

**Olympic-size Outrage;  
Joe Klamar's Photos, Framing, and Phelps**

Last spring, Joe Klamar, a professional photographer with Agence France-Presse and Getty Images photographed an event called the Olympic Summit held in Dallas, Texas. There was huge Olympic star power in the room, the biggest of the bigs; world class swimmers Ryan Lochte and Michael Phelps joined track and field's finest in Lolo Jones, and Allison Felix at the event. Klamar's scale and space was far smaller; he'd have just moments to interact with and photograph the athletes.

Because of his affiliation with Getty Images, the world's largest distributor of stock photos and video, Klamar's images are widely circulated. They initially appear to have come to the public's attention when 30 of the images were published on CBS website's 2012 London Olympics page. The outrage was immediate: "Sacriligious!" "An embarrassment to our country and the profession." "Next time hire me!" "A high profile, epic fail." "OMG. Terrible! Sad!" "I could do better. "Maybe the photographer is sight impaired."

On Yahoo! Sports website, more than 6,000 commenters weighed in on the portraits. As the photos and resultant reactions turned into a viral phenomenon, traditional media outlets including ABC News, the *Toronto Star* and the *Daily Mail* devoted stories to Klamar's images. *Reddit* and *The Huffington Post*, along with many niche photography and visual arts websites, saw comments sections abuzz with posts condemning the photographs. Though an exhaustive tally has not been totaled, the comments number in the tens of thousands and largely appear negative if not outright scathing in tone.

## **Framing images**

Susan Sontag (1977) speaks to the populist notions of cameras, vision, and photographs: “What it once took a very intelligent eye to see, anyone can see now.” Thirty five years removed from that remark, anyone and everyone can have an intelligent eye. Because of the immediacy of the digital world and the internet, now everyone’s a critic with an internet soap box. Everyone’s a potential cyberspace “pro.” And, most anyone can own a camera housed in a cellular phone. Photography is perhaps the most democratic of art forms. So, in the case of Klamar’s images, why were so many so angry? These were, after all, simply photographs of Olympians on a photographic studio set.

Perhaps Sontag gets at the beginnings of understanding this in another of her “On Photography” (1977) musings, “To photograph is to confer importance.” (p. 28) In this textual analysis, I turn to the source of that “importance”—Klamar’s Olympic portraits—in an effort to investigate what was present, or absent, within the frame that stirred such passions. I will look closely at the seemingly most commented photograph, that of Michael Phelps (figure 1). He is the athlete that drew the most responses and, by no surprise, likely the most recognizable of those Klamar photographed.

Media presentations of Olympic athletes have adhered to framings involving narrative so as to increase audience participation and viewership/readership (Chalip & Green, 2000). From the elaborate and intimate storytelling that television networks offer before and during the international event, to the choreographed opening ceremonies, and on through the spectacle of the two-week occasion and its closing gala, the public personae of the athletes is stage managed by the International Olympic Committee. And, in large part, NBC’s Olympic coverage of the games has exerted a tremendous force in the way narratives—especially nationalistic ones—are

crafted and received in this country (Billings, 2008).

Phelps has been framed a certain way and there are expectations surrounding this representation (Billings, p. 22 ). In other words, the audience knows what he's supposed to look like and how he's supposed to appear; he's likely entered their homes well coiffed, well muscled and well lit, via television—he endorses well-known cereal and sandwich companies, among other products—in national ads. The public is also familiar with sparrow-waisted swimmer with the condor-like wingspan from Sports Illustrated, Vogue, GQ, Time and numerous other magazine covers. Aqua blue, from his sphere of dominance, and gold, from his numerous Olympic medals garnered dominating that sphere, are the palette and props in such photographic or televised displays. He is ready. He performs. He is in the pool. He is cutting through the water with piston-like precision. He is on the medal platform. He wins golds. It is what is expected; it is how his persona has been framed. When that framing is fractured, say through an image of him dark, grizzled, awash in cool tones, a disconnect or a dissonance can result.

