, could work hard, sacrifice, and turn their daughter into a princess.

With attention to five distinct character portrayals and the challenge to adapt them to a familiar storyline, the Women's Figure Skating Competition as a sports event was forgotten. The real competition as interpreted by CBS was a competition for artistry, high cheekbones, whiteness, the public exhibition of nervousness, a cohesive family and a scriptable personal story featuring dreamy goals amidst stretches of adversity. On this level, Kerrigan satisfied traditional ideas of femininity and television storytelling, and, with only mediocre skating, easily won the gold.

### **SPACE AS DISCOURSE**

Thorburn refers to the use of space in melodrama as the place wherein most of us act out our deepest needs and feelings.<sup>36</sup> The space in which CBS orchestrated the Women's Figure Skating Championship narrative was the ice rink, or Halle de Glace in Albertville, and was melodramatically significant on three levels.

First, the ice rink was a "battleground" on which the women skaters competed for the "crown jewel." Even though skating is not a contact sport, individual desires, looks, technique, fashion, personalities, and the emotional endurance to withstand public pressure were all factors determining victory within the spatial construct of the ice arena. Second, the rink became the site of a theoretical battle over whether the sport should be defined more by artistry or athleticism. Commentators argued for or against the addition of the triple axle to determine which direction the sport was -- and should be -- going. And third, the rink played out nationalistic battles embodying "the hopes of a nation."

While one top contender, Surya Bonaly was the nationalistic hope for host country France, a more prominent battle featured Kristi Yamaguchi and Midori Ito, a Japanese-American vs. a Japanese. With regards to the political climate surrounding the 1992 Winter Olympics, the ice rink symbolized the battleground for two opposing countries who were falling out of each other's favor at the time.

Contrasting the battleground motif, the ice rink also represented a “stage” in the context of the Women’s Figure Skating narrative. It was a place for enjoyment, a coveted realm to which one was supposed to feel privileged to have access. As the camera zoomed in on a close-up of a Women’s Figure Skating Event ticket, CBS’ Verne Lundquist (wearing a tuxedo and reporting from the rink alongside Scott Hamilton) revealed that “in all of Albertville there’s no more desirable ticket than the one you just saw.” The emphasis on the event’s glamour, theatrics, music, and regalia, worked in this narrative to dramatize the feminine qualities imposed on the sport. In another pre-edited montage introduction on the second night of programming, each of the five stars swirled comfortably on the ice to the song “Wonderful Tonight” sung by Eric Clapton. As one image smoothly dissolved into the next, the song’s accompanying words went: “It’s late in the evening...she’s wondering what clothes to wear...she’ll put on her makeup...and brushes her long blond hair [Tonya Harding, who happened to be blond, was inserted here]. And then she’ll ask me...do I look all right: And I’ll say, yes, you look wonderful tonight, oh my darling you look wonderful tonight.” Unlike a battleground, the stage was set for alluring performances by the world’s (insecure and nervous) top artists. As was evidenced by the Eric Clapton lyrics and CBS’s frequent shots of little boys peering through stadium fences and supposedly gazing at the skaters, CBS interpreted these skating performances through a male perspective (despite the fact that women make up a majority of viewership). The interpretation, however, fits the fairytale narrative, where the princesses are skating in hopes of male approval and in finality, of finding a prince. To quote from Laura Mulvey, “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.”<sup>37</sup> In the space of the ice rink, the female skater’s attractiveness is measured, consequently, by her erotic appeal to men.

Finally, viewers learned that the competitors could also enjoy the ice rink as a kind of home base. Parents sat in the stands urging their daughters on, friends and coaches offered their support. CBS even showed some instances in which competitors

befriended each other, or took viewers behind the scenes and underneath the stands to show where competitors stored their gear and picked up mail. Vast yet familiarized, the ice rink was a common ground for viewers to interpret who these women were, analyze their similarities and differences, and compare their experience to their own realities.

### TIME AS DISCOURSE

Even though CBS was combating the insecurity of tape-delayed programming in 1992, the network used tape delay as an advantage instead of a disadvantage for the first time in the history of Olympic broadcasting. CBS had two important strategies in pulling it off. First, the network organized the Women's Figure Skating Competition so that it appeared to be live. Second, CBS used the six hour lag time to edit extra footage and add other pre-edited minidocumentaries to create a more compelling program. Indeed, the network created a fully scripted melodrama.

