

# **A Theatre of Cyborgs and Zombies: Mapping the Performance of Sacred Ritual at the Altar of Popular Culture**

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# Abstract

Ever since the ancients, ritual has played a central role in human society. Traditionally exercised within a context of religious or spiritual belief systems, in late industrial and globalized society one finds its position increasingly challenged by the changing cultural landscape, in which the central role of religion in constructing shared narratives and social cohesion has been replaced by the dominant discourse of popular culture. Within this environment, the ritualistic methods are adapted to fit a new paradigm; one that is increasingly technocratic, commodifying, and dependent on structures of media power. This affects both the performance of ritual and the production of meaning which underpins the functional structures of society and its embedded values.

In the following research I will attempt to map out how ritual, as the foundational element of the sociocultural apparatus, is challenged and transformed by its entanglement with new media technologies that are at work in the production, dissemination and consumption of pop culture, and how this affects both the individual participating subject as well as the broader society of which they are a part. If our society is indeed fundamentally constructed through the dynamic interplay of belief systems and associated practices, then having a deeper understanding of the role of new technologies and their various implications is essential. What I aim to achieve in this thesis is to develop a conceptual vocabulary as a set of tools to analyze and understand how the performance of ritualistic behaviors in a technocratically mediatized environment shapes the very discourse which produces it, and the implications this might have on how we should aim to participate in it.

## Introduction

Before I begin with the exposition of this endeavor, allow me to warn the reader of henceforth embarking upon a confrontation (and consortation) of what has been described by Peirce as “ideas so broad they may be looked upon as moods or tones” (1888). This is not for the sake of some great ambition on my part to explain the world in all its minute detail; on the contrary I wish to elucidate one very specific occurrence, but one that is so deeply steeped in a highly divergent range of histories and theories, that I will have to employ a number of complex methods to disentangle the point at which I tentatively aim. Less a comprehensive inventory, what follows is development of an aesthetic logic which links the earliest cave paintings of civilization to our most recent holographic technology.

According to John Dupré (1993), the assumption that the diverse contents of the world can be unambiguously sorted into categories and classifications has become increasingly difficult to defend. He argues “that the disunity of science is not merely an unfortunate consequence of our limited computational or other cognitive capacities, but rather reflects accurately the underlying ontological complexity of the world, the disorder of things” (1993: 7). Classification is of course useful, but its utility is compromised by a forced linearity. I will therefore use a heterogeneous and diverse approach in an effort to question those methodological certainties that were previously used to assert causal developments, accepting the coexistence of divergent forms and concepts in which no paradigm is necessarily dominant. Jonathan Z. Smith notes that theoretical issues often determine the horizon of study for the student who is bound neither by the demarcations of a given canon nor by the limits of a historic community in constituting the domain of the argument or the field of the illuminating example, and that “as the Athenians knew, a straight line is not the route of propriety when treating with sacred matters” (1992: xii). Gadamer, too, looks at things in terms of networks, for he considers the sacred as a category of experience that happens over time, rather than a single thing. Since we are starting from some specific sacred matters, and Gadamer and Smith

are among key theorists whose work we will henceforth consider, it seems advisable to take their view on the suitable approach. Even as we venture further afield we shall encounter complex entanglements, such as Marvin Carlson's 1996 introduction to performance which traverses anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology and linguistics in an effort to elucidate this concept (Carlson, 2004: 6).

Mieke Bal (2002) describes the field of cultural analysis as not delineated, because traditional delimitations must be suspended in order to approach and question an object's participatory field, using travel as a concept for undertaking the study of an object by means of cultural analysis. If looked at purely through the use of method it is linear and proceeds from field to method to object, while looking through the lens of *concept* allows for convergences of objects, theories and methods which can be studied and "traveled" in a myriad of ways. Similarly to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, or Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, we encounter a living and deeply entangled organism which must be, if not disentangled, at least understood in terms of sets of dialectical tensions and relationalities. Latour's actor-network theory posits that everything exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships where humans, objects, ideas, processes and institutions are participants. While a substantial amount of our attention will be dedicated to meditation, which Birgit Meyer tells us "proves to be a bridging — indeed, literally, a mediating — concept that cuts across various disciplines within the study of religion, and beyond" (2012: 31), bringing to bear the involvement of other media in religious experience that goes beyond the book; such as "things, pictures, music...". It is indeed the very multidimensional, transmedial nature of these objects which calls for such consideration; therefore positioning oneself at various convergence points and studying their entanglements, rather than individual strands of thought and process, may be advisable for this particular undertaking.

According to archaeologist and theorist Ian Hodder, movement and instability are at the core of human experience. The key idea in his entanglement theory is that humans get caught in a double bind where they end up depending on things that depend on them. He claims that humans are caught in filaments and threads that extend into a real

beyond, and that religion is a pragmatic attempt to make sense of the world and intervene in that beyond, pointing out that “it is difficult to identify the boundaries of entanglements” (2016: 6). In particular I will be focusing on human-thing entanglement, whose “asymmetrical tensions and dialectical co-dependency” are a key nodal point in the human dependence on things in cognitive and psychological development which makes humans and their relations “radically dispersed and distributed” (2016: 2). Evoking Heidegger, he describes the *thing* as an entity which draws other entities together, creating meaning as an entanglement of associations, assumptions and processes. Therefore the utility in the study of entanglements is that it offers an opportunity to examine the relationship between small everyday acts and large-scale movements, while bridging narrow approaches such as behavioral, evolutionary, ecological, theological or sociological.

Further, the use of triads in our study of entanglements will be essential, as it maps out a set of convergence points and allows for a closer examination of their relations. Here I would posit that the ancient sky-gazer, entranced by the rotations of the sun and moon upon the firmament, might be forgiven for taking the self out of then equation, for the great spectacles which come before us in the most mundane occurrences may often seem sufficient evidence unto themselves. Phenomena can generally be distilled down to a duality, yet we have seen time and again how the introduction of a subjective view into any binary opposition is the path which yields the fruit of nuanced understanding. In his unfinished work *A Guess at the Riddle* (1888), Charles Sanders Peirce presents a triadic approach in reasoning which affords mapping sets of existing concepts such as deduction / induction / hypothesis, but also the supplementation of other actants within this framework for analysis, such as agent / patient / action, term / proposition / argument and the Kantian three-fold division of mind into feeling / knowing / willing which can be traced from Kant via Plato and all the way back to Pythagoras. The importance of the theoretical third element is highlighted by Peirce as it creates a mediation that “bridges over the chasm between the absolute first and last”. It is the subjective aspect which comprehends and attempts to assimilate the binary tensions existent in the very fundamental structures of nature.

Everyday life is very much a matter of all things occurring in resistance, a kind of tension. Thinking in terms of triads does not mean we don't have to deal with all kinds of oppositions. To a large extent, the dimension of secondness is resistance and polarity, while the third

dimension is concerned with mediation, similarly to the triad in dialectics which follows thesis / antithesis / synthesis. The triadic unity consists of three distinct elements that can only be understood by relating them to one another. The three cannot be without each other. Peirce delineates the triadic form as first, second and third following chance, law, and habit-taking. The first element is Chance, that which is what it is without being related to or caused by something else. The second element is Law which is also causality: one is what it is by relation to another. The third element is Habit-taking, which is a process of repetition and iteration. The first is chaos, last is order, and this triadic model follows distinct stages of causality. Thirdness is the strongest operation in this causal process and as such is the key to Peirce's triad. A recurrence of triadic motifs in the following research emerged quite spontaneously from the material and allowed for going beyond the binary and observing a multiplicity of dialectical tensions. Further: there is a kind of beyond-ness, above-ness relating to the limits of time and space, here and now, which is involved in this. The starting point I will be taking here is the question of the sacred and profane, and their role in the ritual process so as to make the sacred ritual act distinct from, say, the ritual of brushing your teeth. Of course, I acknowledge that cleanliness is next to godliness and self care is in fact a holy act; but the central concern here is a macro level of meaning-making, the foundation of how participants relate to communities, cultures and societies through the active construction of shared narratives.

The primary research subject of the following line of enquiry will concern key elements in the relationship between new media technologies on the performance of sacred ritual in contemporary popular culture. I will argue that ritual as a foundational element of the sociocultural apparatus is transformed by new media technologies at work in the production, dissemination and consumption of pop culture, and further aim to ascertain the nature and implications of this transformation. Popular culture and new media technologies are concepts pertaining to the later 20th and early 21st centuries, respectively; a period during which Western society has been considered increasingly secular, leading to a blurring of the sacred and profane within its public discourse. As a result, a number of contemporary pop culture practices are now comparable with what we have traditionally understood as forms of religions worship, having been adapted to the spectacle of ritualistic

media performance. New media technologies are instrumental in the production, dissemination and consumption of pop culture, creating unprecedented levels of production and accessibility. Thus, complex belief systems are being constructed through an increasingly digital, technocratic and mediatised sociocultural landscape. I intend to demonstrate how our society is fundamentally constructed through these ritualistic practices and develop a conceptual vocabulary for thinking through our relationship with (and participation in) ritual, pop culture and new media technologies.

This question arises from an interest in the intersection of the foundation of society-making through the ritualistic construction of shared narratives, values and meanings, and our increasing entanglement with new media and digital technologies. The underlying assumption here is that there is an existing relationship between these phenomena that can be studied by drawing on theoretical frameworks; an assumption I will dutifully follow at the outset and upon constructing a set of analytic tools I will test their utility by applying them to empirical case studies. The first section will primarily concern the concept of ritual in terms relevant to religion, with special attention to those places where it overlaps with sociology, culture and the arts. Once an established set of parameters is constructed I will link this in the second section with media studies and popular culture. Please note that, with regard to the names of persons referenced, I will habitually use the academic tradition of referring to scholars and academic authors by their last name; while with regard to the celebrity or public figure, I will alternate between their full name or their first name, depending on how they are best and more commonly or familiarly known in the media or popular culture. Finally, the third section will focus on new media technologies, digital culture and questions of virtuality. Starting with a clarification of terms, each section builds on the theories established in the former, and a case study is considered in each section in order to ground the theory in empirical observation. The primary reason for using a number of different case studies is to show that these theoretical findings are not localized to one occurrence, medium, or genre, but indeed that they permeate across multitudes under a variety of guises. In this manner, a complex entanglement can be deconstructed and analyzed.



## Part one

*In which I ask what is ritual, what are its traditional functions and characteristics as observed by scholars, and how these combine to create belief?*

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### Key distinctions in dyadic form

As is well known, Durkheim initially defines religion as the absolute distinction between the sacred and the profane (Smith, 1992: 39). Here at the very outset we encounter a duality, a direct opposition of the first and last. How we understand the very concept of ritual must immediately be asserted in light of this binary tension; therefore a clarification of the “sacred” ritual, as distinct from a purely habitual one, must be made. The word sacred comes from the Latin *sacrare* “to make sacred, consecrate; hold sacred; immortalize; set apart, dedicate”, while ritual comes from *ritualis* “relating to rites, usually of a religious nature” from *ritus* “religious observance or ceremony, custom, usage” perhaps from proto-Indo-European root *re-* meaning “to reason, count”. Thus in the definition and etymology of this term we begin to see the semantic composition of an act of making, holding, dedicating, and a separation or setting-apart, which is choreographed and repeated through ceremony, custom, or usage, and involves a form of reasoning, accounting, or demarcation. Distinguished British anthropologist Maurice Bloch (2008) specifies the distinction of transcendental exchange which separates the sacred from the transactional of the everyday, while both archaeologist Ian Hodder and professor of religious studies Birgit Meyer make frequent reference to the concept of a “beyond” the relationship with which signifies a religious aspect. The sacred implies a connection with a separate yet ritualistically accessible realm which behaves in the manner of a map-territory relation as taken from Borges to Baudrillard, where a map covers the territory to such an extent that it effectively becomes it; in other words, the sacred is always here and exists all around us, but its presence is by no means obvious

nor can one access it without making use of a particular method I shall call the sacred (as distinct from specifically religious) ritual.

The word 'ritual' like the word 'art' does not have one commonly agreed definition (Lewis, 1980: 19) but is generally agreed that 'ritual' extends beyond religious ritual. This extended usage was already implicit in Durkheim's broad interpretation of religion and religious ritual, but it was made explicit by Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff in their 1977 book *Secular Ritual*. Mary Douglas even went so far as to argue that 'very little of our ritual behavior is enacted in the context of religion' (Douglas, 1984: 68). Even though there is no consensus among scholars on a definition of ritual, Catherine Bell has argued that it has certain characteristics that define it (Bell, 1997: 138-169). These are formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism and performance involving complex sensory experience sometimes described as an altered state of consciousness (Jimenez, 2013). Rituals are often repeated in stereotypical fashion and conducted deliberately at appropriate times, usually during crises, seasonal changes, or when societal changes occur. Their meanings are not always transparent, neither to outsiders nor even to the insiders themselves (Viviers, 2012). The concept of ritual has been taken to mean different things depending on the line of scholarship one follows. While historical and anthropological approaches might consider the ritual of ancient societies through the lens of primitive belief systems, theological approaches tend to look at philosophical and liturgical concepts in its considerations, and sociologists have rightfully pointed out that almost all human activity that is recorded or studied can be in some sense conceptualized as ritualistic, or viewed through such a lens.

Victor Turner follows van Gennep's *rites de passage* model of separation / transition / incorporation (alternatively: separation, margin, aggregation) in constructing his work on spaces which are liminal, holding momentarily the potential for subversions or inversions of norms and values of the social order, a space which effectively divides all that it entangles into a before and after which is marked out as such relative to the ritual. Van Gennep's rites of passage are transitional phases which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age, or indeed any type of stable or recurrent condition which is

culturally recognized. In his 1969 work *The Ritual Process*, Turner looks at the role of symbols in social and cultural processes and specifically connections that may exist between culture, cognition and perception. His work on processual symbols in cross-cultural and trans-temporal terms points to an anti-structural liminality of the ritual and aesthetic forms which will underpin much of the following research. Namely, for Turner society is a process which relies on certain constraints and boundaries to keep the chaos at bay, and certain regularities become fully intelligible only in the light of values embodied and expressed in symbols at ritual performances. Turner talks in terms of dyads, binary oppositions such as cosmos and chaos, or the ritual site and the wild bush; and triads which involve a mediator, such as a witch or doctor mediating between life and death or the male and female (Turner, 1969: 37). Elsewhere, he defines the ritual symbol as a dynamic entity in the context of action, a set of social and cultural dynamic systems (Turner, 1974: 54). The utility of these classificatory structures (as Turner refers to them) and analytic tools is concurrent with our chosen approach and echoes Ian Hodder's entanglement theory which will form a key part of my theoretical framework.

Roy A. Rappaport, described by Nick Couldry as the most systematic theorist in ritual, defines it as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers (Rappaport, 1999: 24). At the core, his idea is that ritual action is always more than it seems, and the emphasis is on behavior. Taking behavior at face value, one may be forgiven for assuming that our society is increasingly secular. Scholars have pointed to the decline of institutional religious power and discourse as evidence of secularization which has been termed by many as progress. However others have noted that the institutional element does not constitute the entirety of religious process and pointed to the subjective and personal experiences of adherents as posing equal validity in the modern period. Durkheim describes religion as "first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it" (Durkheim, 1995: 227). Therefore the apparent decline of certain practices in particular organizational contexts should be looked at as a

distinct and separate phenomenon not necessarily in tandem with a decline in relevance of the system of ideas it is rooted in. Scholars such as Thomas Luckmann have observed that the all-purpose term “secularization” is not indicative of destructive decline of religion, but rather a radical transformation in societal practice following the industrial revolution and 20th century urbanization (Luckmann, 1967). As Birgit Meyer explicitly states:

“It would be mistaken to see the process of ‘unchurching’ as being proof of the decline and eventual disappearance of religion, as is claimed by the secularization thesis that has been part of grand narratives of modernization. Instead of evaporating with increasing ‘progress’ and ‘development’, religion has transformed.”

(Meyer, 2012: 6)

This transformation is the focus of my research; the manner in which ritual has been adapted to mass popular culture and mass media, and the implications that the technologies used in its construction, will be interrogated through a synthesis of theoretical work and a number of case studies from various fields where sacred rites are apparent. Therefore I shall treat ritual as fundamentally religious act which has taken on a meta dimension and can be used as a traveling concept. A traveling concept is one which traverses disciplines, such as narrative, myth, or meaning, and as I propose: ritual. No longer tied to the fields of anthropology, sociology or religious studies, I will use these as a starting point, and traverse across other fields such as media and culture in the second section, and science and technology studies in the third. Hence this might be termed a post-secular project, as it sees a persistence or resurgence of religious phenomena in a supposedly secular age. As noted by Meyer, since Jürgen Habermas popularized the term ‘post-secular’ in 2001, it has been subject to much debate. The term may be too ambiguous or confusing and may not be indicative of the new visibility of religion as an indication of post-secularity (understood as going beyond secularity), nor does it satisfy to answer the numerous

complicated implications of the transformation of religion (Meyer 2012: 39).

This first chapter will interrogate the concept of ritual as a form of triadic mediation between absolute first and last; to identify and compare the relational processes involved in the construction of the sacred, a materially mediated synthesis with the beyond which involves symbolic relationships acted out in ceremony and transmuted into custom. The triadic form will be used as a blueprint for mapping out these relations and understanding the role of each entangled element participating in this process.

Nick Couldry identifies three broad approaches to the term ritual in anthropology as firstly habitual, secondly formalized, and thirdly transcendent action; each a more elaborate and meaningful iteration of that proceeding it. The habitual ritual is the uninteresting, everyday action or habit. The second, formalized ritual is that which involves a recognizable pattern or form which gives it a particular meaning; thus being a compounded form of a series of habitual rituals arranged in a manner that gives them meaning. Finally, the ritual involving transcendent values is an enactment of a series of formalized ritual to their highest end, “direct contact with the ultimate value, God” (Couldry, 2003: 3). These sets of rituals gradually turn the attention towards a transcendent pattern beyond the detail of actions, and thus raise the question of form with regard to key life aspects such as the social structure and cultural narratives. Couldry uses the term ritualization (as per Catherine Bell) which encourages one to examine the links between ritual actions and the wider social space, practices and beliefs which make them possible (Couldry, 2003: 12). The aim of the following section is to interrogate the concept of ritual and its positional relationalities within culture and society.

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## Materiality, myth and mediation

In her work on evocative objects, Susan Yee (2007) shares her the experience of visiting La Fondation Le Corbusier and asking to see the

master drawings for an unfinished project by the famed architectural designer. She describes being taken to a viewing room, waiting for the curator to bring out the artifact, watching it unrolled on the table, and the uncertainty of touching the sacred object. Coming back the next day, she tells us that “The ritual began again.”

This example illustrates the uncertain boundary between the ritual as both an everyday occurrence and a sacred act. The professional enquiry, the waiting, the choreographies politeness; these are all very mundane everyday rituals we frequently enact or take part in. However, the context of the spatial and subject-object reactions, the particular value of the object as containing a mythical (almost *magical*) significance, and the emotional response of the subject, all work together to imbue the author’s visit to the archive with profound meaning. The mythology surrounding Le Corbusier and his unfinished work created a unique phenomenological situation where an embodied and material state are in tension. The materiality, the drawing at hand, holds within a potent history and acquires thereby a symbolic value; but one which is also quantifiable within the market system, most commonly enacted in the ritual of auction where this value is debated through a play of tug-of-war among potential buyers until said value is temporarily agreed upon, providing a momentary stability. However, in this case the embodied brings its own particular potential and utility which extends Le Corbusier’s work into future iterations, analysis and exhibition; further adding to the cultural and mythological value. Following literary theorist Bill Brown’s “thing theory” which implies a socially encoded value in defining objecthood wherein an object becomes a thing when it can no longer serve its purpose, one sees the usually hidden paper and graphite again momentarily become fused together as an *object*, emerging from its passive “thingness”. This is because, in spite of the fact that the drawings are stored away and unfinished, in the act of their display and representation they continue to produce meaning both as objects of analysis but also, for Yee and others, on a deeply profound and personal level, thereby engaged as active participants in what Yee herself describes as a “ritual”.

## MATERIALITY

Meyer describes religion as sets of practices and ideas that go beyond the ordinary and produce meaning (2012: 23), pointing to the role of the fetish as a hybrid or border phenomenon for objects which are made by human hands yet are held to have some life of their own, sometimes termed “spirit”. In his text *Fetish Factish*, Bruno Latour describes the encounter between the natives of Guinea and the Portuguese, where the “primitive” claim to the divine nature of an artifact and the colonizer’s misapprehension points to an early distinction between embodiment and representation. The Guineans were told in no uncertain terms that something can either be holy, or made by the human hand; it cannot be both. While fetish might come from *feitiço* — from *feito*, the past participle of the Portuguese verb “to do, to make”, form, figure, configuration, but also artificial, fabricated, factitious and finally, enchanted — it was also linked by Charles de Brosses, who invented the word *fétichisme* in 1760, to *fatum* or destiny and *fée* of fairy. This points us in the direction of animism, of objects in possession of a totemic spirit. This concept of the object possessing a particular power, embodying a mythology, or constructed as an archive, will be a recurrent motif; but for now let us merely note here the first point at which materiality is imbued with an explicit agency of its own. We may look upon Le Corbusier’s drawing as a fetish, though its value is notably ascribed to it by the renown of its maker; it is the mythology of the architect that is evoked, embodied, enacted in the ritual of surveying the work. According to Latour, belief is not a state of mind but a result of relationships. The researcher in this case has a particular relationship to the artifact which is characterized by material reverence; both to the brick and metal of the Villa Savoyé (for example), as well as the unfinished drawings in the archive.