If a person is exposed to frames that are not in compliance with his/her cognitive elements (knowledge, opinion, and reflection of own behavior), it causes a state of cognitive dissonance. The extent of cognitive dissonance is directly proportional to the number and importance of cognitive elements that are in contradiction with the frame (Kalvas, Váně, Štípková, & Kreidl, 2012).

Hall writes of shared cultural maps (1997) by which members of that culture share meaning. At that moment when Klamar snaps the shutter—in that instant of production—he is coding the image with meaning. When the consumers visually digest that image, they decode it, working from conceptual map that is, presumably, shared by others in the culture. McKee (2003) echoes this notion in his discussion of sense making as it applies to textual analysis.

The consensus at the level of the largest communities—say a national culture—is enough for us to make sense of it most of the time, but may often jar with our own practice: sometime we’ll hear people who share a nation with us saying things that just don’t make any sense to us; we don’t understand how they could possibly think that way (p. 12).

Klamar, then, in his photographic representations of Olympic athletes and Olympic hopefuls, created a disruption between what was expected, the traditional narrative, and the execution of that image. For the majority of commenters, he got it wrong.

### **Focus on Phelps**

For his part, McKee would say perhaps no one, neither Klamar nor viewers of his work, got it wrong. In furthering his explication of textual analysis, in particular the ideas of post-structuralist readings of texts or cultural relativism he writes, “From a post-structuralist perspective, you look for the differences between text without claiming that only one of them is the correct one” (p. 13). But, for commenters/viewers/readers of the Phelps text, *something* was clearly incorrect.

I will give the Klamar image of the swimmer a close reading, by which I mean an examination that is:

An active and a creative process of engaging with what is before our eyes, paying close attention, selecting focus, analysing the material seen, and in other ways drawing on our general and specific knowledge to make sense of what we see and how it is organised as a visual text (Webb & Schirato, 2004, 197)

This is but one way to look at images or to perform text analysis. (I will return to this discussion later.) In a close reading, Rose (2001 p. 17) identifies three sites where meaning is produced in

images—production, image, audiences—and provides useful modalities for the critical examination within these areas. These modalities (technological, compositional, social) can intersect, however, I will use one in particular, compositionality, in this close reading of Klamar's portraits. Rose argues that compositionality can be most easily read and understood when talking about the genre of an image.

Genre is a way of classifying visual images into certain groups. Images that belong to the same genre share certain features. A particular genre will share a specific set of meaningful objects and locations and . . . have a limited set of narrative problematics (Rose, 20)

Clearly, the Phelps photo was not read as an image belonging to the sport photography genre. Was it the shadow that raked the left side of his body, making that portion of his face and extraordinarily-long bared torso? The effect: a stark chiaroscuro of blues, blacks and flesh tones, blindingly bruise-like in its intensity. Ropy arms crossed across his chest, Phelps stands with a willowy forbearance, the mien of an A-List Club bouncer; his is an "I am not amused" countenance. The traditional sports culture cues and clues are absent in this image. There is no flag nor is there present anything to suggest a flag schema. The blue backdrop is of a tone more associated with electric blue; a hue suggesting energy, vitality, the "color" of lightning, energy, power. The hue darkens dramatically to a midnight blue at the edges of the circular glow of the studio light aimed almost centrally at the athlete's mid section. A near oval swath of the light stretches oblong, from the upper left quadrant of the image to its lower right, the darker blues splaying to the sides of the ovoid. In the areas where the light is most concentrated, just above the exposed band of Phelps' Diesel brand underwear sported an inch or so above a pair of low slung-belted pants, and just beneath his earlobe to the left of the frame, the blue background

appears wrinkled, flesh-like, imperfect. And, though sinewy, this dominating athlete also appears imperfect and out of his element, literally and figuratively.