Deming remarks on television's capacity to project liveness, and on its ability to emphasize "the present tense and irreversible flow of time."<sup>38</sup> CBS accordingly thrust its programming in the modes of anticipation and "continuous update" (p. 249) by imposing frequent live narration between the tape-delayed broadcast in order to maintain and dramatize the present. "There's going to be some tough competition out there on the ice tonight, some great jumpers, some great artists," Paula Zahn announced, who was live but commented on dated material. Zahn then handed off commentary from her comfortable living room studio (where she co-hosted Olympic coverage with Tim MacCarver) to Verne Lundquist and Scott Hamilton, the CBS announcers in the Halle de Glace, who had taped their material hours earlier. "There are empty seats in the stadium right now because it's early in the competition..." Lundquist said.

As the Women's Figure Skating Competition flowed in chronological order, each skater performed her routine while anticipation and speculation riveted the programming forward. "Well, Kristi Yamaguchi, Tonya Harding and Midori Ito have been in the spotlight, but when considering the Ladies' competition here, don't dismiss the medal capabilities of Nancy Kerrigan, the elegant young skater from New England." These kinds of announcements, notes Deming, "remind the audience that the fiction is part of television's segmented flow, the flow that continues whether the set is on or not and whether the viewer watches or not."<sup>39</sup>

Besides projecting the present, CBS also used the six hour tape delay to expand on the event's dramatic moments and finesse the coverage. With each skater's routine lasting only 2 1/2 minutes for the first night and 4 1/2 minutes for the second night, CBS filled the inevitable lag time by manipulating the event's temporal order and imposing

prerecorded, pre-edited flashbacks in the form of documentary pastiches that detailed moments in skaters' pre-Olympian lives. Instead of watching Kristi Yamaguchi skate around the rink during her allotted 6 1/2 minutes of warm up, viewers were taken back six months earlier to relive the moment when the skater selected the music for her original routine and met with a seamstress who fitted her for a costume. In another lull between 2 1/2 minute routines (and of course, commercials), viewers were taken to Massachusetts for a flashback visit with Nancy Kerrigan's mother, who admits that "it was such a relief that Nancy stopped playing hockey with her brothers...you're a girl...let the boys play hockey and you can do girl things!"

Kozloff discusses how the use of proliferating storylines is a means by which TV narratives compensate for their lack of suspense. Such storylines, she writes, "diffuse the viewers interest in any one line of action and spread the interest over a large field."<sup>40</sup> Time to fill made the proliferation of story lines necessary during the Women's Figure Skating Competition, but also worked to expand the narrative's spatial orientation, stimulate sympathy and recognition for the narrative's characters, and, in this case, continually orient them in terms of their princessy characteristics.

### STRUCTURE AS DISCOURSE

While action in a narrative is motivated by individual characters, and while these actions and characters somehow connect with the flux of fairytale myth, that shifting flux needed to be organized within a narrative framework, a categorization of human experience. According to structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss, we explain experiences by casting them in terms of binary oppositions; male/female, sacred/profane, pure/impure, in/out, kin/other, and nature/culture.<sup>41</sup> By defining data and experience into two-dimensional dualistic categories<sup>42</sup> we create a dramatic tension that subsequently calls for a resolution. Narrative construction for the 1992 Women's Figure Skating Competition followed the same pattern: a structure was first imposed through a series of binary oppositions and then a way was offered for those oppositions, or narrative tensions, to be resolved.

Up until 1988, when the typical Cold War binary in all Olympic coverage was quickly breaking down, television found in figure skating, an event that straddled many more disparate (and potentially exciting) binary configurations: Sport vs. musical theater, athlete vs. artist, strength vs. grace, match vs. show and jump vs. dance. While the women figure skaters all demonstrated many different levels of technical and aesthetic ability, CBS neatly packaged and pair them in separate, polarized camps: Kristi Yamaguchi, artist vs. Midori Ito, athlete; Nancy Kerrigan, artist vs. Tonya Harding,

athlete, with Surya Bonaly remaining the token “wild card” athlete. Even though Yamaguchi and Kerrigan were legitimate athletes as well--Yamaguchi ironically had been labeled “athlete” in past events--their artistry and Harding's, Ito's and Bonaly's athleticism were reconfigured so that the dualistic tension and narrative pattern was more or less intact. And while it was made clear at the beginning of the event that “artist” and “athlete” had equal chances for the gold medal (Ito and Harding had both worked up impressive 3 1/2 rotation axle jumps), a failure to successfully complete the terrifically difficult jump throughout the course of the narrative put the “artists” at an advantage. Narrative tension between athlete and artist was subsequently resolved then, with the artists--the more “feminine” skaters--coming out on top. At the end of the first night of competition, Lundquist pointed to such a resolution:

Favoring the artistic over the athletic, we saw Tonya Harding and Midori Ito lose an edge. But it was really a night to admire the artistic...the beauty of Nancy Kerrigan, the joy of her Mom and Dad, and the exquisite style and grace of Yamaguchi.