It has been noted that “in principle all gods [...] by necessity require some material vessel in order to be present and enact their power, and humans can access, and partake in, this power through certain religious acts” (Meyer, 2012: 17). It was this “worship” of “a mere piece of stone or iron” that alarmed the missionaries in Latour’s anecdote, and Meyer tells of the use of “ritual acts to render them [ie. gods] present and serve them by food offerings, libations and

drumming”. According to Meyer and Houtman (2012) the turn to materiality in humanities and social sciences comes from a dissatisfaction with the traditional view that sees immaterial abstractions studied as the prime movers of history, pointing to the way that processes of social and political formation create a tangible material world. Ian Hodder also refers to an acknowledged “return to things” in religious studies, and evokes Bill Brown’s “thing theory” (which has already been addressed) and Don Ihde’s “material hermeneutics”. The latter denies the opposition between positivism and hermeneutics and explores ways in which technologies and machines shape the way we do science and see the world. Further, Hodder frames religion as not mere contemplation of abstract beliefs, but indeed a technology for dealing with something real, one that relies on complex sets of entanglements between humans and things. This line of reasoning points to the relationship or entanglement between humans and the material world, and as evidenced in the role of relics and totems, including the example of Le Corbusier’s drawing an object imbued with symbolic or mythical meaning is central to creating the tension required for the ritual act to take place. The thing becomes an object when it is wielded in terms of its mythical or symbolic significance. “It is an empirical symbol through which societies and their cultures mediate the universal relationship between culture and nature” (Strinati, 1995: 90).

The material object as ritualistic artifact takes on a totemic aspect which provides a symbolic reconciliation of the opposition between culture and nature because they are united by the totem which represents them both. Thus we see this tension between the absolute first and last, mediated by the totem which holds the mystical power of thirdness as described by Peirce. The totem is positioned at the tension between nature and culture by holding certain aspects of each, which create and maintain relationships between communities, mythologies, environments. One aspect here is the material from which the object is made. When I hold a hand-crafted object from wood or clay, I feel it poses more spirit than a plastic item from a factory line, simply because of the effect that its tactile quality has upon my senses. Where once local producers and cottage industries were the primary producers of ritualistic objects, today we find ourselves entangled in patterns of



production and trade across the globe which have tended to be exploitative to developing countries and have generally taken an agonistic position to workers' rights and environmental concerns. This shows how the intended meaning of an object can have a broader set of conditions or entanglements which bear upon it certain implications that may indeed be directly oppositional to that meaning.

In *Materiality and the Study of Religion*, Hutchings and McKenzie explain that to study religious material culture is to study how people build and maintain the cultural domains that are the shape of their social lives, treating objects as primary aspects of what religion is and how it is lived. They further point to art historian and religious scholar David Morgan's key phases of material analysis: production, classification and circulation. For Morgan, focal objects participate in the creation of assemblages that engage human and non-human actors in the social construction of the sacred (Morgan, 2014: 83). He follows a history in the scholarship of art which sees images acting as objects, which are agents upon the body. The focal object constructs the subject by acting as its counterpart, acting as the face of a network, an access point, and thus making it usable. This is the tension which we have already established, the dialectic opposition between first and second, chance and law; a relationship that is further intensified by the aesthetic affect. American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey described the aesthetic experience as one that begins with the art object, but extends far beyond that one element to produce an ongoing exchange between artist, viewer, and culture at large that culminates in an experience that is a "manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization" (1934: 326). This assigns the value of firstness to materiality, which lays passively and is in and of itself present in its thingness, not yet an object. It holds an encoded dormant mythology which is not activated until it assumes its position in the triad. Walter Benjamin holds that the unique value of "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual which ascribes to it exhibition and cult value. Meanwhile, Hans-Georg Gadamer describes how the work of art makes a claim upon the viewer, rising above the purely aesthetic function and setting its truth against the tradition; for the spectator is not merely a passive experiencer but also an active participant in this construction.

He claims that the performance of ritual is essential for the attainment of “religious truth” and that this involves the presentation of, and play with, the aesthetic form (1975: 115). It is thus the ritual where one interacts with materiality and makes use of it more than arbitrary by encoding the very production of meaning as its purpose.

The process itself, as per Peirce, is that which takes from the chaos of the ultimate first to the order of the ultimate last. However, this process does not have a particular start or end point either; it continues on regardless and is merely outlined or vaguely traced by our scholarly observations. Archaeology, for example, has a tendency to identify ritual practices as they are materially traceable, unlike non-ritualistic behaviors (Kyriakidis, 2007: 9). Materiality is therefore a useful starting point but comes with its own problematic constraints which must be acknowledged. We form many of our assumptions about history and culture based on materially encoded findings which must be compared with and studied alongside other elements relevant to it, such as mythology.

## **MYTH**

The study of ritual in anthropology, sociology and religious studies has tended to put it alongside and sometimes inextricable from myth. Renowned but controversial religious scholar and ex-nun Karen Armstrong explains that “Mythology is usually inseparable from ritual. Many myths make no sense outside a liturgical drama that brings them to life, and are incomprehensible in a profane setting” (Armstrong, 2005: 3). This use of the word “drama” to describe the method of bringing to life a dormant form of knowledge is interesting, because it implies a staging of narrative performance by actors, thus entangling a number of elements which shall be addressed in due course. Mythology itself is a form of knowledge, stored in the minds of adherents, believers, students and orators but also in noted texts and inscribed upon artifacts. E.B. Tylor explains the co-relation between myth and ritual as follows: myth serves to explain and understand the world, while ritual emerges secondarily as a means of applying that understanding in order to control the world (Segal, 2004). Sir James George Frazer, however, posits

the opposite; namely that myth emerges from ritual as beliefs change over time while habits remain largely same, claiming that the “history of religion is a long attempt to reconcile old custom with new reason, to find a sound theory for an absurd practice” (Frazer, 1922: 477).

Frazer was a student of William Robertson Smith, the famed linguist and Old Testament scholar who argued primacy of ritual in origin of religion and society. Frazer began by appropriating E.B. Tylor’s theory, but gradually came to see myth as a secondary remnant which separates itself from ritual; for Frazer, ritual is the original source of most of the expressive forms of cultural life. He developed Robertson Smith’s notion of ritual sacrifice and a divine totem into a complex new theory which essentially claimed that the universal pattern underlying all ritual is “the enactment of the death and resurrection of a god or divine king who symbolized and secured the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people” (Bell, 1997: 6). Others, such as “Cambridge ritualists” Gilbert Murray, F.M. Corford and A.B. Cook, took this model of the dying-and-rising god-king from the Near East and linked it with Dionysian fertility rates and also the structure of Greek drama, tragedy, comedy, philosophy and sport (Bell, 1997; Segal 2004). Victor Turner’s later works would focus increasingly on performance (including theatrical performance) and left behind the Durkheimian concerns with social order, while renowned classicist and linguist Jane Ellen Harrison attempted to root the origins of Greek myth, dramatic theatre and even the Olympic Games in the ancient rites described by Frazer, landing at the conclusion that myth separates and forms its own life after the ritual dies out (Bell, 1997: 7). What is proposed by Harrison here is that myth remains as a surviving element while the ritual falls by the wayside as an ancient relic which can be studied and contemplated but which does not possess an active life of its own. However as Meyer suggests, what has occurred is indeed a transformation where the myth exists as a distinct field unto itself, vulnerable to all sorts of developments, iterations and interpretations. However it seems that the ritual behavior has certainly not diminished; instead, it continues now more vibrant than ever but in a new guise or incarnation we accept as a given in our day-to-day.

The myth exists as an abstraction of various processes into a narrative form, such as that of the reincarnating god-king. Roland

Barthes, perhaps the most elegant and widely read of 20th century commentators on myth, considers it a form of speech which is formed by the historical process, further affirming that it is not confined to written discourse, “but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity..” (Barthes, 1991: 108) which points to a manner in which myth can travel across media and thus permeate culture. This is a key point in the argument that I will develop in the following sections with regard to new media and popular culture. Barthes follows Saussure’s semiology, the science of forms which studies significations apart from their content by postulating a relation between the signifier and the signified, which creates the third object which is the sign; this triadic constitution is described by Barthes as emerging from a crisis of the subject position which is actualized in different ways (1991: 111-112). For Barthes, myth acts as a metalanguage which is a second level emergent structure in which one speaks about the first which is the language-object; thus leading the semiologist to treat the written and pictorial in an equivalent manner. In myth, unlike in other semiological systems, the signifier and signified are perfectly manifest, rather than one obscuring the other; yet the intention or meaning is considered to be of greater relevance than its literal sense, as an understanding of it requires an implicit understanding of the symbolic, historical and cultural contexts within which it operates. Myth cannot be held or confined, not even in its written form, for even when encountered in materiality the myth only shows itself through understanding (a combination of the first two forms, the Saussurian signifier and signified as described by Barthes), and its continued existence and development is reliant on the other two elements of materiality and mediation, in order to continue to come into continual being. While the myth permeates culture and the social structure, in many places it remains linked to ritualistic practices. Barthes’ writings are deeply informed by the model of theatre, and he habitually refers to terminology of the theatre such as ‘scene’, ‘staging’, ‘mimesis’, etc.

This particular formation presumes the position of second to the myth, but it is an emergent second that does not exist except functionally. In its ethereal nature, existing in Plato’s world of ideas, the second is in direct opposition with the first, the material, which is full

present in its three dimensional form but unless brought into mediated contact with its counterpart remains impotent, void of meaning. Materiality is chance, that which exists regardless, but myth is law which is in a conceptually oppositional tension with it. The triadic formation requires all three elements in order for the second principle to exist, similarly to the dormant nature of the material “thing” before it is activated as an object. Therefore one must look at the final element of the triad as that which simultaneously constrains and liberates; for it gives form to the triad and defines it, while in that very act it makes it alive. This is the role of mediation.

## **MEDIATION**

Mediation is that which leads to the genesis of presence (Meyer, 2012). Meyer critiques the past mentalist approach and sketches the contours of a material alternative that includes the mental dimension without being reduced to it. In her use of the term “beyond” is implied that it refers to “the ordinary” (ie. beyond the ordinary), taking the stance that in religious materiality we find neither the fictitious illusory superstition of the fetish, nor the self-revealing but wholly “other” aspect of religious phenomenology and Protestant theology. Rather, taking the path between, she posits “the everyday as the location whence a sense of getting ‘beyond the ordinary’ is generated” (Meyer, 2012: 24). She describes how objects but also the human body can become a religious medium, indeed anything “from language to the body, from book to computer, from sculpture to icon...” can take this place, asserting that the medium is defined by its active role rather than its properties. Here the concept of a material state which is activated when entangled with its mythological aspect is brought forward. Meyer points to the need for authorization and authentication, but also the fact that these various uses of objects can serve to distinguish groups, bringing the term “sensational form” to bear on the functioning of religious mediation. The sensational form refers to a configuration of religious media, acts, imaginations and bodily sensations which are ‘formats’, in that they direct those taking part in them on how to proceed, as well as being ‘performances’, in that they effect or make present what they mediate in

the context of a religious tradition or group; citing Rappaport's (2002: 450-51) example of the liturgy of a church service stipulating particular steps which are performed and induce in participants an experience of divine presence.

“Stressing a material take on mediation, it is a methodological tool that makes it possible for researchers to discern via participant observation the micro-practices through which the ‘beyond’ becomes present and through which particular personal and collective identities with a distinct ethos and style emerge, and relate to society at large. Guiding researchers to unpack religion without simply focusing on the illusory or non-illusory nature of the ‘beyond’, but rather exploring the process of reaching out to it, the notion of sensational form is of help to operationalize the material approach I propose.”

(Meyer, 2012: 26)

Meyer's focus on sensational forms leads her the sphere of aesthetics, which she understands in the traditional Aristotelian sense of “aisthesis”, the sensorial perception of and entanglement with the world; one which engages select strong stimuli for perception, mobilizes and trains particular senses so as to invoke emotions of varying intensity, provides an imaginary that pulls together these sense impressions into some kind of conceptual homogeneity, and creates particular ‘atmospheres’ that conjure up related moods. For Meyer, religion is thus a domain of “aesthetics par excellence”. Importantly, by focusing on sensational forms she draws our attention to the threefold role of the body as a producer, transmitter and receiver of the transcendent. Sensational forms induce in people, in a repeated and repeatable manner, sensations of reaching out which they experience as real. Therefore, Meyer sees the body is a physio-cultural formation which is essential to understanding how fabrications that reach out to what is posited as ‘beyond’ eventually conjure a state of being that commands belief: how, in short, the genesis of extraordinary presence occurs. By drawing attention to specific examples in which the body is ritualistically treated in the sensorial form, we may begin to see the mediating process as one

inextricably linked with embodiment in its varying forms, in a manner that is itself sacrificial in the manner that it offers up its phenomenological state to the triadic formation.

As I have mentioned Barthes in relation to his work on myth, it is useful to note his position on mediation as expressed in his essay *The Death of the Author*. According to Barthes, in primitive societies, narrative is never undertaken by a person, but by a mediator, shaman or speaker, whose “performance” may be admired (that is, their mastery of the narrative code), but not their “genius”. Barthes’ author is a modern figure produced by society from the end of the middle ages when English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation together elevated prestige of the individual, or, as he puts it more nobly, of the “human person”. However it is not clear if, by creating an emphasis on authorship, the mediating element is directly affected, or merely obscured by what may be referred to as the mythology of the writer.

I would argue that none of these occurrences are mutually exclusive, and that in today’s new media saturated world these complex entanglements create habitual, formal and transcendent processes which have been described by Couldry, and which move from the relative chaos of the absolute first towards the relative order of the absolute last as described by Peirce. One must recall that for Peirce the third element which is that of mediation is the activating and therefore most important part in the triadic formation, perhaps even the strongest force in the universe. It is that which bridges the gap between the first and second, chance and law, nature and culture; it is an embodied performance which creates the procession of ordering by means of ritualistic interactions.

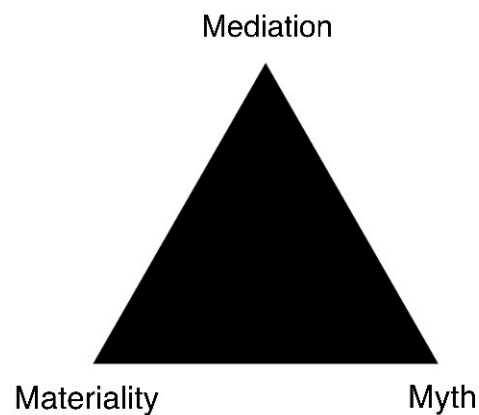
### **SOME REMARKS ON THE FIRST TRIAD**

It has already been specified how the aforementioned elements act in terms of their first, second and third -ness, in a manner that assumes the form of first chance nature to materiality, the second law culture to myth, and the third habit-taking to mediation. Materiality is that which

exists as a given, unto which a mythology is continually encoded through a mediation, the combined elements of which construct the ritual.

Materiality is the first element also variously described as nature or chance, with the second element in oppositional tension to it being the mythology which can also be described as culture or law, and the third mediating element between them as habit-taking is the process which finally constructs the ritual. In the triad of materiality / myth / mediation I propose the subjective stance to be that of the latter, as the subject is that which mediates between the mythology and the material world, and through this act is constructed the ritual setting. Much like a book left unread is only brought to life in the act of comprehension and even more so recitation, so does the materialistic totem remain dead and essentially powerless until brought to life by the performed act of reconciling it with an equally dormant mythology. This mythology exists in the everyday customs and culture, but is activated and questioned, and potentially subverted, in the ritualistic act upon which it depends.

theoretical shortcomings



The ritual of viewing the Le Corbusier drawings brings to life or (more correctly in this case) re-animates what has previously been a mere combination of paper and graphite; it can now be observed, revered, interrogated, even *destroyed*. The act of book-burning (to follow this particular example) is today most associated with oppressive authoritarian regimes, and has sometimes been termed a “ritualistic” practice, though one may presume there is an assumed metaphor in this phrasing. It affirms the status of object as actant, powerful and dangerous with its mythology, a magical totem which is encountered in



its full ferocity within the confines of a consecrated space. Many such acts exist to support this particular triadic understanding of ritual.

However, this type of positioning addresses the relevant triadic elements in a conceptually limited, one-dimensional way that fails to acknowledge their position outside of their strictly defined relationality. In the next chapter section I will attempt to critically evaluate some of these theoretical shortcomings. The blueprint (or tracing) here is not without its faults, for it fails to be adequately descriptive of the process which is much more dynamic and unstable than the above graphic representation might suggest. Therefore I will now propose a new schema, similar to what we have established but a further extrapolation of the process which describes in greater detail some of the tensions which will begin to emerge as I interrogate the concept of ritual further.

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## Environment, embodiment and the archive

This section will construct a similar order of triadic relations, taking into account the spatial as key attribute; not merely in terms of a physical dimension but also as a perspective on entanglement in a system of things such as signs, meanings, cultures, objects and actions which exist simultaneously as concepts but also as concrete and observable occurrences, often in multitudes and various forms. This triad is to serve as a useful theoretical extension to the established materiality / myth / mediation, functioning as an alternative conceptual vocabulary which expands and deepens the understanding of it. Jonathan Z. Smith evokes Claude Lévi-Strauss that “all sacred things must have their place” as sacred objects contribute to the maintenance of order. Smith’s focus is indeed on the issue of ritual and its relation to the social and verbal understanding of place: both in the sense of *location*, but also relating to part of a choreographic sequence in a temporal sense, and also as a hierarchy in terms of rank or value. Smith takes the work of Kant on orientation and how we place ourselves (*On the First Ground of the Distinction of Regions in Space*, 1768), framing orientation as always in relation to the body, and geography as a “spatial co-comitant of history”

which forms with it a parallelism. Thus the following section will interrogate the existing framework through the lens of place, body and history; or more appropriately environment, embodiment and the archive.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

If all things must indeed have their place, they also must *take* place. This taking place happens at a convergence of the spatial and the temporal created by the act, variously choreographed and embodied or enacted. The idea of space I will develop here may more properly be called environment; for it extends beyond the mere material affordances outlined thus far and further considers the social, cultural and political tensions which exist where the ritual occurs. These values are in part transmitted materially, as each spatial unit (a gate, a wall, a sign...) confirms and corresponds to an ideological supposition (access, exclusion, intent...). However, on the relation between space and place, Smith follows geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in that “space is more abstract than place” as space is that which allows movement, while place is a pause which is more specific because it is a focus of value and intimacy, filled with meaning. The broader environment, however, is one that resembles a rhizome and is made up of sets of convergence of spaces and more specifically defined places across which such values are distributed unevenly. In his 2003 work on the media ritual, which will be of central relevance to the next chapter, Nick Couldry refers to space as a metaphor for an interlocking mass of practices which are held in place by a ritual process which is stretched across multiple sites, pointing again to the utility of conceptualizing this aspect more appropriately as environment.

For Hodder, an environment involves (or entangles) a heterogenous multiplicity of forces (2016: 7). The built environment communicates ideas, values, and beliefs that reflect the material culture of a civilization. In this way, spaces and places can be understood as a language of communication in the same way that our written and verbal language allows us to communicate with each other. The physical space contains an embedded choreography, rich with meaning and capable of

shaping behaviors by variously concealing and revealing, thus creating various sets of affordances. This form of choreography is not limited to architecture. In *Lumbar Thought*, for example, Umberto Eco describes how clothes implement semiotic coding by shaping physical behavior; this is echoed by John Fiske when he asks of his students to write about the meaning of the jeans, which they were wearing by an overwhelming majority (Fiske 1989: 2-3). Fiske's point here is the ubiquity of certain cultural practices which is concealed by its embeddedness in the visual environment.

Meanwhile, Couldry outlines the role of ritual as composed of action, framing and boundaries. Framing involves something wider that is at stake; actions structured around categories and boundaries which stand in for an underlying value and symbolically capture the social situation. These categories and boundaries are what constructs an apparent stability within the environment. According to Mary Douglas, whom Couldry draws on extensively to define his key concepts, ritual focuses attention by framing; it enlivens the memory and links the present with the relevant past, thus aiding contextual understanding and perception (Douglas, 1984: 64). The ritualistic act is a self-perpetuating enframing and re-framing of a nexus of forces which together constitute the sociocultural environment by means of categories and boundaries. As Catherine Bell puts it, the most central quality of ritualization is how it organizes our movements around space, helps us to experience constructed features of the environment as real, and thereby reproduces the symbolic authority at stake.

In this sense there is a chicken-and-egg loop of uncertain origin where categories exist because of ritual, and ritual due to categories; bringing into question not only the temporal primacy, but also a hierarchal one; thus addressing similarly the concepts which Smith lays out in his aforementioned relevance of the process of taking place. This is inextricably linked with the categories and boundaries, without which the affective aspect of the ritual — the liminal transition from one state of being to another — would be impossible, as there would be no essential or clear difference between the two. One example of this can be found in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991) where Pierre Bourdieu drew on the works of van Gennep and Turner, but held social

significance of the line or boundary to be more important than the individual's liminal passage from one state to another.