Where are the swimming goggles? The sleek cap? The ever-changing, ever-engineered swimwear? And wouldn't that sturdy, three days' growth of facial hair—notably accented in an almost sinister fashion by the lighting—increase drag in the water? This subject, centered precisely in the image, body turned every slightly to his right, is marked more by what is not in the photograph than what is: water, kick turns, breast stroke, lap lane dividers, start platforms, signature, pre-race headphones, sweat jacket are all absent. Present? A near thousand-yard stare, though it does not engage the viewer nor the camera. The aforementioned garments are visible as it a watch on his left wrist. (Phelps endorses Omega watches, though it is difficult to identify the brand in this photo.) He is without props, an almost nude figure.

His positioning in the frame directs the eye to express his central significance, but it is a violation of a basic photographic compositional tenet, the rule of thirds. Given that Phelps face is half obscured, Klamar's intent seems to be to draw viewer's attention to the highlighted portions of the portrait, Phelps' crossed arms and lean torso. This is the powerhouse for swimmers; the core generator for stroke efficiency. It is Phelps' remarkable engine. Klamar offers little depth of field and little room between camera and subject; he is forcing viewers into this pictorial area. It is an area that, as constructed, decidedly calls attention to itself. From harsh lighting to ragged backdrop the text refers back to itself in a self-conscious, self-reflexive way. Those hidden tools of the photographer's trade—lighting kits, scrims, seamless backdrops, electrical cords, strobes—are made evident in Klamar's images. His process of creating photographs is made transparent; it connects to itself and runs counter to intertextual referents. McKee defines intertexts as “publicly circulated texts that are explicitly linked to the text you're interested in (p. 97). Klamar has

decontextualized the swimmer, separating narrative and representation. And this, McKee writes may strips viewers of this text as bare as Phelps: “Much the likely interpretation of a text depends on contextual information such as genre, wider discourses in culture and ‘intertexts’” (p. 131). Rather than inviting us into the golden glow, which so often defines Olympic sport portraiture, his is a space of potential confrontation or confinement. But whom holds what position? Was Klamar confronting the masses reading his texts? Was he suggesting they are in some way confined? Or, perhaps the subject is confronting us, his powerful gaze not intercepting our own; he is to be looked upon, but does not need to look upon us.

### **Lenses**

I want to return to McKee’s post-structuralist take on analysis here. In elucidating cultural relativism, he writes:

It seems to me that we make sense of the reality we live in through our cultures, and that different cultures can have very different experiences of reality. No single representation of reality can be the *only* true one, or the *only* accurate one, or the *only* one that reflects reality because other cultures will always have alternative and equally valid ways of representing and making sense of that part of reality (p. 10). (italic is author’s original emphasis).

And so, my assessment of Klamar’s photo of Phelps is nothing more than my particular reading of this text at this time. It runs counter to the postings by the majority of the thousands who made comments after the images gained public attention, but it is no more or less valid, though it is decidedly lengthier. And that fact of space and place deserves some discussion, because it likely shaped the dialogue around the photographer’s images.

I would expect a far different discussion had these images initially come to the public’s

attention in another space, either a different digital space or a bricks and mortar venue such as an art gallery or a retail Speedo swimwear or Nike outlet. But, it did not. It is of a particular time and place and so are the people viewing it. And, so am I. I carry, say McKee (p. 24) and (Bourdieu, 1986) a certain cultural capital. I am conversant in art speak and hold an advanced degree in art history. I have the knowledge, the lexicon and the experience to critically evaluate images. That is my position of subjectivity. Or at least part of it. I'm also an American and, it might be interpreted, interested in positive portrayals of my cultural heritage or ambassadors, in this case, Olympic athletes. That's a point of relevancy, but my aesthetic concerns override my nationalistic ones in evaluating these images. It is of interest to note that a brief survey of comments made in European chat forums/comment sections, don't seem to have the intensity of dislike for Klamar's efforts compared to those expressed in the same sorts of forums that are associated with publications in this country. Finally, it should be noted that I've spent several hours over the course of several months looking at these images, whereas commenters likely spent no more than a few moments eyeing the images before posting their impressions. That's a substantive difference in that my understanding of the images is removed from such immediacy and has involved some careful consideration.



Figure 1. Michael Phelps (Joe Klamar/Agence France Press).

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