The competition's final resolution again confirmed the preference for artistry, but warned that athleticism would be back again in four years. Ironically, it was television that shaped the tension between art and athleticism in the first place with the abandonment of compulsory school figures. The sport's only direction for growth was in jumping.

Another binary opposition in the narrative which was initially encouraged and then subtly dropped was the U.S. vs. Japan dichotomy. The 1992 Winter Olympics were broadcast at a point when U.S. car manufacturing was at a low point and activities like Toyota sledgehammering were popular American news events. The binary opposition proved too delicate to maintain, however, due to Yamaguchi's American-Japanese background and what may be considered the touchy subject of American guilt over Japanese internment camps in which Yamaguchi's families were detained. This opposition slid comfortably into the secure non-political realm of artist vs. athlete and lean vs. stout. Had Ito triple-axed her way to the gold instead of Yamaguchi, perhaps there would have been more narrative opposition between the two skaters, and certainly a more problematic message to sift through.

## CONCLUSION

CBS was overwhelmingly successful in their broadcast of the 1992 Olympics because the network couched Women's Figure Skating into the already familiar narrative of a Cinderella-like fairytale. The skaters, then, didn't have to be previously famous to make the event entertaining, but they had to fit into a pre-established storyline. CBS first

designated star skaters as ideal princesses fulfilling their dreams. But rather than celebrate the event winner according to the competition's outcome, however, CBS chose to highlight the *bronze* medalist (Kerrigan) in 1992 because she more closely fit into the familiar melodramatic plot line the network was striving to impose and maintain. As an established star after these Olympics, Kerrigan was featured in high-profile television commercials and specials, and was chosen to appear in *People* magazine's "most beautiful people of 1992" issue. Yamaguchi later resurfaced in the pro circuit.

CBS's investment in their characterization of Kerrigan as a real-life Cinderella would reach its full potential two years later when Kerrigan, Harding and Bonaly competed again in the 1994 Olympics.<sup>43</sup> By 1994, Kerrigan was a more seasoned skater, a gold medal favorite, and a familiar face to American audiences. She was also dramatically assaulted by associates of skating rival Tonya Harding six weeks before the Olympics at the U.S. National competition. Rather than posing a problem to the narrative, the attack actually allowed CBS to expand Kerrigan's princess-like characterization. The former Cinderella suddenly became Snow White versus Harding's evil queen, and the captivating story allowed CBS weeks of buildup to the final showdown between the "pure and innocent" Kerrigan and the "conniving and baneful" Harding. Luckily for CBS, the Olympic melodrama would garner one of the largest audiences in television history.

Unluckily for Kerrigan, she, like all the skaters, had become a media pawn in CBS' fairytale, and could not withstand the enormous pressure to fulfill the narrative as precisely as the network had planned. With Kerrigan fumbling on the ice and in person, CBS embraced the story another skater who could be implanted into a more dramatic fairytale storyline. Ukrainian figure skater Oksana Baiul (a virtually unknown entity, as Kerrigan had been in 1992) outshone Kerrigan with a brilliant performance and beat Kerrigan's artistic score by a tiny fraction. Kerrigan, who was captured complaining about the scores, was immediately cast as spiteful and spoiled, and became quickly marginalized as CBS heralded Baiul.

Luckily for CBS, Baiul seemed to have an even better Cinderella story. Orphaned when she was 13 and skating on inferior rinks in the harsh environment of the Ukraine, Baiul was Bambi and Cinderella combined. An artistic skater with a tiny body and a ballet-like skating style, she valiantly sailed through her programs on an injured leg (injured by an accidental on-ice collision during warm up) but only had one day of recovery time compared to Kerrigan's three weeks. With Baiul's repeated references of her mother in heaven looking down at her magnificent skating, the Ukrainian skater fit the

mold of a rags-to-riches princess far more precisely than Kerrigan, who was reconfigured as a cold-as-ice and jealous rival. Kerrigan's media persona would hit rock bottom when she was later caught on videotape in Disney World (one of her corporate sponsors) shortly after the Olympics, disparaging the fairytale kingdom, and later married her (much older) agent. In two short years, Baul's princess image would also self-destruct with a tarty article and photo spread in *Esquire* men's magazine, a drunk driving charge, and weight gain.