The boundary is that which creates, by marking out existing parameters, a space in which the specific taking of place can occur. Thus we find the environment in place of materiality as the first aspect of the triad, not localized to one totemic object or material specificity but distributing that value across spatial dimensions. The environment is constructed by means of boundaries, encoded values and choreographies, but remains passive and still until joined in the triad. This is what rather suitably makes it analogous to nature as the absolute first, semantically suitable because environment and nature are often seen as interchangeable terms, but also because culture stands apart from nature to form its direct opposition in a similar manner to how the archive takes a historicizing approach to environment in that it is fundamentally constructed from pauses.

## **ARCHIVE**

This environment is deeply entangled with a mythology that may more properly be called an archive. The crucial difference is that myth is written, studied, retold, while the archive is recalled, added to and interacted with in a manner that is materially or spatially encoded; the archive is myth which is treated as an active participant. It exists in space and time simultaneously such as in Freud's notion that memory is a palimpsest, as he looks upon Rome not as a human dwelling place but a mental entity. The totemic value of any symbolic entity can be therefore understood as a layering of meaning. An object is as powerful as the sum of its symbolical layers, yet upon its animation in relation to the archive and environment — or its *place-taking* as per Smith — it becomes a sacred ritualistic object.

In discussing (or perhaps more appropriately “revealing”) the allure of the archive, Helen Freshwater describes it as an established symbol of truth, plausibility and authenticity which itself carries a sort of fetishism or a desire to hold the fragment which operates as a literal substitute for the lost object which is part of a now unrecoverable past. Drawing a theoretical link between Foucault's 1969 *Archaeology of*

*Knowledge* and Derrida's 1995 *Archive Fever*, Freshwater describes the archive as a place, a system of creating meaning, something to be re-animated, and also a study of the dead. This particular aspect is to be of increased relevance to us as we explore the hologram in the third chapter, but for not it is sufficient to pause on the convergence of existing systems (place, meaning-making, re-animation) and this new point of necro-fetishism; for the previous references to an inanimate or impotent state may be afforded to the aspect of nature or environment, but the archive is not inactive but dead and must be resurrected, though this can only be done in part, due to the entropic withering away of all things.

Even memory fades in the mind of the subject until only the components are left to cling to, certain Proustian evocations that give us, for a time, access to the archive. We may again recall Freud, looking upon the ruins of the acropolis thinking to himself "so all this really *does* exist, just like we learned in school". Describing memory as a "complex and deceptive experience", Jonathan Z. Smith follows from Aristotle's split between perception and fantasy, through John Locke's concept of storehouse and Thomas Reid's revive-ability, landing at an intimate connection between memory and place. Like a memory palace, we structure and compartmentalize our own personal archive in terms of layers of situationally encoded images which fade over time. Memory is thus stored up like an archive at a convergence of the phenomenological and the semiotic. According to Victor Turner, the social function of remembrance and the crisis brought on by contradiction between norms are resolved by rituals rich in symbolism, where every article, gesture, song or prayer, unit of space-time "stands for something other than itself" (1969: 14) both known and unknown. The known can be divided into triad of name, appearance, exegesis; suggesting that the act of standing in for another requires these explicit distinctions in order to be fully understood. These categorizations are what makes it possible to functionally map the archive in oppositional tension with the environment, and also what makes their ultimate unification in the triad possible; for the archive is merely a palimpsestic set of environment mappings that is variously reiterated through mediation.

## EMBODIMENT

If we are to treat the world beyond our subjective self in spatial terms, it seems prudent to look upon ourselves in such a matter also. After all, to balance an equation one must treat both sides in a fair and appropriate manner, and if I divide one side in a particular way I must do the same on the other. Therefore I shall pay attention to the body's corporeality, its embodied phenomenological state and those extensions such as clothing and choreography which contribute their own respective encoded semiotic values. Crossley (2004: 31) refers to our pre-reflexive, embodied knowledge of which rituals are a part in that they are a form of embodied practical reason which are key to upholding our constituted realities as they are performed as (bodily) acts. Using and taking part in the sensational forms that are characteristic for a particular religious group or religious tradition, a believer's sensorium is tuned through distinct, gendered techniques of the body which may be more or less accentuated, inducing more or less intense feelings, but are always key to the genesis of presence. Humans are sentient beings who relate to the world and themselves through perception, which is not a mere neuro-cognitive process, but is also always subject to cultural framing (Meyer, 2012: 27).

Cultural framing comes in many forms, from overt impositions to more subtle or embedded structures; meaning is transferred both semantically and semiotically. These forms of semantic and semiotic coding are embedded in the structure of society through ritual, through the performance of the body through a consecrated space, and through a combination of these forms and its ability to mediate between the "ordinary" and the "beyond". Meyer tells of the priests and priestesses who "embodied their gods in situations of trance" (2012: 18) in which the corporeal appears to become a temporary mediating element between the sacred and profane. Trance is a special form of embodiment, characterized by a loss of cognitive functioning and motor faculties and specific to experiences that go beyond the ordinary. The implications of embodiment and its function in ritualistic space are essential as the process of moving from habitual via formal to the transcendent, the anthropological values of ritual described by Couldry and comparable to

Peirce's journey from chaos to order. This process is enacted and presented through the body which moves in more or less choreographed sets of patterns. A clear example of uninhibited embodiment may be witnessed in free form, interpretive and improvisational forms of contemporary dance, and the utility of the associated theory should not be neglected in our endeavor.

“One of the important things that dancers and dance theorists have done is to propose ways to attend to both the specificity of physical experience and the intellectual or imaginary world that is made possible in and through that experience. In other words, a body onstage is not an end in itself, but a gateway to the alternative ways of thinking and knowing that occur all the time with and through that body.”

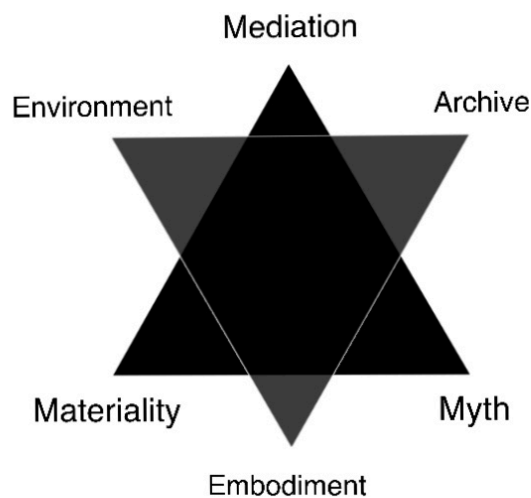
(Elswit, 2018: 9)

Embodiment makes use of the sense and properties of *being* in-a-body, even though this might be representational or even fictional, and need not necessarily have any corresponding piece of flesh. For example, a flag might “embody” a culture, or a fictional character might serve to “embody” an idea. Oftentimes however, embodiment is corporeally, materially, or at least spatially manifest as a mediating element between two distinct states, for example as Meyer has addressed how certain performances are used in “primitive” society to embody the deity they are attempting to summon or appease. Le Corbusier's unfinished drawing contains an encoded mythology that is animated through the embodiment of the researcher, serving as that which mediates between the inanimate materiality of the environment and the abstract mythology of the archive. This embodiment is the third order of Peirce, the mediating element which breaks or bridges across the nature / culture binary and creates the ritualistic performance, which in turn constructs a shared and encoded narrative which transmits sets of values and meanings. Thus meaning manifests through embodied action which mediates the tension between the archive and the environment. How this tension is resolved, I propose, is by means of performance and play.

## SOME NOTES ON THE TRIADIC ENTANGLEMENT

In the following section I will focus more specifically on these elements which are part of the third, embodied mediation which is both the catalyst to action and the consequential outcome in the aforementioned constituent elements and therefore warrants closer inspection. In order to understand the parameters of what has been ascertained thus far, we may construct a “playing field” as follows:

if = setical shortcomings



mean

As a functional entanglement of two corresponding conceptual structures, this framework sees two similarly constructed triads which exist concurrently and sometimes in unison or even interchangeably, as their movement and interrelation see a close functional resemblance. The concepts of environment and materiality are on one side of the process, inter-relatable though not identical, and consequently myth and the archive are found in oppositional tension on the other. The elements that complete each triadic formation (activators, if you will) are mediation and embodiment, which connect the processes into the active formation required for the construction of complex narratives, shared meanings and values, which is affected by the movements and tensions which exist within and through this entanglement.



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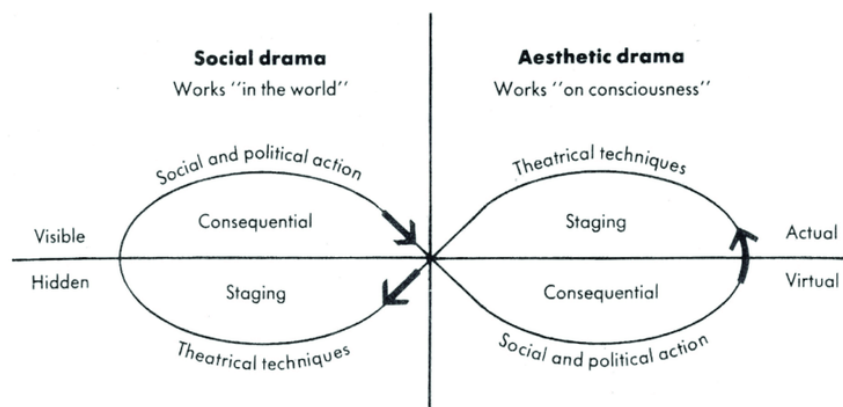
## Performance, play and society-making

An important question raised by Marvin Carlson in his *Performance; a Critical Introduction* (1996), is whether performance reinforces traditions and assumptions, or provides a site for the exploration of alternatives. I will attempt to address this question as relevant to the space at which sacred rites and cultural performance overlap. In 1959 Milton Singer defined cultural performance as a convergence of human carriers and cultural media. These events are the most concrete observable units of cultural structure, and include theatre, dance, concerts, religious festivals, weddings and so on. These are events which possess particular features: “a definitely limited time span, a beginning and an end, and organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance” (Carlson, 2004: 13). Carlson points out the emphasis on triad of time, place, occasion has found countless echoes in subsequent research, and that this view of performance as a discrete concretization of cultural assumptions significantly contributed to interpretations of the role of performance in broader culture. Differing from Singer, John J. MacAloon’s definition of cultural performance describes it as “occasion in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others” (1984: 1), thus suggesting that the correct answer to Carlson’s earlier question regarding the reinforcement or subversion of tradition to be that both occur simultaneously. That is to say, the cultural performance is a ritual in which an part of the social structure is brought before a congregation for the purpose of self-reflection, while a new range of meanings and assumptions is presented for consideration.

Victor Turner follows a similar cultural performance model to MacAloon, but defines it as a “social drama” in which participants are actors, and through their actions they are transformed and in turn have the ability to transform society itself. He ties it in with Van Gennep’s liminal process of separation / transition / incorporation, using drama as a metaphor for non-theatrical cultural manifestation (Carlson, 2004: 17). For Turner, society is a process rather than abstract system; utilizing

means of classification, constraints, and boundaries to keep the chaos at bay, and pointing to the anti structural liminality of ritual and aesthetic forms (Turner, 1969: v-vi). The ritual, carnival, drama or film is a structurally created space-time which cannot be captured in the classificatory nets of quotidian action and is reflexive of the social process. Its quality of apartness and otherness affords it the possibility of questioning, reconfiguring, or subversion of the social order. Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin shows how in carnival the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure of the ordinary are suspended, making carnival “the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counter posed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchal relationships of non carnival life” (Bakhtin, 1965: 123).

The first two of the seven areas of performance outlined by Richard Schechner in his introduction to *The Drama Review* (1973) are “performance in everyday life, including gatherings of every kind” and “the structure of sports, ritual, play, and public political behaviors”. Schechner describes the aesthetic drama as functioning alongside the social drama in a useful figure-of-eight diagram which was in turn used



by Turner in his 1982 book *From Ritual to Theatre* where he diverges from it in several ways but acknowledges its importance. The main idea is that the social and aesthetic are interconnected through a mutually exchanged flow of social and political action in one direction, and theatrical techniques in another, with the social drama working “in the world” and the aesthetic drama working “on consciousness”. This points

us again to the value and relevance of the aesthetic, its claim upon the viewer, but now entangled with (or even presented as) a narrative drama; moreover, the ritual can now be seen as a space for collective self-reflection, that part of society-making which requires “the finding of common meanings and directions” (Williams, 1958, 93), referred to by Henry Jenkins as an “implicit theory of participation” (Jenkins, 2013: 269). It is the aspect of communal discourse where the group reflects upon its position with regards to events and experiences both current and past, and attempts to make sense of them, integrate them into its discursive identity, and move forward. This reveals a complex (non-binary, non-linear) entanglement between the performance of an act in the form of the social or aesthetic drama, and the understanding and assimilating of its affect into the socio-cultural apparatus which provides stability to the structure of community.

“Huizinga considers the development or reinforcement of a community spirit or consciousness, “*communitas*”, to be one of the basic features of play, and suggests that its effects often continue beyond the actual play experience. Thus cultural play, like Singer’s cultural performance, provides a solidifying of the community, and the “actualization by representation” of the hidden values, assumptions and beliefs of the culture. This becomes becomes particularly apparent as Huizinga explores the close relationship between play and ritual.”

(Carlson, 2004: 22)

Here, Carlson introduces the tension between “seriousness” and “play” as per Gregory Bateson, a contemporary of Huizinga. Bateson specified the necessity for metacommunication (such as “this is play”) which creates a psychological frame within which to contain the message. Huizinga meanwhile talked about “civilized life” — things such as law and order, commerce and profit, crafts, arts and sciences — as rooted in myth and ritual, but also and maybe most importantly in “the *primaeval* soil of play” (1949: 5). He claims that “human play” (distinct from the sexual display seen in the animal kingdom) in its higher forms always belongs to the sphere of festival and ritual, which he terms “the

sacred sphere". It is an activity which subserves culture, a necessity which contributes to the cohesion and well-being of the group in spite of its distinction from "ordinary" life. Indeed, he claims that there is no formal difference between play and ritual (Huizinga 1949: 9-10). Similarly to Smith's insistence on the relevance of place to the ritualistic process, Huizinga points to a "consecrated spot" such as the theatre stage or the sporting arena, which is analogous to the materially encoded environment we have already established as the first aspect of the multi-triadic ritual form. For Huizinga these are temporarily constructed worlds within the "ordinary" world, which are specifically designed and dedicated to the performance of "an act apart". He further points to the importance of dressing up in a disguise or mask as a means of affirming or perfecting the extra-ordinary nature of play by making the individual into another being (more than just playing the part of another, through these acts the person is fundamentally changed, at least while staying within the consecrated space).

In a performance, much like in play, a certain number of roles are potentially adopted; such as the performer, the spectator, the architect, the archivist, the critic, and others. Among all of these actors, a "false reality" is temporarily agreed upon. This reality is then symbolically constructed and superimposed upon our regular functioning. Tupac Shakur becomes the ghetto street warrior and messianic poet liberator of the urban black youth. Hollywood Hulk Hogan tells the kids to eat their vitamins while he beats up bad guys in the wrestling ring, all on behalf of American values. Marilyn Manson is the rockstar antichrist come to take your kids straight to hell. None of these fictions resemble the truth (Tupac studied ballet and drama on a scholarship, Hulk Hogan cheated on his wife with his daughter's best friend, etc) but they are nonetheless important because they create the world which is required to absorb, reflect, touch or move the audience.

"The "differentness" and secrecy of play are most vividly expressed in "dressing up". Here the "extra-ordinary" nature of play reaches perfection. The disguised or masked individual "plays" another part, another being. He is another being. The terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are

all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises.”

(Huizinga, 1950, 13)

This altered state of self presentation is another key element of playful or performative embodiment. In order to reach the audience, the performer makes use of symbols (such as uniform, iconography, movements and utterances, for example) which make possible the travel of concepts across bodies, audiences, cultures. This creates various audiences and determines something about how the performance will be identified, processed, framed and represented.

According to Valerie Frissen (2015: 17), play is both an individual and collective activity. On one hand each player is absorbed in their own private play-world, but in most cases the game is played with or against other players in a shared play-world, often before an audience. Even in the case of a solitary game, it is played before an imagined audience, while in the case of mimicry the player is pretending to be someone else by creating a community of personae within himself. Mimicry is an important element, not only because the player mimics a range of presupposed behaviors as set out by the rules and customs of the activity in which they are engaged, but also in the way that the audience in turn mimics the player in various ways, such as using the aforementioned symbols to identify themselves and relate to one another.

Interestingly, Huizinga also points to the semantic relevance of the Germanic term “spiel” leading to the English words for “spell” (in the sense of magic, but also word formation) and consequently the word “gospel” (1949: 38) which will be of relevance to a later case study. Summing up the formal characteristics of play, Huizinga defines it as a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life, absorbing the player intensely and utterly, proceeding within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It thus promotes the formation of social groupings which stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga, 1949: 13).

French sociologist Roger Caillois describes six essential qualities of play which are basically identical to Huizinga’s characteristics, with

the voluntary activity aspect aligned with “free time” or leisure. This aspect is of particular interest to Victor Turner who argues that leisure arises with modern industrial society, ascribing the label of liminoid to non-working, leisure periods and play activities. Caillois’ final category, “ilinx” or “vertigo”, performs a specifically subversive function by momentarily destroying the stability of perception and inflicting a kind of “voluptuous panic” upon an otherwise lucid mind. The emphasis on the destruction of stability and lucidity is brought about by a foregrounding of physical sensation, “an awareness of the body set free from the normal structures of control and meaning”. This final aspect is the key role of embodiment as it is the mediating vehicle which holds a self-sacrificial power within the liminal space. The embodied is simultaneously in part material and materially encoded and in that aspect can claim to be part of the environment, while at the same time through its enacted choreography of movement and communication draws upon and reanimates a mythological archive which it may also lay partial claim to.

According to Eric Berne, whose 1964 book *Games People Play* is a seminal work of transactional analysis, “a ritual is a stereotyped series of simple complementary transactions programmed by external forces” (1964: 34). We may look upon the example of a child, a toddler with its first significant toy which is a doll in its proximate likeness. The child will develop a relationship with this doll where it draws upon the familial resources from observation and attempts to create a stable environment for the doll, usually by a re-enactment of simple rituals such as the tea party. McLuhan meanwhile talks about games as extension of man, following tension, relief, rhythm; a reflection of contemporary society in its rituals (carnival, New Year’s Eve etc). The reference point in play is always society and its functions; its symbology represents existing tribal and individualistic social characteristics. An example given by the author is that of poker as a supposedly functional model for competitive society, “a game that has often been cited as the expression of all the complex attitudes and unspoken values” (McLuhan, 1994, 169). Games have often been used to define and redefine parameters and borders, from team sports played in different leagues on different territories (eg. Irish teams across rugby, football and other

games, where the maps are redrawn differently), to kids playing soldiers relative to their most recent or most local conflict (eg. Balkan kids playing “Croats and Serbs” or Irish children playing “IRA”). “Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil” (Huizinga, 1950, 6).

Gadamer (1986) divides his analysis of the aesthetic into a ritualistic triad of play / symbol / festival . The first involves movement and mimicry, as can be seen in the various forms of “playing along”; it can be interrogated generally as embodiment and then specifically as play. The second, symbol acts as a token of remembrance, a sensuous showing of “the idea” as per Hegel, representative in its own manner; Gadamer evokes the portrait and the last supper as examples of symbols and their communicative value; it is second also as passively antithetical to the first, forming the dialectic opposition of the first and second. The third is festival; it allows no separation, is a manifestation of the community in its perfect form, the celebration as an art in and of itself. This final is the ultimate unifying third, the mediating element that connects the triad. The relation between the play as mimicry or choreography, symbol as evocative object, and festival as the occasion which brings them together, is one which relies on all three of its constituent elements for its existence, but does not privilege any specific element as its starting point. Gadamer is simultaneously constructive and deconstructive in his approach, viewing the aesthetic as presentational (rather than representational) form, as it occasions the meanings that are invoked and does not represent a meaning independent of itself. However, the aesthetic consciousness is not self-contained, but drawn into the complex interplay of something much larger; Gadamer makes an analogy with drama and sporting events, implies that the aesthetic is eventual, an occasion that the consciousness surrenders to and participates in.

This kind of performance is at the same time a playful space and a liminal space as per Turner or Van Gennep, but also what Hakim Bey refers to as the “Temporary Autonomous Zone”. Although Bey’s text is quite difficult and highly convoluted with anarcho-spiritualist idealism, there is a lot to be gained from a close reading of this strange work. He points to music festivals and parties, but also piracy, as a way for society

to independently develop according to its needs and desires but without the need for state or institutional intervention.

“Stephen Pearl Andrews once offered, as an image of anarchist society, the dinner party, in which all structure of authority dissolves in conviviality and celebration. [. . .] The ancient concepts of jubilee and saturnalia originate in an intuition that certain events lie outside the scope of "profane time," the measuring-rod of the State and of History.”

(Bey, 1991, 5)

Linking these various forms of imaginative playful enactment to the sacred ritual and its role in the construction of meaning and shared narrative among a community, we may follow Maurice Bloch who talks about the role of imagination and “religious-like phenomena” in formulating core differentiation between the Homo Sapiens and other primates, thus suggesting that imagination and creativity are a core element in both religious formations as well as the human condition more generally. He also differentiates transcendental exchanges as existing alongside the transactional (which may be seen as an extension of Berne’s transactional exchanges as they reach into a “beyond”), and his observations are founded on ritualistic behaviors such as the puja performed in the Hindu household. Wouter Hanegraaff similarly frames religion as “imaginative formation”, leading to an understanding of religion as a cognitive process that allows us to apprehend an otherwise chaotic reality; a claim backed up by Huizinga in his analysis of ritual as a form of play which makes sense of and puts order into the world. This socio-cultural role of ritual performance is further affirmed by Goffman to the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs he looks upon it (in the manner of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown) as a ceremony, an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community (Goffman, 1956: 23).