By creating such a simplistic--yet ultimately successful drama for television audiences, CBS also brought many more people into the skating fold, and in so doing, potentially changed the dynamics of the fairytale narrative all together. First, the successful ratings of 1994 launched a plethora of televised pro and amateur skating specials and competitions, which sustained interest in the sport and made figure skating the most popular televised athletic event in the U.S., after American football. Unlike the audiences watching the Olympics, these avid skating viewers were knowledgeable enough about individual skaters and the inherent drama of any given skating competition that adding fairytale storylines would appear overly forced. These televised professional exhibitions also lacked the prestige of an Olympic event--not every top skater competed every time--and without a continuous stable of "new" characters, the same narrative could not be sustained.

Second, the early 1990s saw a rise in other competitive U.S. women's sport leagues such as basketball and soccer, giving viewing audiences athletic alternatives to figure skating that celebrated competition for competition's sake, and would make the configurations of Ladies' Night and the princess narrative seem outdated and almost ridiculous. "What's going on here?" Mariah Burton Nelson wrote in *Newsweek*:

How come sports fans' fascination with female athletes has shifted from skirted skaters (Dorothy Hamill, Michelle Kwan) and tiny teenage tumblers (Mary Lou Retton, Keri Strug) to rough, muscular women in their 20s and 30s who grunt, grimace and heave each other aside with their hips? Are we simply wild over their athletic brilliance? Or does the popularity of women's team sports tell us something deeper about how female athletes and fans are redefining themselves, what they really want and who they might become?<sup>44</sup>

According to Nelson, there are plenty of rich stories to tell about female athletes that extend beyond the confining feminine ideal of passivity, artistry and public poise.

Third, a new type of skater threatened to destabilize the narrative. The ironic outcome of skating's move towards jumps is that the best jumpers are not athletes with

muscular bodies, but the skaters with the smallest bodies and the ability to quickly spin in the air. That the sport was turning too muscular was a recurrent fear in the popular discourse of 1992 and 1994. These muscular skaters, who relied on a singular triple axle (the most difficult jump in the female repertoire) and could rarely depend on a clean jump, had a distinct disadvantage, especially when the scores inevitably tipped in the artist's favor. In comparison, the new crop of young skaters, while certainly lacking in artistry, could more predictably handle their increasingly ambitious triple-toe combination jumps--many jumps in a row, and an impossible feat for larger-bodied women. These 13-15 year old girls, with tiny frames and a sort of impish fearlessness, were suddenly favored in the medal count. The skating establishment, with concerns about maintaining the sport's legitimacy, barely embraced the sudden "girlification" of figure skating. This development also posed potential problems to the fairytale narrative, however. These girls weren't old enough for "their life work" and "their dreams coming true" to make any sense. They had short (i.e., boring) personal histories of stuffed animal collections and trips to the mall, which didn't hold up well in terms of proliferating storylines. They were not bundles of "feminine" nervousness, since they hadn't experienced enough loss and pressure to understand the true weight of Olympic competition. And most importantly, piling a fairytale narrative on such young skaters, which would essentially redefine them as objects of male desire--would create uncomfortable overtones of pedophilia. As it happened, however, CBS would once again force a fairytale on a select skater among the leading 1998 Winter Olympic contestants, modifying the template (as the U.S. networks have done all along) according to who was deemed "the fairest of them all."

The 1998 Olympics offered another opportunity to highlight three U.S. skaters, stirring up the promise, once again, of an American gold medal winner and ice princess, and intensifying the exciting prospect of a 1-2-3 U.S. sweep. It became clear early on, however, that the real drama would be limited to two skaters--the "mature" 17-year-old artist, Michelle Kwan, vs. the ambitious 15-year-old upstart, Tara Lipinski. During the four years leading up to the event, Kwan had become the favored skater. She had been a stringy 13-year-old at the last Olympics, impressing judges with her upright jumps and girlish giggles. By 1998, however, Kwan wasn't necessarily a fresh face--she was a fresh figure. "In the past two years," Starr wrote in 1997, "Kwan has sprouted from a tiny stick-figure kid into a young woman."<sup>45</sup>

The network, the skating establishment, and the public's embrace of Kwan--an Asian-American--certainly signaled a refreshing shift away from the Northern-European model of a feminine ideal. Kwan's story, as CBS would carefully shape it, was about her

new womanliness (e.g., sexuality), her diligent training with a not-as-talented older sister, strong family ties, and tremendous personal dignity. Once believed to have the 1998 gold locked up even before she skated (like Kerrigan in 1994), Kwan came into the Olympic competition, surprisingly, as an underdog. During the previous year, Lipinski had stolen the show, winning the National and then the World titles, and proving that her consistent jumps and unparalleled triple-loop, triple loop combination, were fierce competition to Kwan's on-ice elegance. Even if Lipinski was disadvantaged in terms of artistry and youth, her team of handlers had her strategically skate to the film score of Disney's *The Lion King*--in effect preempting the network's narrative by assigning her the role of princess during her routine--and wearing lipstick to make her appear older. "Now if you look and perform like a mature young woman--no matter what your age--you'll get good results," her coach was quoted as saying.<sup>46</sup>

Because it was comparatively easy for her 75-pound frame, Lipinski was able to complete an awesome amount of jump rotations and ended up with a gold medal, beating Kwan by a fraction. The young skater's "good results" didn't translate into positive media coverage, however. After the dust from Lipinski's "crowdpleaser" win had settled,<sup>47</sup> the young skater was cast as obsessively competitive, as was her mother, who had fired a coach and then moved with her daughter to the best training site possible (while Lipinski's oil executive father remained in Houston). Lipinski's team was described as "beating an unhappy, at times angry, retreat from the public eye,"<sup>48</sup> suggesting that Lipinski's accessible, effervescent smile was a front for conniving operators. And Lipinski's own personality was examined. Commenting on the skater's "picture-perfect moment" at the 1998 Olympics, a *Maclean's* magazine writer jabbed at the young skater's persona:

Watching the marks come up from the kiss-and-cry section at the rinkside, the girl from Sugar Land, Tex., elicited perhaps the loudest, most ear-piercing series of screams ever heard in an Olympic venue. It hurt just being in the same building.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, Lipinski did not "belong" in the ice rink. With composure a key ingredient to the assigned role of ice princess, Kwan had it--Lipinski didn't.

Indeed, the big story of 1998 was not Lipinski's win, but the graciousness of Kwan's acceptance of defeat. After the event, both Kwan and Lipinski were the featured skaters in competing ice tours, but it was Kwan, not Lipinski, "who landed a coveted array of Disney deals for TV specials, books, and, likely, a film version of her autobiography, *Heart of a Champion*"<sup>50</sup> (Starr, 1999, p. 66). As Starr put it, Kwan's popularity and marketability had not diminished, and perhaps had even grown. As with

Kerrigan in 1992, Kwan was even included in *People* magazine's year 2000 list of the 50 most beautiful people in the world.

Despite the numerous pro and amateur skating specials, other competing women's sports, and new ways of redefining the sport, the fairytale narrative clearly lives on in the context of U.S. network Olympic broadcasts. As we have seen with the previous U.S. Olympic skating competition coverage, all the variable ingredients in the drama--skating proficiency, sexual desirability, a good personal story, and poise--are all part of the narrative mix, but winning the gold medal is not necessarily the key to becoming an anointed media fairytale star.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> T. Tyrer, 'CBS Banking on Olympic Games Payoff,' *Electronic Media* 3 February 1992, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> 'Paying for the Olympics,' *Electronic Media* 3 February 1992, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> CBS would successfully bid for the next two Winter Olympics in 1994 (Lillehammer) and 1998 (Nagano).

<sup>4</sup> T. Tyrer, 'Olympics Put CBS Ahead of Sweeps in Race,' *Electronic Media*, 24 February 1992, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Tyrer, 3 February 1992, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> F. Deford, 'The Jewel of the Games,' *Newsweek* 10 February 1992, pp. 46-53.

<sup>7</sup> See S.R. Kozloff, 'Narrative Theory and Television,' in R.C. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 67-100. Also see C. J. Deming, 'Hill Street Blues as Narrative,' in R. Avery and D. Eason (eds.), *Critical Perspectives on Media and Society*, (New York, London: Guilford Press, 1991), pp. 240-264.