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## Section one conclusions

My effort thus far has been in pursuit of establishing the fundamental contours of a functional model for analysis of ritual within a broader context of its intersections with socio-cultural structures and discourses. Taking these various and divergent theories into account, what emerges is a number of key aspects which may serve to define the concept of ritual. Fundamentally, it is a process of distinction between the sacred and profane which establishes an ordered and structured social space through a mediating between materiality and mythology which is entangled with a corresponding triad in which an environment is temporarily merged with an archive through embodiment. This involves a choreography within a consecrated space, a performance of arbitrary acts which are connected to the collective imagination and involve a series of transactions that are rooted in a tradition, further affirming or re-shaping the structurally encoded norms and values existing therein.

The essential elements involved in this process are understood as follows. The environment is constructed through the material aspect, often with a focal point that is the totem or sacred object which is encoded with a symbolic history and mythology, and archive that is an abstract conception and therefore in continuous oppositional tension with it. This is the bridge between the absolute first of nature or the environment, and the absolute last of culture or the archive, which is brought into unified triadic form by the mediating power of embodiment. This is the role of a protagonist, actor or player; the embodied corporeal experience which is the sacrificial human subject (Henry David Thoreau famously called for us to be human first, and subject after) performing the ritualistic act, a choreography or play which determines sets of relations and develops through a set of iterative stages such as separation, transformation and integration. The choreographed act is a moment in time-space which creates the *taking place*, a liminal pause pregnant with potential for meaning, the construction and exposition (or more suitably, *revelation*) of which results in the development of new ideas, categorizations and shared narratives that maintain the symbolic social order and keep the proverbial (but also very real) chaos at bay.

The material aspect of environment also assumes the form of a consecrated space, set apart from normal functioning of the world where the rules and customs that govern ordinary life are temporarily suspended. This space is contrasted by an audience or spectator, and external actant which represents the “ordinary” world, but is nonetheless entangled with the ritualistic process, for as Gadamer tells us: “In being played the play speaks to the spectator through its presentation; and it does so in such a way that, despite the distance between it and himself, the spectator still belongs to play” (Gadamer, 1975: 116). Through a process of play, Gadamer accounts for the presence of truth in the aesthetic, although this is not reserved for human agents as he also describes the “play” of light as an example.

These revelations of truth from a playful process which emerges from the entanglements of elements such as environment and the archive, materiality and mythology, enacted or activated in an embodied mediation and constructing the palimpsestic layers of meaning and value that manifest in narratives which we then call culture. They are structurally entangled with the society, but simultaneously set apart in the sense that they are constructed and reconstructed in a manner that holds a certain amount of autonomy and is partly governed by an independent set of rules. I will next interrogate this process and its various entanglements and implications by means of a case study example.

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### Case study: the bull as a ritualistic concept

For this first case study I will continue in a relatively broad manner to outline the contours of what has already been established with regard to the ritualistic form, by taking specific examples from contemporary culture and tracing their connection with established tradition by means of comparative symbology. Comparative symbology is described by Victor Turner in his text *Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow and Ritual: an Essay in Comparative Symbology*, as studying the relationship between symbols and concepts, values, feelings (etc.) across semantic dimensions

by using data drawn from cultural genres and subsystems involved in the social process, including in its consideration both the internal changes or adjustments within the group, as well as adaptations to external environment. This approach attempts to preserve the ludic capacity of studying symbols in movement by “playing” with possibilities of form and meaning. Turner frames his analysis of ritual symbols as a triad comprised of positional meaning (roughly analogous to syntactics, or the formal relationships and organization), exegetical meaning (roughly analogous to semantics, or referential meaning) and operational meaning (roughly analogous to pragmatics, or relations with users). This approach is suitable for our current endeavor as it maps onto the methods undertaken thus far in terms of both specificity in terms of ritual, play, the construction of meaning, as well as its scope in terms of taking into account various cultural genres, activities and narratives. For this purpose I will explore one of the earliest known symbols used in human society, that of the bull. The entanglement of humans and cattle go back many thousands of years. As Ian Hodder writes:

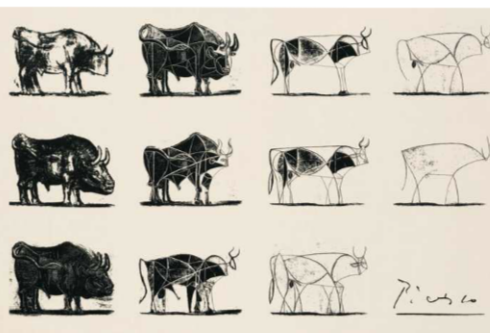
“There are now about 1.5 billion cows and bulls worldwide. Humans have become very dependent on cattle and it would be very difficult to sustain the planet’s current human population levels without them. The entanglements too have proliferated. A cow or bull on average releases between 70 and 120 kg of methane per year. Methane is a greenhouse gas. All ruminants in the world emit about two billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalents per year. In addition, clearing of tropical forests and rain forests to get more grazing land and farm land is responsible for an extra 2.8 billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emission per year. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) agriculture is responsible for 18% of the total release of greenhouse gases world-wide.”

(Hodder, 2016: 23).

Hodder has been a leading proponent of post-processual archaeology, an interpretive theory which emphasizes the subjectivity of archaeological research. Since 1993, he has been leading the

archeological study of the Çatalhöyük settlement site in Turkey, one of the most ancient UNESCO World Heritage Sites from the Neolithic period dating back to 7100 BC. It featured a number of bull and aurochs heads (or sometimes just the horns), mounted on walls or built right into the facade of a building. This is one of the earliest images we see used in a purely symbolic manner, presumably representing a great elemental force of nature, fertility, ferocity of conflict, or whatever else one may tend to associate with the bull. Stipulation is our best recourse in this regard, since we deal with the prehistoric ancients. Hodder has linked the tending of domestic cattle and sheep and increased focus on the independent production of individual larger houses in the upper levels of occupation, to the loss of the symbolic and ritual potential of wild bulls; he claims that these rituals were key to the establishment of memories and sodalities that tied the social community together.

The image of the bull has been of great symbolic significance throughout history and has travelled widely across cultures. The myth of the Minotaur is one of the oldest and best known stories of antiquity, while the bovine figure is a central motif in cave drawings found in Lascaux (France) and Altamira (Spain). In more modern time, the Spanish bullfighting tradition deeply affected the works of Picasso for example, who repeatedly iterated the symbol throughout his career.



Clockwise, from top left: Bullfight: Death of the Toreador (1933), Bull (1945), Guernica (1937, detail), Bull's Head (1942)

*Bullfight: Death of the Toreador* (1933), the eleven etchings from 1945, and the found art sculpture from bicycle parts, as well as the left panel of *Guernica*, stand out as the most poignant and historically relevant of Picasso's bulls. Each of these works exists materially in its own peculiar manner, as well as possessing a discreet archival mythology of its own, and a Benjaminian set of cult and exhibition values which are connected with the grander social, cultural and political apparatus through the embodied ritual of the museum or gallery visit. This is an example of the positional meaning of the symbol, where its formal relationship to materiality and culture emerges through the study of fields such as art history, for example.

To take another significant example from 20th century culture, in Hemingway's novel *Fiesta; the Sun Also Rises* (1926) the main character's love interest is infatuated with a young toreador, and the animal comes to represent the cycle of life and death, the power of nature, and the social role of masculinity. The bullfight is also associated with the concept of *duende*, a form of heightened emotional state bordering on intoxication that is part of the flamenco tradition. Thus we see how the bull has persisted across time and culture as a significant symbol, an archival totem or Freudian palimpsest which builds upon itself a layered vocabulary of meaning and is contextually encoded through ritual filled with symbolic meaning that is exegetical or semantically referential, as per the second layer of Turner's comparative symbology approach.

The strength and fertility of the bull are also symbolically manifest in the Red Bull energy drink brand, whose pioneering use of viral marketing has made them a standout in the industry. This is a particularly interesting example, as the ritualistic consumption of mystic potions imbued with some sort of special power has been one of the primary motifs in all ritual, and continues in the many examples of liturgy to this day. The slogan of "Red Bull gives you wings" and humorous cartoon angel scenarios in their advertising make explicit reference to supernatural occurrences and specifically the Christian belief system. The company has been a notable sponsor of many live events, and in 2012 famously teamed with Austrian skydiver Felix Baumgartner in a high altitude diving project which saw him jump from 39 kilometer height in a high pressure suit; a new media spectacle of



extreme sports that might be rightfully conceptualized as a sci-fi or futuristic ritual which pushes and challenges the boundaries of both environment and embodiment as they have been laid out thus far by placing the consecrated space at the very edge of the planet and the entire process of mediation is radically reliant on new media technology. Through these marketing, branding and promotional uses of the bull image we are able follow the operational or pragmatic relevance of the symbol in the final aspect of the comparative analysis; of which I will henceforth use a combination of all the three aspects pointed to in these examples.

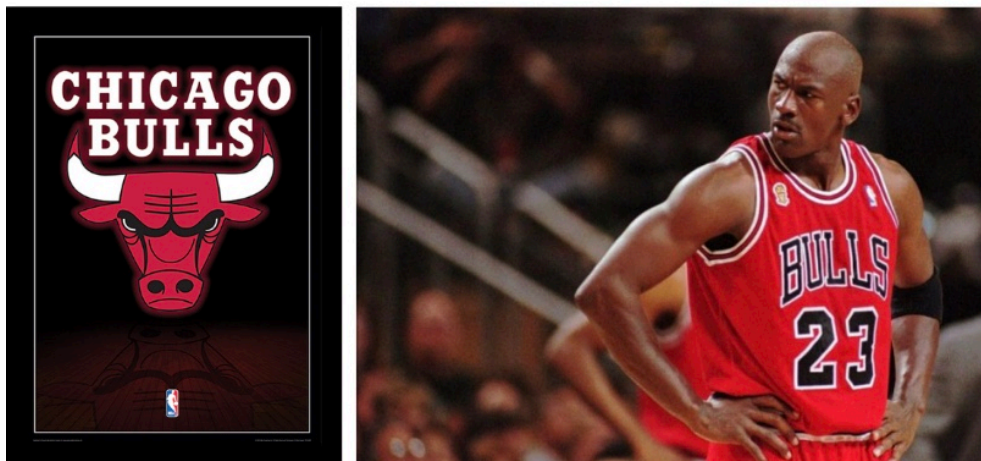
We see the bull stand mightily on the corner of 26th and Broadway, charging with insurmountable power representing the awesome force of capitalism. Created by Arturo Di Modica in the wake of the 1987 “Black Monday” stock market crash, the statue was initially illegally displayed and therefore impounded by police before being reinstated due to a public outcry, fast becoming a tourist attraction and gaining a temporary and then permanent display permit. It has become one of the most iconic images associated with New York and the Wall Street stock exchange. During the Occupy Wall Street protest camp, the bull was targeted by activists as an agonistic symbol, and used in a variety of visual critiques such as the famous *AdBusters* image of a dancer perched upon it amid the protests. Some have likened Modica’s *Charging Bull* to the golden calf worshipped by Israelites during their exodus from



Egypt, thus linking it explicitly and directly to sacred scripture and ancient worship. Here we see a semiotic value transcoded intertextually to a modern context, a contemporary struggle between a people and an oppressive system. The embodied phenomenological experience, the genesis of presence differs depending upon context, with the ritual of tourist posing for photos quite different to that of the Occupy protesters. One embraces the exhibition value and inserts the self into a frame which adds to a sense of personal status, while the other positions itself in an oppositional stance or manner to the symbol and uses it as a counterpoint of social, cultural and political critique.

The bull is further present in the brand identity of one of the most iconic teams in the history of the sport of basketball, namely the Chicago Bulls. With a historic catalogue of championship victories and notable players such as Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen and Dennis Rodman, their status is inseparable from their brand, the bull proudly displayed on their clothing and merchandise in a manner similar to national insignia or religious iconography. The highly energetic fast

paced action of the basketball court is an ideal environment for the symbolic resurrection of the bull spirit. Here we bear witness to a consecrated space filled with thousands of spectators seated in elevating aisles surrounding a central court, looming above them digital display screens showing the logos of teams and associations, as well as those of advertisers and sponsors. The atmosphere is tense as all present wait for the arrival of players and formation to take place. As the starting line-up emerges, the lights dim and spotlights shine upon the sacred few, the select representatives of the entire culture of followers. The presenters and commentators exchange professional courtesies, largely rehearsed exchanges of a transactional nature that, save for the media attention, may be termed mundane. The game begins quite suddenly and a rapid series of back and forth exchanges follow a largely predetermined choreography where specific rules govern and a tradition leads to sets of norms and expectations, but deviation and subversion are possible and, although risky, are indeed what draws the most attention from surrounding spectators. In this dance there is a shared mythology among both the players and the followers of the respective teams. Let us pause on this example a moment with regard to the Chicago Bull as a symbol of ritualistic worship.



Here the relation to the community is obvious. At time of writing, the NBA has 48.4 million followers on Instagram, while the Chicago Bulls have 5.4 million. While some fans may not use social media, this number is a reasonably good indicator of the respective sporting organizations' popularity. Many of these fans purchase or even collect various merchandise that is associated with the sport, as well as



attending the games and watching and rewatching them as recorded objects belonging to the archive. This is more than just discrete sets of aesthetic experiences, it is a greater formation which permeates across countries, cultures and languages but is symbolically represented by icons such as the Chicago Bull that are able to transcend these specific contextual constraints through representation; further constructing a traveling mythology. By this I mean a mythology which is comprised of traveling objects, which becomes a form of aesthetic consciousness which, as described by Gadamer, can no longer suppose to view the aesthetic object in its own right, but must discover its true meaning in the performance of ritual. The aesthetic cannot be isolated from the chance conditions in which it appears, and where this kind of isolation occurs the result is a reductive abstraction. "A drama really exists only when it is played, and ultimately music must resound" (Gadamer, 1975: 115).

Meyer looks at the world as a culturally constituted realm which is structured through social relations and practices of transmission; in a phenomenological sense it is both constructed and real at the same time.

"By virtue of sharing media and practices of mediation, people are drawn into religio-aesthetic formations which shape shared ideas, emotions, moods, values, practices, and a shared 'common sense' through habitual modes of perception, body techniques and a material environment or habitat. This is not just limited to linking people with a 'beyond', but also calls forth modes of conduct and an ethos of how to act in the world (as pointed out by Weber). The shared partaking in religious mediation sustains collective identities (as Durkheim posits) within a particular material environment on the level of the household, religious space, the neighborhood, the city, or even a much larger context."

(Meyer 2012: 29-30)

The ritualistic performance of the basketball game and its extensive symbology constitute a shared fantasy among its spectators, a sort of tribal existence filled with belonging and a sense of meaning for the fans of the team, perpetuated by the associated iconography in advertising,

merchandising, fashion etc. What is constructed through materiality is supported by, and in turn serves to reinforce, a symbolic and social order among participants and communities.

The archive exists in the multifaceted extensions through which it is connected to the ritualistic environment. On one hand the sport itself carries its own pervasive mythology, as does each of the teams and their respective followers; usually this is attached to a city or particular geographic community, such as in the case of the Chicago Bulls, they adopt from that community's mythology and fuse it with their own unique incarnation of the bovine figure. These elements are awakened in an act of remembrance which is inextricably tied to the material assemblage of the ritual taking place. Materiality is the primary level at which this ritual is manifest; the spherical conduit through which the action is performed acts as Morgan's focal object within the consecrated space which is built from wood and steel and plastic, that designates the parameters of the game, the division between the performers and the audience. Further, the mythology is perpetuated through innumerable material extensions; various merchandise such as fashion items and posters, memorabilia, and others. Mediation is that which fuses the materiality with mythology, the environment and the archive, by imbuing it with renewed symbolical meaning. Here we see mediation working across a number of levels, from the tension of the game translated across various broadcast media to the continuing relationship created by the material extensions of the sport, to the various relationships that exist between and amongst varying strata of followers. Ultimately, these are manifested and resolved in sets of embodied phenomenological states such as anticipatory anxiety, the warmth of communal bonding, or the ecstatic joy of victory.

Let us take a literal player, for the purpose of this example let us place him on a the basketball court, and imagine a man wearing the number 7 proudly displayed on his back (I am using this particular number for the hypothesis as it does not exist in basketball games; as only combinations of digits 0-5 are worn by players). This player takes control of the ball and skillfully carries it across the court dodging his opponents and the he zooms in on the basket as he's coming up to a clearing and this other guy, let us call him Mark, is at home watching on

the TV and cheering him on, and number 7 is in a perfect spot to take a shot and Mark jumps up in his seat with excitement, but the player misses the shot, and Mark — who can barely make it up the stairs without losing his breath — is calling number 7 — who is one of the greatest athletes in the world — useless and incompetent.

What this fictional hypothesis shows is an example of the secondary performative embodiment associated with play, mediated via the “live” on-screen broadcast to another space, another material environment in which the ritual is enacted. Environment is that specific material but also the extended space in which the act is played out or takes place. This eventually becomes relegated to the archive and other contextual environments continue to take its place as the performance is replicated, re-enacted and reproduced. Embodiment is dispersed unevenly across performers, other professional participants, and levels of audience members which are present and to whom the ritual is broadcast. The archive is similarly dispersed across the sport’s tradition, each team’s respective history, the league’s own archival history, and the broader socio-cultural context which continued to inform it and it continues to inform in turn.

A key distinction to be made between the NBA game and much of what has been historically studied as ritual is the presence of media. The events are filmed, broadcast live, archived and then broadcast again, further uploaded (legally or illegally) to various internet platforms which are distinct environments unto themselves, where these archival objects can now be streamed or downloaded. Each of these reiterations (or indeed *reincarnations*) of the ritual creates a separate, smaller and less significant ritual of its own, and through these reprisals the totemic value of the performance increases, such as in the example of the most viewed videos on YouTube having priority status in the way in which the platform sorts and presents content. This reincarnative capacity of media adds to the symbolic configurations within the group dynamic. Classic basketball games, for example, can be rewatched with updated knowledge and hindsight of the spectators providing a further, deeper and richer context or framing than that which existed when the actual game was played.

A particularly notable and current example is the 2020 Netflix documentary mini-series *The Last Dance*, which focuses on the time during which the Chicago Bulls dominated the NBA championship and Michael Jordan was the biggest star in the world (according to Oprah's introduction, anyway). This is an example of the archival aspect which is dialed into digitally, functioning through the material conduit of the technological device, it tells a story that is deeply steeped in religious and ritualistic symbology; from the resurrection theme that dominates the early stage of the narrative when the Bulls were not doing particularly well, and the accompanying portrayal of Michael Jordan as the savior hero, to the huddle and chant that resembles a communal prayer and appears to fulfill a similar function. Continued references to Michael Jordan as "the savior" and "god-like" with fellow players saying that "he's not human" and describing his skills as "supernatural", at one point even referring to his popularity as "the Pope and Jesus phenomenon" (although I would humbly argue that the Beatles perhaps deserve a place in that moniker). The effect of this global popularity led to a complex and profound influence of corporate interests on the game, with players occasionally refusing to display certain logos. It is further noted that, alongside music and fashion, Michael Jordan and the NBA were now also "selling Americana". The entanglement with the world of politics, economics, corporations and much else is brought to the forefront as the story explores tensions between managers, coaches, players, sponsors, broadcasters and more.

This archival object, albeit digital, serves as a mapping out (or at the very least, a tracing) of the complex situation that was unfolding at the time. Furthermore, it creates a repurposing and remediation process in which a distilled and condensed version of the events is repackaged and retold to an audience that has varying degrees of familiarity with it. However, the role of the media is far from just a mediating or archival role; as will be explored in the next chapter, it is an active participant that radically alters the established functioning and discourse by various means and on a number of levels.

## Part two

*In which I examine how ritual production and dissemination are manifest in contemporary pop culture, where this fits into a history of media, art and performance, and the role played by corporate interests in this process.*

In this chapter I will examine more closely how sacred ritual is practiced through contemporary pop culture, by linking further the established theoretical framework with key theories in the relevant aspects of media and culture studies. This chapter will explicitly link the ritualistic mode with pop culture by focusing on the media ritual and further elaborating on this link by examining the case study of Kanye West's recent series of gospel concerts in the context of his career and the broader social situation and cultural tradition within which it is placed. I wish to show how a number of contemporary practices and experiences, specifically within the media and its link to the performing arts, are identifiable with what we understand as religions worship and sacred ritual. I further suggest that the context within which this occurs is increasingly rooted in the traditions and practices of neoliberal capitalism, leading to an entangled process of religious and cultural commodification. The key element here is the media event; and in this regard I will follow the relevant work from Nick Couldry because his analysis links closely with the line of reasoning I have taken thus far.