<sup>8</sup> Tyrer, 3 February 1992, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> J. Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> R. Campbell, 'Securing the Middle Ground: Reporter formulas in *60 Minutes*,' in R. Avery and D. Eason (eds.), *Critical perspectives on media and society*, (New York, London: Guilford Press, 1991) pp. 265-293.

<sup>11</sup> Kozloff, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> F. Deford and M. Starr, 'American Beauty,' *Newsweek* 2 March 1992, pp. 50-52.

<sup>13</sup> 'Sweet Life of an Olympic Doll,' *Sports Illustrated* 11 November 1968, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Deford, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> 'Peggy Fleming: A Golden Grace,' *Newsweek* 5 February 1968, pp. 48-9.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Olympics,' *Time* February 16 1968, p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> 'Peggy Fleming: A Golden Grace.'

<sup>18</sup> 'Peggy Fleming: A Golden Grace.'

<sup>19</sup> 'Sweet Life of an Olympic Doll.'

<sup>20</sup> 'Magic Memories on Ice: Three Decades of Great Moments in Figure Skating' (Video) Produced by ABC Sports in association with Jack Nicklaus Productions. CBS/Fox Video Sports, New York, 1990.

<sup>21</sup> 'An Arcane Discipline,' *Time* 2 February 1976, pp. 61-3.

<sup>22</sup> 'An Arcane Discipline,' p. 61.

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- <sup>23</sup> ‘Magic Memories on Ice.’
- <sup>24</sup> J. Bruce, ‘When You’re No. 7 You Try Harder,’ *Sports Illustrated* 19 January 1976, pp. 24-5.
- <sup>25</sup> T. Callahan, ‘The Word She Uses is “Invincible,”’ *Time* 15 February 1988, pp. 44-57.
- <sup>26</sup> I. Austen, ‘Chasing a Crown’ *Macleans* February 1988, p. 30.
- <sup>27</sup> Callahan, p. 46.
- <sup>28</sup> D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), p. 70.
- <sup>29</sup> Lundquist’s parallel comment for Yamaguchi after a flawless set of jumps was “And look at the smile.”
- <sup>30</sup> Deford and Starr, p. 52.
- <sup>31</sup> Deford and Starr, p. 52.
- <sup>32</sup> Since Nadia Comenici won gold as a spry 14-year-old in 1976, Olympic gymnastic competitors have all been young teenagers. Figure skating is also moving in this direction as the sport grows to demand more difficult jumps. A small size allows for easier completion.
- <sup>33</sup> Deford, p. 50.
- <sup>34</sup> J. Powers, ‘US’ Yamaguchi 1st; Kerrigan Gets Bronze,’ *Boston Globe* 22 February 1992, pp. 1, 35, 41.
- <sup>35</sup> P. Hersh, ‘U.S. Skater on Top of the World’ *Chicago Tribune* 22 February 1992, p. 1.
- <sup>36</sup> Deming, p. 251.
- <sup>37</sup> L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Hounds mills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989), p. 62.
- <sup>38</sup> Deming, p. 249.
- <sup>39</sup> Deming, p. 249.
- <sup>40</sup> Kozloff, pp. 51-2.
- <sup>41</sup> C. Mukerji and M. Schudson, *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 19.
- <sup>42</sup> Campbell, pp. 265-293.
- <sup>43</sup> Both the Winter and Summer Olympics are scheduled to occur every four years. The International Olympic Committee began alternating Summer and Winter Olympics after 1992. The next Winter Olympics were thus rescheduled for 1994, making this the first (and only) time athletes would wait only two years between competitions. CBS won the rights to broadcast the 1994 Winter Olympics, as well as the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan.
- <sup>44</sup> M. B. Nelson, ‘Learning What “Team” Really Means,’ *Newsweek* 19 July 1999, p. 55.
- <sup>45</sup> M. Starr, ‘Dueling on the Ice,’ *Newsweek* 17 March 1997, p. 64.
- <sup>46</sup> Starr, 17 March 1997, p. 64.
- <sup>47</sup> M. Starr, ‘Beautiful Dreamer,’ *Newsweek* 9 February 1998, p. 62.
- <sup>48</sup> M. Starr, 9 February 1998, p. 62.
- <sup>49</sup> J. D., ‘A Pixie-Perfect Moment,’ *Macleans* 2 March 1998, p. 42.
- <sup>50</sup> M. Starr, ‘The Long, Winding Road to Gold,’ *Newsweek* 29 March 1999, p. 66.