The term 'media rituals' is designed to imply neither a simple order nor a simple disorder, but a complex and never fully stable interaction between order and disorder; in this manner it is a mediating distinction between the absolute first and last we have already seen. Similarly to Turner's concept of "taking place", Couldry uses the word 'space' metaphorically, as a convenient term to refer to the whole interlocking mass of practices that must be 'in place' for there to be ritual action oriented to the media. The term 'ritual space' is intended to help us think beyond the local context of media ritual and through to a larger social scale, to the landscape whose contours constrain individual ritual practices at any particular time. "In complex societies, the tightly defined contexts of formal ritual, such as religious ritual, are relatively

rare. It is better to think of the ritual process as stretched across multiple sites, indeed across social space as a whole” (Couldry, 2003: 13). What this tells us is that in the new media landscape, the ritualistic space is by definition distributed or dispersed across communities and technologies. Although there is no longer a concrete centre, increased participation and entanglement with media imply a drawing towards an imagined centre which will be discussed in more detail in this chapter.

The lens I am adopting here is distinctly Western, with a particular view on mainstream American media as the dominant narrative style and voice, it is in part because of my chosen area of study being generally dominated by said discourse, and also due to my own view and bias inevitably derived from participation in it. I am not seeking to do an anthropological study of cultures overall as they differ vastly across distant parts of the world, and as interesting as such endeavors may be, my aim is rather to understand more deeply the cultural, social and political situation I find myself in as a consumer and also as a contributing participant. Furthermore, the very concepts of mass media and popular culture emerged from the unique situation in the 20th century European and American contexts, largely thanks to the various technological breakthroughs that brought the spectacle into the living room of every home.

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## Pop culture, mass media and power

The intersection of culture and media, and its consequent influence on power dynamics among their participants, has been a subject of scrutiny by scholars in the fields of media, culture, politics and the social sciences for some time. Hodder notes that in entanglement theory larger-scale human groups, nations, institutions, and bureaucracies are “things” in the sense that they bring entities, other humans and things, in relation to each other. Therefore we again encounter sets of convergences that can — and likely *should*, if we are to continue following the comparative symbology approach — be considered through a ludic methodology that

can freely follow the directionality of these vast entanglements unlike those more formal and constrained counterparts.

I will treat the pop culture apparatus as a form of theatre or social drama as per Victor Turner, in which participants are actors and their actions construct symbolic reality which is acted out across multiple sites and extends out beyond the specific context of the act in which they are taking part. The play-form which has already been outlined in terms of ritual from the perspectives of Huizinga, Berne, and Gadamer, becomes an aesthetic spectacle when it moves from the spontaneous and free form towards something that is spectator-oriented. The development from play to art occurs through the “transformation into structure” described by Gadamer who posits that a game, even when played before spectators, is not presented for anyone; if others participate in play by spectating, their involvement is accidental to the emergence of play. In contrast, when play is intended for spectators, it is transformed and becomes a play, a work of art. The meaning of the artwork is transformed to include the presence of spectators, who become necessary players involved in the back and forth of the play (Williams, 2017: 325). Jean Genet famously declared theatre to be a ceremony, and claimed the liturgical mass to be the highest form of modern drama: *‘La messe est le plus haut drame moderne.’* Touching upon themes such as the double, the mirror, the triumph of dream and death over reality, Genet hit upon the idea that the true site of theatre was the cemetery, making it essentially a mass for the dead; he wanted theatre to be *‘la fête’*, a festivity addressed to the dead (Lehmann, 2006: 70). Here we may again recall Freshwater’s concept of the archive as study of the dead, which will be increasingly relevant as we tackle the issue of reproduction and simulation in the final chapter.

Hans-Thies Lehmann regards the changing media constellation in the twentieth century, in particular the historical shift out of a textual culture and into a ‘mediatized’ image and sound culture through the lens of theatre, drawing on a wide range of media analyses and aesthetic theories. His theory of postdramatic theatre is in part a response to Peter Szondi’s seminal *Theory of the Modern Drama*, which read plays in terms of a ‘crisis of drama’ that stems from the tension between the formal requirements of Aristotelian drama and the demands of modern

social themes which could no longer be contained by this form. Drawing on the foundations established by various theorists regarding the power of performance to question and destabilize the spectator's construction of identity and prevailing ideologies, as well as inducing the audience to watch themselves as subjects which perceive, acquire knowledge and partly create the objects of their cognition, Lehmann further observes how the impact of media on performance manifests itself not only in the use of high-tech multimedia on stage, but sometimes also in minimalist aesthetics "which nevertheless can only be understood by being related to life in a 'mediatized' society" (Lehmann, 2006: 10). Further, the actor of postdramatic theatre is often no longer the actor of a role but a performer offering, in a self-sacrificial manner, their presence on stage for contemplation in a performance that functions as an "integrative aesthetic of the live", at the centre of which is a production of presence (Lehmann, 2006: 135). Looking at ritual in the context of contemporary theatre and performance, Lehmann finds that it interrogates the possibilities of the human being at the border of its taming through civilization. Comparing the function of the artist to that of a shaman, he notes that the latter is a socially recognized and admired outsider who transgresses boundaries for the others, while the artist executes the ritual at their own expense (again echoing a self-sacrificial phenomenology). Quoting Schechner, he notes that "theatre is a mixture, a braid of entanglement of entertainment and ritual. At one moment ritual seems to be the source, at another it is entertainment." (Lehmann, 2006: 139). This particular intersection of theatre and entertainment is the focus of the following section.

## **POP CULTURE**

Popular culture has been approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as various postmodernist, Marxist and feminist angles which have informed much of the recent discourse surrounding and concerning it. Dominic Strinati uses Dick Hebdige's definition of popular culture which covers 'a set of generally available artifacts: films, records, clothes, TV programs, modes of transport, etc.' (Hebdige, 1988: 47). As Strinati concludes, popular culture is ultimately defined by how it



is explained and evaluated theoretically, but also can be defined descriptively as covering a specific set of artifacts. These may be taken to include films, records, clothes and technologies, and can be divided into artifacts that are functional (such as clothes and technologies), and textual (such as films and records). For the purpose at hand, these may be treated in terms of the materially constructed aspect of environment and the mythological archive; both existing in a tension with embodied modes and each containing their own mythology and semiotic value which is built upon and developed in the ritualistic process. This contributes to the formation of social and cultural cohesion among participating audiences who increasingly act as both consumers and producers. In the current 21st century landscape, these artifacts are more widespread and embedded than either Hebdige (writing 1988) or Strinati (writing in 1995) had imagined. Audio, video and image files are now abundantly if not overbearingly accessible, ubiquitously producible, and utterly disposable. The effect of social media in particular has meant that new modes of producing and engaging with media and communities are continually developed, adopted and integrated; but this is the outcome of a deeper history.

Social anthropology posits that industrialization and urbanization lead to the decline of mediating social organizations such as the village, the family and the church, which once provided a sense of psychological identity, social conduct and moral certainty for the individual. For the Frankfurt School, popular culture is produced by the culture industry to secure the stability and continuity of capitalism. Whereas the Frankfurt School believed consumers were passive, Baudrillard (1994: 110) argued that consumers were trained to consume products in a form of active labour in order to achieve upward social mobility. The implications of this participation point to a breaking of boundary between the social strata through consumption which becomes a dialectic process that is amplified and proliferated through mass media and creates a new and more unevenly dispersed form of social cohesion.

Nick Couldry, however, posits that there is an implied centrality to this process contained within the very media apparatus. Couldry defines “central media” as those through which we imagine ourselves to be connected to the social world; traditionally things like television,

radio, and the press, but increasingly computer-mediated communication. He further terms “media rituals” to be any actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values. This the framework I have developed so far in which entanglements that construct the ritual are linked to the social space.

The environment is constructed through media and its related categories and boundaries. Akin to the demarcation of space in the basketball game in terms of sets of inner and outer spaces (or the sacred altar and the wild bush as per Turner), the media frame is a secondary superimposition on a spatio-temporal reality which outlines the divisions of consecrated spot for play and the ordinary space of spectatorship. The performance of the media ritual is the embodied, mediating element which activates the archive and creates a relationship between the mythology therein and the material aspect of the environment. From this emerges a fractal perpetuation of secondary mediation and embodiment through the broadcast media technology and the respective audiences, such as the hypothetical example of Mark the basketball fan and the number 7 player on his television screen. The values are those same norms and customs constructed in the archive, the mythology which exists as a result of prior rituals and is added to in turn.

The media ritual further reinforces or legitimizes the notion of media as an access point to a “social centrality”. Indeed, according to Couldry, the traditional notions of ritual need to be re-thought in light of the complexity of contemporary media and its impact on social space, by shifting the emphasis in ritual analysis from questions of meaning to questions of power. As I will show in the next section of this chapter, the tension between the more grassroots “folk” form and the institutional “high” art is in some ways resolved by mass media; however this has a complicating effect on the shared narrative. The distributed nature of the social space in which the media ritual occurs means that cohesion is formed in new and radically different ways. Participants have greater agency and contributing power but are also entangled with their environments and new communities in more complex ways, for the myriad of plateaus at which one person functions and interacts socially is extended and multiplied across the new media virtual environment.

Further, the focus that Baudrillard places on the consumption of products shows how a process that was once within the realm of materiality can now be transferred to media. The social mobility once reserved for the purchasing of luxury goods to signify status now operates in a manner that involves media participation through media events, varying modes of technological connectivity, virtual platforms, and other forms of mass media.

## **MASS MEDIA**

Popular culture is almost inseparable from mass media, and it is impossible to look at one without considering the other (Strinati, 2004). Also addressed by Walter Benjamin, a mass medium is a medium that defines its audience as a mass, a public constructed of individuals who habitually consume mass-produced cultural products. For Arnold Hauser (1951) however, “mass public” is a contradiction of terms, since the word “mass” relates to a heterogenous group of individuals belonging to different social classes and cultural groups, whereas “public” implies a more or less fixed socially and culturally homogenous group; he considers the passage from public to mass a phase in the democratization of the arts. Mass is anonymous; it does not matter who you are as an individual, because you are part of a mass.

“Mass society consists of atomized people, people who lack any meaningful or morally coherent relationships with each other. These people are clearly not conceived of purely and simply as isolated atoms, but the links between them are said to be purely contractual, distant and sporadic rather than close, communal and well integrated.”

(Strinati, 2004: 3)

The mass medium is related to commodification, the evolution of a fragment of popular culture into mass culture, a term referring to popular culture which is produced by the industrial techniques of mass production, and marketed for profit to a mass public of consumers. Pointing to the comparison that culture critics make between folk

culture in pre-industrial societies and mass culture in industrial societies, Strinati tells how folk art grew from below as a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped to suit their own needs; here painted as in direct opposition, at least ideologically, to high culture which is beyond the reach of those previous lowly masses who were presumed to lack the sophisticated capacities to comprehend it. Mass culture, however, is “fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying... Folk Art was the people’s own institution, their private little garden walled off from the great formal park of their master’s High Culture. But Mass Culture breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of political domination” (MacDonald, 1957: 60). While MacDonald here contradicts Baudrillard’s later take on participatory aspect of consumer culture, what clearly emerges quite early on is the tension for political domination as present in popular culture, where an ideological position between cultural strata is resolved, or at the very least temporarily mediated. Mass media acts as a democratizing medium accessible from both sides of this divide, albeit not fully identifiable with either. The following diagram shows the initial convergence point at which mass media operate, though in a similar manner to the previous visual representations of the entangled triadic formations, its two dimensional nature precludes its accurate representation of the movement and instability which it also assumes to contain.



Raymond Williams (1976), describes a shift in perspective between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, noting that ‘popular’ meant “being seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favor or power over them”. The process by which social order and shared narratives are constructed through ritual is altered; as previously rites were constrained to a privileged set, in a special circumstance that existed in exclusivity and isolation and any potential spectator had to take the comparatively passive role of an audience. By bringing the extreme mediating and affective reach and scope of mass media technology into the everyday lives of ordinary people who have thus far been in more constrained and passive spectator positions (or fully excluded), mass culture simultaneously empowers and constrains. It brings the ritualistic environment into a both a communal as well as personal, even intimate, environment; for, one might share a media experience across great distances while remaining still in their solitude. The media ritual has the ability to travel directly to your personal space and command your own uniquely fixed attention by means of screens and interfaces. This the condition of materiality, and the varying methods of embodiment and mediation, and thus also the consequent meaning- and society- making (and also the allocation of power), are distributed or dispersed globally and unevenly, becoming commodified in the process. If we are to follow McLuhan, as one should in regards to matters of media, we might ask if the commodification of media also means the same fate awaits the message.

The proliferation of semiotic mythology and shared narrative in pop culture and mass media is further complicated by what has been termed convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), which refers to the flow of content across media platforms, cooperation between media industries, and migratory behavior of audiences; a process which also depends heavily on consumer participation. Henry Jenkins explains that the actual convergence happens in the brains of consumers and in their social interactions with others. “Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives” (Jenkins, 2006: 3-4). This is parallel to the meaning- and society-making established in the ritual form as discussed

in the first chapter. The interactive construction process combines with media fragments and manufactures resources which are similar to values addressed by Couldry.

What is described here follows neatly and dutifully the ritualistic process I have outlined in the first section, where Jenkins forms a discursive triad that maps onto it perfectly. Convergence culture sees a triad of media flow (fragments) / personal (myth) construction / (everyday) resources; the first takes the place of environment, the second of embodiment, and third of archive. Fragments of media flow act as the environment, a discreet new materiality in which the ritualistic ‘taking place’ occurs; its encoded semiotic values determine the affordances which shape and construct the space filled with meaning and potential in which the act takes place. Personal myth construction is the embodiment aspect, the mediation between first and last, nature and culture that is enacted through choreography of the media consumer in their various roles of spectator, user and contributor. Finally the everyday resources are the archive, the mythology which is re-enacted and reconstructed through ritual. The mapping of convergence culture onto the sacred ritual mode is not a particularly far stretch, as the introduction to *Convergence Culture* finds Jenkins describing the New Orleans Media Experience event organized by HSI productions in October 2003 in explicitly religious terms:

“Inside the auditorium, massive posters featuring images of eyes, ears, mouths, and hands urged attendees to “worship at the Alter of Convergence”, but it was far from clear what kind of deity they were genuflecting before. Was it a New Testament god who promised them salvation? An Old Testament god threatening destruction unless they followed His rules? A multifaced deity that spoke like an oracle and demanded blood sacrifices? Perhaps, in keeping with the location, convergence was a voodoo goddess who would give them the power to inflict pain on their competitors?”

(2006: 6)

This question of convergence, as well as its closely related concept of transmedia storytelling (also popularized by Jenkins), will be of more interest as the following section explores the specifics of how the shared media narrative generated by and embodied in ritual is manifest and disseminated. In order to accurately follow this particular thread, however, one must address the recurring issue of power dynamics involved in this process.

## **POWER**

Questions of power dynamics arise if one studies closely the production and distribution of media. Henri Lefebvre talks about ambiguity of everyday life and electronic media engaged in a network composed of countless trajectories of power (such as the economy, political order, and media narratives). His famed work on the production of social space (1974) conceptualized it as a social product, a complex construction based on values and the social production of meanings which affects spatial practices and perceptions. The space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; “in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (Lefebvre, 1991: 26). This suggests that the exercise of power as action is dependent on the spatial conditions and affordances created through prior actions, or forms of consecrating rituals. For Pierre Bourdieu, rituals are much more than formalizations of otherwise ordinary action; they are rites of institution, which institute as natural, and seemingly legitimate, certain key category differences and boundaries. Couldry claims that this legitimization extends to the functioning of power, and further posits that ritualistic practices and performances include an element of coercion and create a symbolic power and ideological domination (Couldry, 2003: 37). This is connected to the existing tensions I have already outlined with regard to the orchestrated construction of power and authority in ritual and how it engages the social body in the objectification of oppositions and the deployment of schemes that effectively reproduce the divisions of the social order, and according to Catherine Bell (1992: 215) in this

objectification lie the resonance of ritual and the consequences of compliance.

The question of power that is raised in the merging of top-down and bottom-up modes of mass culture are also relevant to convergence culture. For Jenkins, collective intelligence is a new form of media power; he describes convergence as both a top-down corporate-driven process, and a bottom-up consumer-driven process, where corporate and grassroots convergences coexist and variously reinforce or subvert each other (Jenkins, 2006: 19). Here we can see a further convergence of the two modes described by Strinati (quoting MacDonald) in the tension between high culture and folk culture which is resolved in mass culture. This perspective however fails to fully acknowledge the role of the corporation, and the sublime power of neoliberal consumerism, in the manufacture of culture and its associated material aspects. Jenkins makes reference to “affective economics” as an attempt to blur the line between entertainment and brand messages, thus constructing a consumer that is active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked; consumer that is not a passive spectator but participating member of a “brand community” (2006: 20).

Here we see the ritualistic process applied in a particular manner as mediating questions of power relations in a complex web of entanglements involving communities, technologies and corporations. The norms and values brought into the liminal space of play-performance questions the very structure of social hierarchy, but in the media ritual the process must be adapted to a new mode of operating, where existing dialectic tensions between the absolute first and last are transformed into relationships between sets of symbolic entities unique to the new media environment, which will be elaborated on in the following section.

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## Spectacle, celebrity, and the virtual

As the aforementioned positions of and relationships between various constructive elements have been defined by the instability of their roles and meanings, and for the purpose of their study in terms of their



entanglements but also in terms of comparative symbology, I will map out another formation of elements active in the media ritual, as follows.

## SPECTACLE

Situationist Guy Debord argued that ‘the spectacle’ (not only mass media, but the whole façade of consumerism) works by a claim to encompass the entirety of social space. In the spectacle, one part of the world represents itself to the world and is superior to it. For Debord the spectacle is nothing more than the common language of this separation “the spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which exactly covers the territory” (Debord, 1983: 31). He claims that authentic social life has been replaced with its representation, declining from *being* into *having* and finally merely *appearing*; the commodity has thus colonized social life. The subject here is passive in its identification with the spectacle which supplants genuine activity with a relation mediated by images. In an explicit critique of consumer culture and commodity fetishism which otherwise appears valid, I hold that the author makes a crucial error in assuming the passivity of his subject, whom he refers to as a spectator who has been drugged by spectacular images. As has already been asserted, all media consumption requires a level of participation and indeed can even facilitate social mobility. The media ritual sees an evolution of the concept of genuine activity into a multi-level system, a hierarchical web of modes and networks which function through mass media and convergence culture, but still follows the triadic pattern established in the first chapter and results in society-making and the construction of the social order and shared narratives.

In Dayan and Katz’s *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992) they define the ‘media event’ as an event that is broadcast ‘live’ and is ‘remote’ from its audiences, which is a real event occurring at society’s ‘centre’, not set up by the media itself; its broadcasts are a preplanned interruption to the normal flow of broadcasting (1992: 3–7). Evoking again the still somewhat unspecified or at the very least elusive concept of media centrality, the media event as described by Dayan and Katz creates a complex space of discursive production by thousands, even millions, of people (Couldry, 2003: 71). The authors argue that

media events tend to fall into one of three broad categories: “contests” in sport or politics, “conquests”, and “coronations”. Their account emphasizes the role of media events in integrating society, affirming its common values, legitimating its institutions, and reconciling different sectional elements. Society is thus characterized as a community with shared values but pluralistic differences which rely on the media events to bring them together.

Media events are monopoly communications, usually transmitted simultaneously or extensively via different channels, reported uncritically by broadcasters, and reach a mass audience attach a special significance to what is being broadcast; they may be explicitly referred to as collective and televised “rites of communion” (Liebes & Curran, 1998: 4, 11). Communion is a specifically Christian rite, pointing to the influence of the dominant religious worldview to the philosophical semantics in media studies; it refers to the Eucharistic ritual commemorating the Last Supper. The philosophical terminology appears to borrow the language of religiosity, as it best encapsulates the profundity of meaning in the transcendental event.

Here we may also link this ‘communion’ with Huizinga’s ‘*communitas*’ as a key element in play which extends beyond its confines and spills out into everyday life. Tamar Liebes further elaborates on how Dayan and Katz’s research suggests the importance of media for actively constructing common identities and solidarities; at the micro-level filtered through multiple communities, webs of interpersonal relations, and identities, and at the macro-level concerned with the dramatization of civil society and the creation of a common cultural framework for building common identities. “Media events provide the cultural grounds for attachment to the social imaginary of civil society, and they provide plot points for updating the ongoing public narratives of civil society and nation” (Liebes & Curran, 1998: 28).

## **CELEBRITY**

The media event is Debord’s spectacle but with an active central (even *focal?*) participant, one who seeks out an intimate and personal relationship with media by traversing a landscape of printed materials,

spaces and screens that turn the spectator into an actant who is also in a position to contribute to this media discourse and the resulting archive, thereby participating in the construction of a shared narrative or common meaning, and also navigating a social hierarchy. The ultimate media actant is the celebrity, the central embodying figure of the pop culture by which it is constructed and reproduced. Cultural studies professor and author Graeme Turner describes how, having emerged from the sporting or entertainment industry, the celebrity figure is highly visible in the media and their private lives attract greater interest than their professional lives (Turner, G. 2004: 2). He further quotes Daniel Boorstin's claim that "the celebrity is a person who is well-known for their well-knownness" (Boorstin, 1961: 58). Boorstin's account is critical of American pop culture and what he describes as a fundamentally inauthentic "pseudo-event"; planned and staged entirely for the media, which accrues significance through the scale of its media coverage. He defines the concept of celebrity itself as a "human pseudo-event".

In the introduction to his book *Claims to Fame; Celebrity in Contemporary America*, Joshua Gamson takes the example of Angelyne as a consciously engineered celebrity, a sexist stereotype of an objectified and commodified body. Angelyne is an American celebrity who styles herself in the manner of a Hollywood Barbie that became famous after a series of billboards featuring her name and image (in a suggestive pose)



popped up in Hollywood, in spite of the fact that she was not otherwise known or notable prior to their appearance.

Charles Marowitz (quoted in Gamson, 1994: 40) talks about the refinements of “hype” as a means of acquiring (or “purchasing”) fame through media manipulation, self-promotion and association. Here the celebrity comes to quite literally embody all things that were associated with Hollywood culture; the peroxide-plastic aesthetic, the vapid glamour, the sexual objectification of the self for the purpose of fame. Its material values and associations are promoted and perpetuated through billboards, creating a mythology which allows for the central purpose of celebrity; recognition. As all media increasingly draws in its spectators and audiences to becoming participants of its production and distribution, the participants vie for increased social mobility as they are entangled with the concept of celebrity; a phenomenon which has come to increasingly dominate culture with the proliferation of social media platforms in which anyone is a potential ‘influencer’. Content posted by participants now regularly and with greater ease crosses over from the grassroots “folk” culture and merges with the top-down institutional form at the mass culture point of convergence, largely by means of corporate sponsorship deals. Here the liminal space is created at the intersection between the discourses, for if the participant can garner sufficient “purchasing power”, attention and socio-cultural capital in the bottom half of the hierarchy they might pass through the convergence point into the upper stratum.

The symbolic value assigned to content is measured by its viral capacity, and in the marketplace of digital content all participants have the opportunity of their own proverbial fifteen minutes. Graeme Turner (2004: 4) defines the modern celebrity as existing in a culture which privileges the momentary, visual and sensational; possessing qualities which are simultaneously natural and magical; and a product of a number of cultural and economic processes such as commodification. This link between the natural and “magical” suggests there is a layer of reality otherwise inaccessible or unmediated which is accessible to, and possibly *through*, the celebrity who presents a form of embodiment (as well as an associated and entangled forms of materiality and manner of mediation) that is uniquely placed in the pop culture. The celebrity

exists variously as a private individual, the character they portray in the media, as well as alongside the range of products associated both with their work and their personal lives. The material aspect of the celebrity figure exists through these products, the merchandising of which now functions at a material but also digital level, deeply entangled with a range of new media technologies. This means that there are corporate interests involved in overseeing not just the official output that makes up their product, but the personal lives of the people behind it (as contracts are often revoked on the basis of ‘undesirable’ aspects of personal life leaking out into the public realm), and the tone and direction of the entire associated participatory and convergence cultures, including things such as fan art and tabloid media. It is not only the public, outward-facing aspect of the celebrity’s life that is circulated among media, but indeed any aspect of their being deemed worthy or desirable of public scrutiny. In this manner, the celebrity may also be seen as a sacrificial figure; one who discards certain privileges and securities that come with civilian life, such as privacy, and bestows their own being in a manner that is elevated above (or at the very least within) their own community while serving their greater goals and needs that go “beyond the ordinary” (the aspect of personal material wealth notwithstanding). As we shall see, the entanglement with new media technologies and the virtual reality they construct make this convergence point crucial to the ritual as we have so far understood it.

## **THE VIRTUAL**

As we took an explicitly material position in the introduction, we must note how this question changes when we address new media technologies and the peculiarities of the digital aspect. Henry Jenkins (2006: 13) posits that delivery technologies become obsolete and get replaced, while media evolve. He uses the example of CDs, MP3 files, and 8-track cassettes as delivery technologies, while the recorded sound they transmit is the medium. While the technologies are materially ephemeral, media persist as palimpsestic layers within a complex system. However, it is important to note how the technological affordances determine the type and nature of the media content that is produced.

While early social media focused on sharing of text-based statuses and photos, the development of video sharing and streaming has adopted augmented reality technologies which connect the superimposed virtual reality with the documentation of our everyday through various applications and virtual filters.

A chapter in Hutchings and McKenzie's *Materiality and the Study of Religion* deals with digital media by shifting the viewpoint from material object to mediation. Websites and apps are treated as objects, active in the production of digital media, the materiality of which is not limited to the level of technologies and devices. Digital content also functions just like material objects; following David Morgan's process of production, classification, circulation. This includes media files of various formats, though most prominently video and audio, as well as memes, gifs and other types of images that each contain their own archive of meaning and distinct semiotic functions. The understanding of this archive and the archival value of the media object is equally shared and dispersed among participants who construct it through the object's use and reiteration. Here we may note the differentiation between our prior understanding of the archive as materially encoded through a system of belief and a mythology; now the archive takes an additional, virtual dimension which is increasingly uploaded live and broadcast in real time, but also stored for the duration of the life of its server.

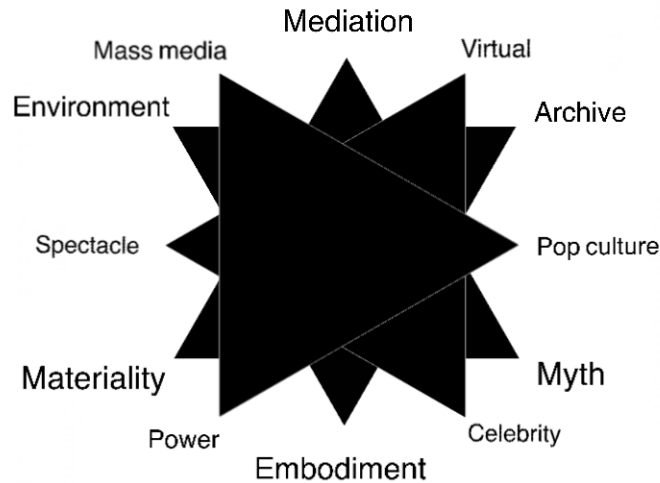
What is happening here is a superimposition of a socially coded reality which functions in the virtual world, one which permeates like a plasm on top of — beyond but also throughout — the living, corporeal, material world we have known so intimately since the ancients. It exists in a transcendental dimension as per Bloch or Hodder, or even a “magical” realm as per Graeme Turner, and its power extends through ritualistic mediation. Our environments are altered by it, through the flickering lights and display screens, through the navigational paths created by apps, and the manifold implications of digital representation of identity and presence. In social media, for example, a technologically constructed replica or simulation is developed as a cartographic tracing which attempts to map out the social space in a digital realm, while

continually altered and updated by the very bodies which it seeks to capture.

Thus also embodiment is affected; from the mere physical relation of the user to their device, the way its dimensions and interface determine how it is held, used, interacted with, where it is kept, to the way the devices themselves, and the media that is broadcast through them, determine our embodied relations to one another and to our communities, environments, institutions. In this performatively generative navigation of meaning and social structures, those shared narratives which are constructed, interrogated and reconstructed in the process exist in a newly mediated environment. William Gibson famously defined cyberspace as a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions; a bodiless exultation (1984: 67). Even in fictional accounts of cyberspace, the question of materiality is entangled with the role of the body and the construction of shared belief systems.

#### **SOME NOTES ON THE MULTI-TRIADIC ENTANGLEMENT**

This structure of spectacle, celebrity and the virtual is another triadic formation which can be conceptually framed (or, perhaps more aptly, unravelled) as a functional paradigm for the ritualistic process. The spectacle is an extension of the environment in the superimposed layer of reality which is created through mass media and the virtual, and it comes to take up the entirety of social space as specified by Debord. This is a materially constructed space further mediated through the tension with its virtual counterpart which is an archival mythology encoded through technology but extends beyond it, as its archival potentiality and capacity of the virtual exceeds the environmental confines within which it is constructed. The celebrity is a form of embodied actant, an engineered human pseudo-event which is created by and further perpetuating both the environment that is the spectacle and the virtual apparatus that is the archive. All of these formations and relations are emergent from and imposed onto the initial triadic entanglement in a manner that may be shown, though in a limited capacity, by the following diagram.



Here we see how the new functions are layered over the structure based on which they operate, but their position is neither completely stable nor fully in a state of disorder; they exist nested in similarities and pulled apart by tensions, thus always open to reconfiguration and reimagining by design, which is indeed the function of the ritual process. The more entangled elements are plotted the more unstable the structure is, and at this point their positions on the map (which is what this diagram essentially is) are completely arbitrary and interchangeable depending on the specifics of the occasion, the media event which creates a momentary stability in which the various points of entanglement may be plotted and analyzed. For example, celebrity might appear logically nested somewhere between myth and embodiment in this case, but of course it is also connected to and entangled with all the other points on the map, the relations of which remain most easily conceptualized as triadic, even though this is a mere slice view. More than a rhizome, it is closer to a still representation of subatomic particles in motion. In other words, it is inaccurate but an approximate metaphorical two-dimensional representation of a complex choreography of movements and tensions. The complexity of these structures and their entanglements will be interrogated through a case study example in the following section.



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## Religious practice in the age of media corporation

As the following case study is specifically situated in a culture of North American evangelicalism, it is important to briefly outline the convergence of this particular tradition with popular culture and new media. According to self-proclaimed “internet theologian” Tom Breen, pop culture is how the vast majority of Americans express themselves religiously. He cites “a recent study” which shows that eight out of ten Americans say they worship God primarily through rock concerts, extreme sports and t-shirts. “Today’s Christians believe it’s possible to be religious by shopping, watching TV, listening to their iPods, or applying fish bumper stickers to their cars” (Breen, 2008: 3). It has been argued that organized religion has failed to satisfy spiritual hunger because it has accommodated secular demands, “interpreting spiritual life in ways that uphold the values of a production-centered commodity culture” (hooks, 2000). Indeed, in today’s culture evangelism and capitalism often look indistinguishable, and wealthy American preachers wearing Gucci and being chauffeured to their congregations is not an unusual sight.

According to R. Laurence Moore, in his 1995 book *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*, the pervasiveness of religious self-identification and the intense commodification of religion that characterizes the American landscape is due to the absence of state-supported religious establishment in the USA; thus leading to churches literally competing for followers in an open and free “marketplace of culture”. According to Moore, American religion appears barely distinguishable from the larger commercial world due to the religious leaders’ being forced to compete with one another and with the broader world of amusements. This requirement to make religion “entertaining” enough to compete in the commercial culture led to a tendency to draw upon the very worldly pleasures their doctrines condemn as a means of competing for followers. He further makes an explicit comparison between early nineteenth-century revivalism and modern rock concerts (Moore, 1995: 49), suggesting that the link between entertainment and transcendence might be embedded in the foundation of our social functioning. Moore depicts American religious leaders as deeply engaged

with popular culture as both innovators and incorporators, marketing their “product” and engaging in the corporate culture in a manner that sometimes leads the way in techniques that would later be copied and incorporated by the larger marketplace (Satter, 1995: 160). What appears to happen here is another “mass” convergence between corporate and commodifying market forces of the top-down institutional apparatus, and a bottom-up community sense of faith in transcendence. Of course, these communities have their own myths and agendas, sometimes at odds and at other times aligned with the dominant discourse. Fiske famously proclaims that “ideological forces of domination are at work in all products of patriarchal consumer capitalism” (Fiske, 1989).

However, as one might recall Jesus expelling the traders and money lenders from the holy temple, the tension between commercial endeavors and sacred places of worship is not an entirely new phenomenon in the Christian context. The corporation is traditionally seen incompatible with church and in his 1970 work *A Black Theology of Liberation*, James Cone puts it plainly, saying: “Any message that is not related to the liberation of the poor in a society is not Christ’s message. Any theology that is indifferent to the theme of liberation is not Christian theology.” The relation of these ideological forces is inextricably related to, and in many cases determined by, the media apparatus alongside which it functions. The link between ritualistic behaviors as outlined thus far, and their entanglement with the corporation and media, will be the focus of the following section.

#### **THE EXAMPLE OF SISTER ROSETTA**

According to Jerma A. Jackson, at the dawn of the twentieth century spirituals were seen as not just heartfelt expressions of human emotion, but also as a reminder of the resilience of the human spirit under hostile circumstances. While music comprised an important part of the black community, it was also drawn into an expanding commercial economy by entrepreneurs and corporate entities eager to mass-produce forms of local musical culture and distribute them across the nation. Jackson tells us that “as a growing entertainment industry came to wield increasing influence in American life, the popular appeal of African American

music elevated a small corps of black singers and musicians to national stardom, making them some of the most recognized figures in black America” (2005: 2).

A most notable voice from the period that followed was sister Rosetta Tharpe, at the time America’s best known black gospel singer, and nowadays the woman generally credited with having invented what would become rock and roll. *Life* magazine chronicled her work in a 1939 feature “Singer Swings Same Songs in Church and Night Club”, and her success signaled the expanding role played by commerce in shaping the larger context in which gospel and other musical genres operated. Jackson notes that this emphasis on pleasure and materialism would in fact come to comprise an important component of the expanding consumer values that became a cornerstone of twentieth century commerce, as the twentieth century advanced, the pressures of material concerns would make increasing inroads into every corner of black American life. The growth and expansion of the music industry affected the full range of American musical styles, though the issues that emerged differed from community to community. In the case of gospel, critical issues emerged not only around religion but around race (Jackson, 2005: 102).



At the time of Sister Rosetta, segregation still existed in the south, and this meant that oftentimes promotional materials focused on the power of her artistry and the authenticity of her sound, rather than on the meaning of her message. Growing up in the sanctified church, Tharpe and her contemporaries used their talents to testify to the power

of the divine in their lives and to convey that power to others. Such concerns had little place within the music industry, where music was seen primarily as raw material from which a multitude of different commodities could be produced (Jackson, 2005: 84). This saw Tharpe singing successful but compromising songs such as “I Want a Tall Skinny Poppa”, which might seem at odds with her religious convictions. Jackson talks about “white [audience] enthusiasm” for black spirituals as a profitable industry, and Sister Rosetta “negotiating an ever-shifting line between religion and commerce”. Jackson further states that even at that time there was already an existing “emphasis on sex appeal over musicianship” (2005: 85), Sister Rosetta justified her choice to perform at nightclubs over church congregations, claiming that those in the nightclub are more in need of having their souls saved than the regular church-goer, already favored by god.

What this example shows is how the entanglements with corporate media structures reach further back than the emergence of modern media, and how the line between religious worship, entertainment, and commerce has been steadily negotiated throughout the history of popular culture. I will next follow a more contemporary example which brings into consideration the increased influence of technocratic media power structures and their wider implications on both the ritualistic act and broader society within which it takes place.

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## Kanye West and the Sunday Service

In January 2019, Kanye West began his *Sunday Service* performance series in Calabasas, California, with the choir group The Samples and other collaborators performing a combination of hymns and secular pop songs rewritten with Christian themes. The concerts have been described as “not only musically intriguing but essential toward the genre’s evolution” (Chow, 2019), while critics have accused Kanye of “gallivanting across the country in a roving gospel circus act of a church” (Alexander, 2019). Dr. Ricky Dillard, a Grammy-nominated gospel singer, praised the performances as valuable religious practice, saying “If you know God and

go to one of Kanye's worship experiences, you will experience God". Tobi Oredein, however, writing in *Premier Christianity* magazine, pointed to the seemingly megalomaniacal nature of the events: "He's employed a choir of people who are not only singing his songs, but are all dressed in his apparel. Is Christ really at the center of this gathering?"

Of course, Kanye is no stranger to religious motifs. One of his first singles, *Jesus Walks*, talked openly about his struggle with his faith in the face of things like police brutality and rap stardom:

"So here go my single, dawg, radio needs this.  
They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus.  
That means guns, sex, lies, videotapes,  
but if I talk about God my record won't get played"

The song peaked at number 11 in the billboard charts and won Kanye a Grammy award. He further posed with a crown of thorns on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, drawing harsh criticisms from the Christian community. According to Hazel James Cole (2010) "The Passion of Kanye West" cover is a paradoxical reference to the box office smash "The Passion of The Christ," a Mel Gibson film about the last twelve hours of Jesus of Nazareth's life. Offended Christian organizations such as the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights criticized West and *Rolling Stone*. The Catholic League's president, William Donahue, took issue with both West and the magazine. On the organization's website, Donahue's disapproving comments were perhaps indicative of what many Christian white readers felt:

"If it is true that West is a morally confused black young man, it is also true that *Rolling Stone* is staffed by morally challenged white veterans: they are to West what white boxing agents in the 20th century were to black boxers—rip-off artists. It is not for nothing that West poses as a Christ-like figure on a magazine geared to whites. To top it off, the white readership is bound to get a kick out of knowing that the 'The Passion of Kanye West' is the rapper's self-confessed passion for pornography."

(Donahue, 2008)



Christian writers Jason Barnes and Jim Meyers in their article “Christians Angered by Kanye West Mockery” also expressed outrage over West’s photograph, stating that offended Christian groups have called the cover image “sacrilegious” and “an insult to Christians” (Cole, 2010).

The use of messianic imagery in the hip-hop tradition is by no means a new thing. Tupac is the most prominent example of a rap artist seen as a Messianic figure for urban black youth; but other hip-hop artists, such as Nas and Puff Daddy, have evoked Christian messianic imagery in their work, and consequently used it to sell their products (Ralph et al, 2017). At the time Kanye graced the covers of this entertainment publication, he was a 27-year-old rapper and producer who had been nominated for eight Grammy awards, including album of the year for his sophomore album *Late Registration*.

However, over the fifteen years that passed between *Jesus Walks* and his latest album *Jesus is King*, the religious message has not

remained consistent and Kanye repeatedly seemed to fall into many of the trappings of the hip-hop culture he was criticizing on his early single; such as glorifying the accumulation of personal wealth and promoting the sexual objectification of women in his work, particularly evident in his last few singles before the 2019 gospel album such as “You Love It” (2018). His personal life has also been central to his celebrity status, not least of all his marriage into the Kardashians, the perfect archetype of a 21st century reality television dynasty (a holy family, if you will). His many public outbursts and confrontations have involved multiple American presidents, fellow pop stars, and entrepreneurs. Among the best known are his diversion from the teleprompter script during a relief program for Hurricane Katrina victims where he proclaimed that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” and his interruption of Taylor Swift’s award reception when he took the microphone from the young artist to assert his opinion that Beyoncé had “one of the best videos of all time”. He has openly spoken about mental health issues, taking medication, and struggling with media attention, personal grief and anxiety. A return to religious motifs such as the quest for redemption is therefore not entirely surprising from a public figure whose personal narrative seemed so conflicted.

West has certainly received an amount of backlash for his hard turn toward spiritual music. On Twitter, blog posts and published articles, black Christians have frequently accused West of hypocrisy and commodification — especially given his support of Donald Trump and his eyebrow-raising comment that slavery “sounds like a choice.” West has further been criticized for the exclusive nature of his early (some might say beta versions) of the *Sunday Service* concerts, which were invite only and thus primarily populated by the rich and famous. This made the ritualistic consecrated space available only to those with significant privilege and means; turning sacred experience into a commodity. It is also interesting to note that Kris Jenner, Kanye’s mother-in-law and the “momager” (mom-manager) of the Kardashian family, has co-founded her own non-denominational church in Los Angeles, where members are asked to pay a membership fee of \$1,000 or 10% of their income. What the belief system it subscribes to is not

entirely clear, but it appears to be targeted at Hollywood elites, potentially with some tax implications.

Kanye also has his own hugely successful fashion apparel company Yeezy-wear, which supplies the outfits worn by the performers of the *Sunday Service* concerts. The label has been repeatedly criticized for being over-priced and inaccessible to what Kanye claimed initially was his target audience, namely urban black youth. While the use of Kanye's apparel in the concerts supports Huizinga's definition of "dressing-up" as a key part of ritual, it also adds another level of corporate interest and commodification. The material quality acts as both a ritualistic dressing up and a mediating connection to the corporate merchandising associated with pop culture as well as the specific mythology of Kanye West. The ritualistic mode is materially entangled with the fashion corporation, bringing with it question of sustainability, accessibility and particular implications regarding the narratives around "low-skilled" workers' rights and the environmental impact of industry. The Yeezy-wear promotional events are another form of ritual, the fashion show but presented in a manner that draws heavily on the aesthetics of Afro-futurism, post-apocalyptic dystopia, and even the migrant crisis. However these are explicitly market-oriented and make no grandiose claims to the participants' souls.



However, one must note that the album being promoted at the *Sunday Service* concerts — and let's make no mistake about it, that is what's happening — has been described as "a profound, loving



declaration of Jesus' work" (Alexander, 2019). Echoing Cone, Alexander reminds us that the work of Jesus was subversive. "The last became first; the weak became strong; the rich, because of their attachment to the world, had tough times finding their way to heaven. Jesus came and spent his time with the disempowered and shared his words and healings with those most in need." In this spirit, Kanye has taken his Sunday service show (or, rather, "mission," as he calls it) to US state penitentiaries, bringing the ritualistic consecrated space to an institution the purpose of which is (ostensibly) redemption of those who have fallen from the grace of god, but also where inmates are routinely stripped of the means allowing them to participate in commodity-oriented corporate culture. It is further interesting to notice the parallel between the prison uniforms worn by the inmates and the apparel characteristic of both the Yeezy-wear brand and specifically the gospel choir Kanye performs with. Monochromatic, pastel-colored wears with hard durable fabrics and often visible stitching show the joining by materiality of the condition of the bodies on each side of the line dividing inmate from performer. All positions are materially and spatially encoded in a way that both reinforces and subverts the ordinary social structure.



In an interesting turn of events, West's wife Kim Kardashian decided to train for the bar exam, joined a law firm as an apprentice, and has been spending her time campaigning for miscarriage of justice organizations helping free those who have been wrongly incarcerated, with some success. According to *The Tribune* newspaper, "Kardashian

West has quietly helped fund the *90 Days of Freedom Campaign* led by a team of female lawyers who have helped free 17 first-time non-violent drug offenders” (Price, 2019). She has also met with the president of the United States in order to lobby for this cause. Here we see pop culture intersecting with politics in a way that makes a very quantifiable and tangible difference to people’s lives.

Kanye has made a separate series of concerts affordable by charging 10 dollars per ticket, making his “mission” far more accessible to the economically underprivileged than a regular hip-hop concert. This question of accessibility is of central importance, both to the evangelical Christian tradition which has traditionally been concerned primarily with “spreading the good word”, as well as to the contemporary digital media landscape. The weekly *Sunday Service* concerts are attended by members of the Kardashian-West family, such as the numerous superstar siblings of Kanye’s wife Kim. They regularly post images and video clips from the events to their Instagram accounts, which are among the most-followed on the platform. At time of this writing, Kim Kardashian and her sister Kylie Jenner both have 157 million+ Instagram followers each. “Kardashian and her family have become multi-millionaires by influencing everything from fashion to beauty to emojis” (Price, 2019). They use their social media accounts to promote their reality TV show, their various cosmetic products, and now also, both explicitly and by extension, Kanye’s gospel.

This use of social media technology is something completely new; with a global and instant reach, the power of Kanye’s gospel is at the vanguard of spreading the Christian message; broadcast live and directly to the intimate space of millions of spectators it breaks down the traditional boundaries of religious ceremony. The spectator is no longer merely an audience member but indeed a participating cyborg; reliant on the technological device and the virtual platform to which it connects as a means of perception and social participation. This has further significant implications for the operational mode of the ritual, as I will elaborate on in the following manner.

## SUNDAY SERVICE AS RITUALISTIC POP CULTURE ENTANGLEMENT

At a mythological level, in the Sunday Service we see a convergence of the various Christian myths (an archive going back millennia which stretches across the globe and encompasses believers of many denominations), with the mythology of Kanye West, itself deeply enmeshed in a history and symbology of music, hip hop culture, fashion, celebrity, and others. While the previously discussed works of Frazer, Harrison and others have claimed that myth separates from ritual and is circulated through the cultural domain, not much attention has been paid to the re-ritualization of the myth by means of new sacred spaces and new materially-encoded fetishes. The Christian myth has lived through social, cultural, political and economic situations independent of its central rites, and is now being reincorporated into a new ritualistic realm replete with digital media technologies and new forms of cultural cohesion. It is adapted to the concert hall or stadium setting, and entwined with the modern role of materiality as seen on the performing bodies adorned in fashionable Yeezy apparel which carries its own semiotic coding, much like Eco's wardrobe or Fiske's students' jeans. This materiality extends to the digital realm directly from and simultaneously also within the concert hall, through the devices used to project and record the show, to the very device in each audience member's personal possession.

The social media platform and the technological device it functions through create a new type of fetish, created by humans but possessing supernatural traits, that mediates between nature and culture. Firmly located in each remote spectator's hand, the device is also a focal object which connects to the superimposed digital reality and constructs the subject as its gateway counterpart, making a claim upon them in the aesthetic manner of experience as described by Gadamer and Dewey. The genesis of presence created through this everyday act that goes beyond the ordinary by means of a newly digitized religious medium which is stored up in a digital archive and can be accessed at any moment from anywhere in the world by millions. A shared narrative is thus produced, classified and circulated within the marketplace of culture, a commercial spectacle based on pleasure and materialism which is mass produced and widely distributed.

However, at the *Sunday Service* we also witness a change in the presentation of the celebrity figure, here situated in a worship community, among the people rather than separate and elevated above them. Kanye is not raised up onto a special podium, does not take ‘center stage’ in the traditional sense, and even hands over the duty of conductor to another performer. While most of the outside media focus is still focused him as the key celebrity actant and creative leader of his congregation, the celebrity (and the celebratory) role is diffused among participants. Embodiment thus functions at three distinct levels. The performing body is the unity of the musicians, the choir, even the Kardashian-West children playfully running around and interacting, sometimes even taking turns on the microphone. Second level embodiment is that of the immediate spectators, the audience present in the same physical space as the performers; they follow the choreographed movements and sing along to the songs, thus performing their own secondary and more intimate ritual. Finally the third level of embodiment sees the remote spectator, connected via the digital device and experiencing a ritual separated from its original by time and space. Each of these individual participant player groups performs a somewhat unified embodied act, spreading out from a central materiality through technological mediation of an archival version of it that exists in the virtual, each order requiring a greater degree of mediation in order to become part of the ritual.

The special significance of central materiality is in part demonstrated by the sacred symbolic value of the identical ‘uniforms’ of the performers, and especially when contrasted with the uniforms of the prison inmates, returning us briefly the semiotic coding of Eco. Kanye has repeatedly stated in interviews that his approach to clothing is from a design perspective, looking at clothing as method of problem-solving, and even going so far as making grandiose claims about saving the world through his various design efforts, in an interview with Zane Lowe for the BBC. In the consecrated space of his Sunday Service, the clothes function as material signifiers to the special status of the musical participants. It also acts as the main aesthetic symbol of the show, for in lieu of flashing light shows and big screens, the comparatively humble concert is reliant instead on the congregation and relatively simple

ornamentation for its aesthetic value and can be easily adapted across environments from the stadium to the prison hall. This minimal aesthetic recognizable within a mediated environment is one of the traits of the postdramatic, further relying on the presence of the actor or performer, in this case the celebrity figure. In this way, any environment from the concert hall to the prison cell block, can be imbued with special (even sanctified) meaning and populated with religious potency through the embodied choreography acted out within its parameters, which are in turn added to the archive through which the embodied act becomes fully unified as a media product.



While commodification and commercialization of sacred practices has been often viewed as a negative occurrence (described as “cultural appropriation” by some, or “cultural bastardizing” by others), the view of the *Sunday Service* as a media product does not necessarily take away from the ritual’s potency or relevance in terms of its religious or supernatural link with a beyond or its evocative, embodied meaning-making, as can be clearly seen in the reactions of some attendees. Both

the public concerts as well as those taking part in penitentiary institutions see audience members display intense emotional states commonly associated with the evangelical traditions. This becomes yet another part of the archival gospel of Kanye which is reanimated with each individual rewatching of the events by means of digital media. The *Sunday Service* concert is both a social drama and a ceremony, in which the central textual content of the faith is replaced with a heterogeneity of styles and traditions, in a postdramatic fashion. Further, the impact of media on the performance manifests itself not only in the use of high-tech devices for constructing and disseminating the narrative, but also in the manner it is consumed, stored up, and reported on, or generally interacted with by cultural participants. This technological entanglement creates a distinct cyborgisation of the subject, for the newly commodified ritual event now relies on the mediating extensions of embodiment to engage its contributors (for none of those left are mere spectators) with a magnetic draw towards an imagined and ever-elusive centrality. According to a number of theorists, most notably Donna Haraway in her 1984 *A Cyborg Manifesto*, we are already cyborgs. Chris Hables Gray talks about a lack of clear-cut definitions of the cyborg, while McLuhan points out that “man’s extensions” include clocks, typewriters, telephones, weapons, and motor vehicles, among much else. The view of certain performance and media theorists is that “cyborgism” constitutes a technological response to existential and spiritual uncertainties and crises within late industrial Western societies, symbolizing a human desire for wholeness within a technological matrix, and a quest to leave the frail and fallible mortal body behind, merging or fully becoming (with) a machine (Dixon et al, 2007: 305-6). The extents of these technological entanglements will be the focus of the next chapter.

## Part three

*In which I ascertain the affect and implications of digital media technologies on the pop culture ritual as examined thus far.*

Having thus far established the key parameters for understanding the pop culture ritual, I will briefly reiterate them as follows. Materiality and environment work to create a context of taking place that is the first constituent element of the ritual. It draws on and further adds to a mythology or archive which is the secondary element creating tension in its opposition to the first. The third is the mediating element of embodiment which resolves this tension by enacting a choreography within which a dynamic exchange between the first and last occurs as a liminal separation, transition and incorporation a sacrificial actor. These elements work together to create the sacred ritual which is a method of connecting with a discrete beyond and affects the construction of shared narrative and meaning. The context of mass media and digital technology in which we perform the contemporary ritual is technologically mediated, and increasingly entangled in a complex network of corporate and political interests, while digital platforms make the participatory aspect an embedded feature of their functioning. This sees the consumer or spectator increasingly take the role of participant, and oftentimes even producer or manufacturer. In this chapter I will further interrogate the specific role of new media technologies in the performance of ritual by briefly returning to the foundational triadic formation thereof.

Environment, the first, exists across a variety of entangled and often mutually codependent platforms, and rapidly evolves in a coexistence with science and technology. Brian Massumi describes multiple sites of the virtual which act as combinatorial permutations of an overarching definitional framework which permeates across a culture map, further marking the everyday as a site for “modest acts of resistance and subversion” (2002: 2-3). The actant here is the body-subject, determinately local, boxed into a particular site on the culture map, and defined by its boundaries, the beginning and end points which imply a linear and temporal understanding on the part of Massumi. This

stance is further reaffirmed when he explains that some movements within this culture map site are *coded in*, such as the passage from child to adulthood.

This brings us to the archive, the second order; an encoded mythology which exists through objects and connects the passive and inanimate with an active, lived narrative. One may be forgiven for presuming that in the digital age the archive has been fully relegated to a disembodied code, an abstract binary construction existing in the ethereal world (of the) wide web; but this is not the case. The digital archive remains inextricably entangled with questions concerning materiality, for archival media is available in a range of iterations such as the disk or the server, and each of these has its own relative set of affordances such as accessibility and life-span. The utility and durability of the archive at this level remains materially encoded. However, the computational capacity and informatics complexity that can be retained within these technological constructions has expanded rapidly, creating a depth and breadth of possibility and information which is no longer correlated directly with material qualities and capacities as we have traditionally understood them. An example of this is the simple USB storage device, which has gotten steadily more compact while simultaneously increasing its storage capacity over the years. The archive is now recalled by computational means, through dashboards and interfaces, as well as in the traditional manner we have described in ritual. We may look at this as a secondary, higher order extrapolation which is simultaneously more stable due to its being increasingly entangled with new materialism and technology. This echoes Hodder's theory of human-thing entanglement, which posits that things simultaneously enable and constrain human action, and that their existence provides a temporary stability, or at the very least a functioning appearance of such (Hodder, 2014: 21).

Here the question of evolutionary entanglement with tools points in the direction of technogenesis, described by N. Katherine Hayles as the idea that humans and technics have coevolved together, citing as an example the generally accepted theory that bipedalism, tool manufacture and early forms of transportation were mutually developed as a consequence of each other. She also talks about technologies such as



the computer keyboard becoming an extension of one's thoughts, rather than external usage devices; thus changing the very nature of embodiment to resemble something closer to extended cognition, in which human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks (Hayles, 2012). But, tools also have a life(span), an aura, and an encoded meaning of their own. Beyond merely following Morgan's process of production, classification, distribution, the inanimate is more than loaded with its own mythology, an embedded ideology and other significant material and functional implications. Notable areas of study, for example, have been dedicated to the idea that algorithms can be biased or even agonistic. The varieties of movement (both literal, but also social and cultural), information and meaning which is embedded within the digital archive and various means of participation in it determine the nature and scope of the ritual.

Finally, we have the embodied, the mediating element which is the third order and constructs the essential relationship of the ritual between the first and last. Moving away from analysis of the body from the perspective of concepts derived from linguistic theory, Massumi utilizes William James' radical empiricism and Henri Bergson's theory of perception in order to focus on the more salient aspects of embodied existence which he marks out as movement, affect and sensation. He views the body, and media such as television, film, and the Internet, as cultural formations that operate on multiple registers of sensation beyond the reach of the reading techniques founded on the standard rhetorical and semiotic models. Regarding this bodily entanglement aspect of what Hodder would refer to as human-thing entanglement — though for the purpose at hand I would be inclined to reconfigure this to 'human-technology' instead — Baudrillard tells us that:

“From a classical (even cybernetic) perspective, technology is an extension of the body. It is the functional sophistication of a human organism that permits it to be equal to nature and to invest triumphally [sic] in nature”

(1994: 111).

This idea of technologically extending the human body has significant implications for the element embodiment which is central to the concept of ritual, and indeed also consequently the archive and the environment (for the triad functions as a whole and not independent of any one of its parts). By placing the technological entity against the embodied and as determining a relation with its environment, Baudrillard follows McLuhan for whom electronic media, most notably radio and television, are extensions of the central nervous system leading to an electrical re-tribalization of the west (McLuhan, 1977). He thus attributes the property of society-building — or at the very least *shaping* — to the medium, which may remind one of Heidegger for whom the essence of technology is related to enframing; a setting-forth and a revealing and concealing, coming-to-presence, of truth. This truth, however, might not be as clearly self-evident as the Heideggerian enthusiast would hope. For McLuhan, the key element of aura is lost in the process of mechanical reproduction. This aura is somewhat akin to the potency of its mythological significance; we may well note that McLuhan and Baudrillard both drew upon Roland Barthes' concept of myth as present in popular culture. Guy Debord once wrote of McLuhan that he was “the spectacle's first apologist, who had seemed to be the most convinced imbecile of the century” noting that even this “Global Village idiot” eventually realized that mass media cannot deliver on promises of freedom and accessibility. Indeed, much of McLuhan's techno-optimism has been critiqued in light of the increasingly evident effects of neoliberal capitalism and its relationship with media and broadcasting technologies, which have become institutions of political power in their own right. At this point it might be useful to note that some commentators such as Gary Genosko have acknowledged that rather than an idiot, McLuhan might be more appropriately referred to as an “intellectual jester” whose approach chose eclecticism over the effort to synthesize. Andreas Huyssen (1989: 10) calls upon the reader of McLuhan to perform a thought experiment in which electricity is substituted for the Holy Spirit, the medium is read as God, and the global village is understood to be the Roman Empire. Huyssen refers to McLuhan's work as more than a media theory; it is a media *theology*. This media theology will be the central focus of this final chapter; the manner

in which the power structures associated with media institutions and technologies affect the production of meaning through their interferences in the ritualistic process.

In order to reliably trace an outline of how the ritualistic framework develops in a digital age by adopting and adapting to new media technologies, one must not only concern oneself with the conditions through which it is constructed, but should also consider the how this entanglement affects the outcome; the process of meaning-making, the construction of shared narratives and forming of social cohesion. Baudrillard describes the then-newly built Pompidou Center as a functioning incinerator which absorbs and devours cultural energy, a polyvalent space of deterrence articulated through visibility, transparency, consensus, and signifying the disappearance of any culture of meaning and aesthetic sentiment (1994: 61-64). I propose that this method is in some sense present or perpetuated in the virtual realm by such comparative monoliths as YouTube, Spotify, or Facebook which, similarly to the Pompidou Center, act as cultural incinerators within the digital marketplace of cultural commodification, mass-producing and widely distributing the new myriad of artifacts. For Baudrillard, information in the social register of communication consumes (devours) its own meaning, exhausting itself in an elaborate act of staging that leaves it void. This is described as a circular process with no absolute first and last (1994: 80-81), thus calling upon the dutiful researcher to broaden their theoretical horizon in order to ascertain these new parameters, as I shall do in the following section.

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## Post-phenomenology of science and technology

Post-phenomenological studies focus on the relations between human beings and particular technological artifacts, and specifically on the ways in which technologies help to shape relations between human beings and the world (Verbeek 2008; Ihde 2009). Don Ihde discerns four relationships humans can have with technologies: “embodiment relations”, “hermeneutic relations”, “alterity relations”, and “background

relations” (Ihde 2009, 42–43). In these circumstances, technologies are either relational in the way in which humans experience the world, or the way technology represents the world. This approach neatly maps over and expands on the four-fold theory of entanglement put forward by Hodder, in which humans and things have various interrelations with each other. However, these relationships require a different form of engagement than the archaeological objects Hodder is commonly dealing with, for even though a spearhead and a computer mouse are of relatively similar size, shape and weight, their respective uses and the methods, expertise and resources required to produce them are vastly different. In the age of unrestrained neoliberal capitalism and the market of commodity, the implications of human-thing entanglement are of global significance.

Peter-Paul Verbeek uses the concept of intentionality, which is used to understand the relations between human beings and their world, to refer to these relations. With regard to the recent rapid technological advancements, he adds two new “intentionalities”, namely “hybrid intentionality” and “composite intentionality” (Verbeek 2008, 388–390), which refer to human-technology hybrids in which human and technology are merged into a new entity (such as the case of the cyborg-spectator) and to situations in which not only humans have intentionality, but also the technological artifacts they are using. The case study examples we have looked at thus far have hinted in this direction, with the unique implications that digital media technologies have had on the conditions of mediation and embodiment which are both in their own manner entangled with intentionality.

For example, Kim Kardashian might live-stream her husband Kanye’s gospel concert via her iPhone to the many millions of her Instagram followers with the intention of promoting her own as well as Kanye’s respective brands and messages. However, the phone company and the app company and many other interests are served by, and benefit from, the data that this simple act generates. Furthermore, the fan demographic which is the intended audience also acts and reacts in a certain manner, bringing their own particular intentionality; which is, of course, not a homogenous whole, but a deeply varied and diverse set of individual thoughts, feelings, and predicaments.

According to what is described by Couldry and Powell as “the mass self-communication model”, individuals are still part of an aggregate product to be sold, but instead of their attention on a single message produced for the purpose of being broadcast, it is their individual acts of communication that comprise the ‘Big Data’ and drive much media value-extraction. While early critics of mass self-communication have noted that the model encouraged individuals to create content that was then sold to others in order to capture their attention, the crucial difference between this and the content that is produced and distributed through mass self-communication is that the meaning of data is made not through semantic expression and interpretation, but through computerized processing (Couldry and Powell, 2014 : 3). This has a profound effect on the outcome of the media ritual, namely the construction of social cohesion by means of shared meanings, values and narratives.

In the introduction to *Dreamscapes of Modernity*, Sheila Jasanoff talks about the role of coproduction and socio-technical imaginaries as seen from the perspective of science and technology studies. The process of experiment and demonstration creates tension or a productive dialectical relationship, allowing the society to share a common narrative which is reflected in ritual (as per Durkheim). The resulting structures for what Benedict Anderson has termed “imagined communities” and Charles Taylor refers to as “modern social imaginaries”. This suggests that digital media technologies permeating contemporary pop culture ritual facilitate new forms of social cohesion that are by definition inseparable from the aforementioned corporate interests. Entanglements of environments and archives which are mediated by means of embodiment are pulled this way and that by various participants with their own distinct agendas, all part of the greater spectacle of mass media power and popular culture.

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## Miley Cyrus and the coming of age ritual

On the evening of August 25th 2013 at the MTV Video Music Awards, Miley Cyrus emerged on the stage of the Barclay’s Arena and performed

her song “We Can’t Stop” and a duet of “Blurred Lines” with singer Robin Thicke. The controversial performance would lead her to be described as an “oversexed twerking teen” (Friedman 2015: 170) and “lewd, grotesque and shameful” (Yates, 2013). While critics have pointed out that some of the backlash was ostensibly out of concern that Miley was undermining her position as a role model for young women, Friedman argues this to be “a thinly masked fear of sexuality itself” (2015: 173). Other commentators focused on apparent cultural appropriation, claiming that Miley has “taken on dance moves invented by women of color and prevalent in racialized communities” (Friedman, 174), while Jody Rosen writing for New York magazine noted that the VMA performance “gave minstrelsy a postmodern careerist spin” (quoted in Rothman, 2013). Another element adding to the controversy was indeed the selected pairing of song and artist alongside Miley; Robin Thicke’s number-one hit single “Blurred Lines” was as controversial as it was successful, with both the lyrical content and the music video described as “(stereo)typical, demeaning, and scary,” and critics proclaiming that “it provides the same old, sad, uninventive narrative of the conquering male and sexpot girl waiting to be called upon and used for sex, as an object, a thing” (Richardson, 2014: 39).



In spite of these criticisms, the performance by Cyrus and Thicke was generally considered an event highlight, and given the model of the awards show it was doubtless intended to stir up controversy as a means of attracting social media spreadability. The broadcast was watched by

an estimated 10.1 million people; “up 66pc over last year for a show that is fueled by the buzz from talked-about moments” (Peacock & Kerr, 2013). Apparently, what the masses want most is sexual objectification and cultural appropriation, and both public and media outrage are integral parts of this.

I propose that this event was of particular cultural relevance as it was an example of coming-of-age ritual (or, in essence, Van Gennep’s *rite-de-passage*), but explicitly designed and manufactured to fit into the functioning mass media spectacle; it was a display of sexual maturity broadcast on a global scale. The coming of age ritual seems to be common across societies and cultures, with rites such as the Christian confirmation, the South American quinceañera, and the Jewish bar mitzvah some of the best known among them. However, all of these rituals involve aspects which are familiar, traditional and internal to the particular culture of which they are a part. In this case that localization is disregarded, radically dispersed as the ritual is now transmuted to a higher order of functioning, mapped onto popular culture by means of broadcast media which define its audience as a mass. The consecrated space becomes a main stage, viewed directly by thousands and shared digitally with millions. In the case of the VMA performance, both the mass audience and the individual spectator had to confront their preconceptions, expectations and biases with regard to this particular celebrity figure, which were being actively challenged. For this event to fully make sense we must look at the trajectory of Miley’s career.

Initially best known as the titular character in Disney Channel’s *Hannah Montana* TV show, Miley Cyrus has appeared in concerts, video games, feature films and a variety of spin-offs and ancillary products associated with the character. She has co-hosted a YouTube channel and voiced her character in an animated movie, as well as acting as a judge on a reality TV singing competition, and has even appeared in a biopic comic-book. When Disney began its *Hannah Montana* sitcom, “they knew their combined media outlets could garner them a concert tour, movie, and soundtrack and enable them to cross-promote the television show, the music and the ancillary products” (Vance, 2010: 58). It would appear that any Disney character from Mickey Mouse to *Hannah Montana* can be streamed through any combination of these segments,

thus encountering its target market via television channels, websites, films, records, pictures, storybooks, toys, clothes, food, and cosmetics. This is a process that has been described by Henry Jenkins as “transmedia storytelling”, a technique of telling a story through multiple channels and formats (usually digital), thus increasing its depth and spreadability. I would posit that this is borne out of the development of these very new media technologies that it relies upon, thus materially entangled within the ritual, and therefore affecting the production of a shared narrative which is now by definition spread across media platforms. Transmedia storytelling has become an essential marketing tool of popular culture corporations, most notably in franchises such as Star Wars or the Marvel universe. As Disney marketing chief Adam Sanderson said, the goal of *Hannah Montana* was to “generate revenue across multiple products and entertainment, but also to build for the long term” (Vance, 2010: 59).

This long term view may be exactly why Miley’s shift to adulthood, and all that it entailed, was such a hard pill to swallow for audiences. Premiering in 2006, *Hannah Montana* had become the most popular television show in 2008 with 3 million viewers per episode (Magid, 2009). While Disney has gained the trust of parents because they fashion their products around “traditional values”, Richardson points out (2014: 29) that Disney tales are heteronormative and implicitly based on sexuality. *Hannah Montana* has been noted by some to be a figure which upholds and embraces patriarchy; “groomed, tamed, packaged and sold as a model for young girls about how they can be successful as long as they behave” (Vance 2010: 62-63). Friedman describes the Miley Cyrus of the *Hannah Montana* years as a “poster child for normativity” and “a young girl held captive by Disney” (2015: 174). Therefore, as she stepped away from the role of *Hannah Montana* and developed her own mature artistic persona, the products and fandom had to change accordingly. The controversial performance at the MTV Video Music Awards marked a key point in her career, but also in the direction of her transmedial narrative; by overtly sexualizing her image, she attracted a new form of attention, leading to widespread public and media scrutiny, thus in turn making us unwittingly reflect on our own conduct as a media-consuming society.



What the polarized nature of responses to the VMA performance shows us is that there is no generally agreed upon “correct way” to be a feminist, “no seamless narrative to assume and fit into” (Walker, quoted in Teekah, 2015). We see here the media event active in the construction of societal norms and values; a coming-of-age ritual ceremony reflecting upon the society within which it is constructed, creating a liminal space where specific sets of questions regarding femininity, sexuality, freedom of expression, public decency. The celebrity is the embodied actant navigating a space between nature and culture by enacting a choreography which affirms certain values such as freedom of expression and bodily autonomy, while subverting others such as audience expectations, narratives of feminine chastity and the upholding of a virginal ideal. The ritual changes both the characterization of Miley in the overall narrative that is the arc of her professional career (inseparable as it might be from her private life), but it also affects the way society confronts and deals with the issues raised by the controversial VMA performance.

Perhaps one of the most interestingly self-reflexive incarnations of Miley came in episode 3 of the fifth season of *Black Mirror*, where she plays Ashley O, a pop star whose candy-aesthetic public persona is at odds with her personal struggles as she is abused and manipulated by her aunt who also acts as her manager. Her signature hit is “On a Roll,” a subverted remake of Nine Inch Nails’ 1989 industrial industrial hit “Head Like a Hole,” with lyrics like “I’d rather die than give you control” reimagined as “Ridin’ so high, achieving my goals” over an upbeat electro-pop melody. Ashley’s plans to escape her aunt/manager are foiled when her aunt puts her into an induced coma and replaces her with a hologram. The benefits of this hologram are touted by the abusive aunt character as being able to perform in multiple locations at once, and not being confined by those human constraints such as tiredness or need for rehearsal.

In spite of the far-fetched sci-fi aspect, it has been noted how this narrative fits into the existing Miley Cyrus / Hannah Montana universe, and that Miley is essentially playing herself “or the version of herself many of us have projected on her” (Lawler, 2019). Since her beginnings as a child star, though her controversial coming-of-age

superstardom, Miley has been a focus of an expanding transmedial narrative that has seen various versions of herself occasionally even come into conflict with each other; for example when the (credited to) Ashley O song “On a Roll” started outperforming Miley Cyrus’ actual single which was in the charts at the time. From *Hannah Montana* to *Black Mirror*, she has portrayed a semi-autobiographical (or at least, biographically-inspired) character of a young singer struggling with fame, privacy and autonomy. This brings us to the question: who *is* Miley Cyrus, and has she ever really existed?

Film premieres and award shows are perhaps the clearest examples of the industrial, merchandisable nature of celebrity. According to Gamson they are precisely Boorstin’s pseudo-events, consciously and carefully organized to facilitate the capture and dissemination of standardized celebrity images in media. Both the publicists and celebrities, eager for coverage for promotional purposes, provide easy but controlled access to celebrity images. (Gamson, 1994: 61). In the movie *Sex and the City 2*, Miley Cyrus appears briefly in a cameo that is possibly the most accurate portrayal of a “real” self, smiling alongside the obviously fictional character of Samantha Jones when they both turn up to a red carpet wearing the same dress. Here, we see an instance of the Miley simulacrum not too dissimilar to her incarnations as Hannah



Montana or Ashley-O, but at the same time we are made fully aware of the pseudo-event, as we are watching a cameo appearance take place in a movie, but depicting a very mundane (though nonetheless simulated) scene in the work-life of Miley Cyrus. Although functioning within the apparently inescapable apparatus of the Hollywood celebrity production machine, the simulacrum suffers a momentary conceptual glitch as we see a young woman who is neither a sexual provocateur nor a Disney princess; just a famous person experiencing an awkward moment at their job.

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## Reproduction and simulation of the posthuman form

The key question here is that of reproduction and simulation. Baudrillard describes a simulacrum as a copy which becomes essentially indistinguishable from the real; a copy that comes to stand in for what no longer exists as an original, or maybe never did. Miley has performed the role of her “self” in a variety of guises and incarnations, and for a number of audiences and with varying agendas. Is there a version of Miley out there that is fully distinguishable from the Miley we knew as Hannah, or the Miley we saw on a wrecking ball, or the Miley shown us by the paparazzi (indeed the most overtly problematic mainstream attempt to get at the “real” and “intimate” Miley)?

The role of celebrity is played out across a variety of official and unofficial platforms and distribution channels in the form of transmedia storytelling. While a unified and coordinated entertainment experience is not always predictable or possible to maintain (especially with regard to things such as participatory culture, or the tabloid media) there is an existing structure of media power which guides the narrative. In the case of celebrity, this takes the form of what has been variously described as a simulacrum by Baudrillard, and a “pseudo-event” by Boorstin. It is a copy without an original, which has been created and presented specifically for media consumption. It therefore exists at a nexus of tensions between celebrity and audience, public and private; and it plays an active and complicit part in perpetuating a culture of corporate commodification. While sharing his criticism of the song

“Blurred Lines”, Scott Richardson (2014: 39) claims that the media’s ability to bombard the public, turn a profit and reward top executives while amplifying the functioning of patriarchy will not foster any significant change in the near future. Indeed, similarly to the situation confronting Ashley-O in the *Black Mirror* episode, this more-than-conceptual entrapment of both artist and audience by celebrity culture and the media appears to be inescapable.

For Baudrillard, the hypermarket is a hyperspace or hyper commodity which centralizes and redistributes, concentrates and rationalizes populations, regions, practices, trajectories. This illustrates how an order of simulacra is established on the alibi of the previous order; a fiction of culture furnishing itself with vapid permutations of those same values and meaning on which it is founded, and the place of which it takes. Describing it variously as a stage and display, it lacks vanishing point and functions as a total screen, or a functional map which is not a tracing but equivalent to the territory in spite of aspects of apparent difference. It is a homogenous space which does not mediate but brings together the human and the thing in a space of direct manipulation, inseparable from the infrastructure to which it is connected and on which it relies (Baudrillard, 1994: 75- 76). This is the space in which the *taking place* described by Jonathan Z. Smith happens; it is the constructed and consecrated site at which a multiplicity of forces creates a dialectic tension between nature and culture, materiality and mythology, environment and the archive. This is resolved, as has already been demonstrated, by a mediating act of embodiment, with a tendency towards the playful, which is further complicated in the digital realm via novel modes of reproduction and simulation. Following on from the example of Miley Cyrus’ character in *Black Mirror*, the one I shall focus on is the hologram.

Baudrillard makes a distinction between the clone and the hologram. The clone is a copy, a double that signifies imminent death, a twin that destroys the subject position by its identical duplication. “It is also an end of the body, of this singularity called body, whose secret is precisely that it cannot be segmented into additional cells, that it is an indivisible configuration” (1994: 97-98). The clone signals the end of corporeal history which is reduced to its abstract genetic formula and

the individual, destined to serial propagation, suffers the loss of Benjamin's aura, as it is reproduced in a political form. The body becomes the message, simultaneously McLuhan's medium and Benjamin's work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. However the 'clonic twin' is never identical to progenitor, as it is affected by countless interferences which make of it, in spite everything, a different being.

Dominic Pettman talks about how supposedly exclusive human traits such as reason, soul, language, empathy, or tool use, have now been deployed deep within the post-cinematic spectacle of digital life. He claims that humanity is now located in the eye of the beholder, "a beholder who is beholden to ideas of his, her, or its own belonging—or exclusion—from this privileged set" (Pettman, 2011: 7). He further evokes Agamben (2007, 56–57) who turns to etymology, noting that "the Latin term *species*, which means 'appearance,' 'aspect,' or 'vision,' derives from a root signifying 'to look, to see.' This root is also found in *speculum* (mirror), *spectrum* (image, ghost), *perspicuus* (transparent, clearly seen), *speciosus* (beautiful, giving itself to be seen), *specimen* (example, sign), and *spectaculum* (spectacle)" (cited in Pettman, 2011: 8). The spectral image is a particular form of embodiment which depends upon both the technological apparatus which constructs it and the mythological archive from which it draws and to which it in turn contributes to. The perfect example of a spectral image is the celebrity hologram; at the same time a representational signifier while also being an independent, (virtually) embodied actant of its own.

The hologram is also described by Baudrillard as "the imaginary aura of the double that is mercilessly tracked". This double, rather than a clonic twin, takes the form of a spectral body which connects us to the beyond, for "with the hologram we are already virtually in another universe". The medium is the laser, concentrated light, no longer visible but "abstract light of simulation" which acts as a scalpel and separates the double as "a bit more exact" than an exact representation (Baudrillard, 1994: 105–107). What I propose in the following example is that the celebrity hologram is a distinctly posthuman form which emerges at a convergence of ritualistic entanglements.

Posthumanism is that branch of cultural theory which is critical of the foundational assumptions of humanism as they emerged from the Renaissance and enlightenment period, attempting to question historical notions of subjectivity, embodiment, and “human nature”. Posthumanism differs from classical humanism by rejecting anthropocentrism and relegating humanity back to one of many natural species while taking into consideration the innovative advancements of emerging technologies which transcend the classical notion of the human and redefines its boundaries. Visual perception and digital representation become increasingly salient as one moves away from traditional boundaries of the corporeal and the human body becomes increasingly translated into informatic data, which leads to a potential (though, I would posit, by no means absolutely certain) loss of the subjective position.

N. Katherine Hayles sees the concept of the human subject as having emerged from enlightenment notions of liberal humanism, a specific understanding of embodiment in relation to nature, culture and technology. The posthuman view privileges information over materiality, claiming that there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, describing the human body under the condition of virtuality as “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous component, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles, 1999: 3). She describes embodiment as distinct from the mere *being* of a body, for embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose enactment (1999: 196). This explicitly links the body with an act of perpetual reconstruction, taking place in a complex entanglement which echoes the multi-triadic framework working in a palimpsestic archival manner as established in the first chapter. In the virtual space the concepts of environment, embodiment and the archive persist, though in an evolved form. They also remain increasingly entangled with, and sometimes concealed by, the power of the aesthetic, which is “cosmic in its resonance and hence posthuman by structure”, as it has the capacity to carry us to the limits of what our embodied selves can achieve or endure (Braidotti, 2013: 107). This is where the unique situation of the

celebrity is utilized in the performance of resurrection, for as cultural historian Leo Braudy argues, celebrity and fame have, from the start existed at the crossroads of contradictions, in particular the line between life and death (2005: 80). This brings us to the final case study.

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## Tupac as the risen Christ

On April 15th, the last night of the 2012 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in California, popular hip-hop artists Dr Dre and Snoop Dogg emerged on the main stage in front of tens of thousands of people, and took part in one of the most widely publicized and unlikely resurrection ceremonies the world had ever seen. They performed a series of 90s gangster rap hits alongside their former peer and collaborator, the now legendary Tupac Shakur. The latter had, of course, been dead since 1996, and the particular incarnation of Tupac that they shared the stage with, was a hologram. The rendition was reasonably lifelike, though not completely so; the sometimes inconsistent light underlying the form and a somewhat clumsy and repetitive nature to the movements consistently giving away its inauthenticity.



Since the very beginning of our written history, such as in the example of the Epic of Gilgamesh, we can find narratives about human beings trying to defeat death; this is not merely a naïve and childish

dream, but a quintessential part of our cultural DNA (Manzocco, 2019: vii). In recent time, the primary focus of this endeavor has been on its various potentialities by digital or technological means. Claudia Springer argues, for instance, that this discourse celebrating the union of humans and electronic technology is currently circulating with equal success among the scientific community and in popular culture (Braidotti, 2010: 202). What we see in the performance of the Tupac hologram is a sharp collision of these two worlds; as the performance served to simultaneously entertain hip-hop fans, and to showcase a new technology in the environment of a consecrated place which is celebratory in nature, namely a music festival. This space is mapped out and claimed in part by the “beyondness” of a virtual aspect, constructed by computational means.

Hayles points to the emergence of narrative from code (1999: 229) and makes reference to William Gibson’s description in *Neuromancer* of the posthuman subject as “data made flesh” (1999: 5). This dichotomy of the digital (data) and biological (flesh) is evocative of the Christ story; we might even view the digital as akin to the “Holy Spirit” part of the Christian holy trinity, while the corporeal is merely transient (as was, in fact, the physical incarnation of Christ). Hayles further talks about the emergence of the posthuman as an informational-material entity and how embodiment can flow from cellular automata as easily as from atoms. This paradigm leads to the conclusion that, because we are essentially information, we can do away with the body (Hayles, 1999: 12). However, she explicitly argues for a need of some form of embodiment (or more precisely, the need to “insert the body back into the equation”), and against the notion of being able to survive as a disembodied subject on a server (Pötzsch, 2014). What form this body might take, however, remains uncertain. Braidotti argues that contemporary embodied subjects have to be accounted for in terms of their surplus value; “as bio-genetic containers on the one hand, and as visual commodities circulating in a global media circuit of cash flow on the other” (Braidotti, 2013: 119). This moves us away from the idea of embodiment as ‘something made flesh’ and towards ‘something made valuable’. The embodied is essentially commodified.



In considering Tupac's life and legacy, one might refer to the spiritual power of his resurrection as an apotheosis, or even a form of divine ascendancy toward sainthood (Ralph et al, 2017). Manzocco talks about overcoming the limitations of our short lives as an endeavor which has always being among the deepest, most heartfelt of human desires. He points to the original Latin root of the verb “desire,” a combination of “de,” which means a “lack of something,” and “sidus,” the word for “star”, explaining that to desire literally means “to miss the stars,” to feel a need for them. “Reaching the stars, living among them, becoming like Gods, and, of course, living forever, without ever having to meet the Grim Reaper” (Manzocco, 2019: 1). Tupac, of course, did meet the grim reaper, in one of the most historic, widely publicized and controversial (dare I say, iconic?) celebrity assassinations of all time; he was killed in a drive-by shooting on a busy Las Vegas Boulevard, following a Mike Tyson fight. However, this only contributed to his status as a cult icon and his “life after death”. Further, a series of five posthumous albums released by his record label meant that, while Tupac the human person was dead and gone, Tupac the artistic entity was still very much active and relevant. The remains of his unpublished work, ie. his recorded words, were disseminated in a way resembling the gospels; with the likes of Eminem and other producers making beats and remixing Tupac’s previously unreleased vocals, thus taking on a similar role as that of the evangelists who wrote their own, sometimes divergent interpretations of Jesus’ words. In asking what made Tupac's fans and disciples retain their investment in his spectral presence, it has been suggested that the spirit resurrected in Tupac's hologram had a force beyond the digital apparatus used to raise him from the dead (Ralph et al, 2017).

Hayles discusses the emergence of the posthuman as an informational-material entity, instant images in cellular automata that can be either “on” or “off” (1999: 11), in this sense marking the Tupac hologram as the turning ‘on’ of an artist that had been ‘off’ for some time, at least in one sense—the appearance of his physical body on the stage. If we can indeed do away with the body in favor of information, this is again supported by the fact that there was no flesh-and-blood Tupac on that stage at Coachella, but only a flickering assemblage, a combination of digital data; an ‘embodiment’ rather than a ‘body’. It has

been pointed out by Anna Munster that the digital may combine “materially, socially and aesthetically” in ways “other than closed systems such as dematerialized, entropic conceptions of information culture or of the disembodied posthuman” (Munster, 2006). Here the entanglements between humans and things are almost obsolete, for in posthumanism none is completely human, nor fully a thing; the line is blurred by a deep and essential entanglement of the concepts which is perfectly realized and displayed in the hologram. There is no longer a real body left, only a simulation which takes its place, a perfect digital tracing of the corporeal territory.

This brings us to the question of Tupac’s corpse, one of the more interesting and surreal parts of this entire research endeavor. It would appear that, in true saint-like fashion, Tupac’s peers claim to have rolled up his ashes combined with cannabis, and literally smoked him. An interesting twist on the ritual of transubstantiation, or the Eucharistic process of consuming the blood and body of Jesus Christ in the form of wine and bread, rolling Tupac in a blunt and smoking him might have more affinity with certain African diasporic sensibilities, which also make use of the physical remains of dead humans. Tupac’s group Young Outlawz claim the ritual was inspired by lyrics from the Tupac song, “Black Jesus” where he stated, “last wishes, [...] smoke my ashes” (Ralph et al, 2017), in this case similar to Jesus’ instructions to his disciples at the last supper to “take this, my body, and eat from it” and “do this in memory of me” (Mark 14, Luke 22, Corinthians 11).

It has been noted how the rebel spirit of this murdered rapper continues from beyond the grave the fight against systematic oppression, “even as he is potentially resurrected by different parties for different reasons” (Ralph et al, 2017). This later point is particularly relevant as we recall the slave narrative. It would seem that the hologram that Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre performed alongside at Coachella was ultimately doing the bidding of, and making money for, whatever corporation owned the ‘Tupac brand’ at the time. This brings up the tension between corporation and commodification and issues such as intellectual property, right to reproduction of image and likeness, and even questions of the master-slave relationship — for, at time of writing, the publishing rights to Tupac Shakur’s work are owned by a

corporation, at the head of which is, as it happens, a white person. The symbolic significance of a white-owned corporation profiting from the reproduction, or simulation, or indeed resurrection, of a black artist's physical body which is used for free labour, is of course deeply problematic. This virtual embodiment cannot be divorced from its deep-rooted entanglement in history, politics and culture.

Braidotti demonstrates that the corpse is a daily presence in global media, journalistic news, and also as an object of entertainment (2010: 205). From the suicide bomber, to the CSI television series, the dead are frequently and routinely used to a variety of ends. While zombies in particular feature explicitly in iconic films such as *Night of the Living Dead* or the comedy *Shaun of the Dead*, as well as in the staggeringly popular series *The Walking Dead*, one might also observe a role played by the more-or-less animate corpse in various other media described by Braidotti a zombification (zombi-fixation?) of culture. Similarly to what has been referred to as "zombie media" (Hertz and Parikka, 2012) — which is concerned with media that is not only out of use, but resurrected to new uses, contexts and adaptations — what occurs in this media ritual is a resurrection of cultural idols and their works as artifacts, of which Tupac is a notable and relevant example. Much of what Tupac's work talked about — gang and police related violence, class and race issues — was still very much relevant in 2012 when he was resurrected as a hologram, but now the context was different. For better or worse, Obama was president. Treyvon Martin had been shot in February, and the acquittal of his shooter would contribute to the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement the following year. Tupac's relevance as a messianic figure to urban black youth, and the clarity and force of his message, was strong as ever; but now existing in a new media landscape.

The cultural obsession with the preservation of an artist's image and work has been the subject of debate and speculation with regard to some of our greatest creative figures, such as Walt Disney and Michael Jackson. I believe a primary source of this emergence may well be rooted in Christianity. Easter, the holiday celebrating the resurrection of Jesus, is canonically the most significant holiday in the Christian tradition (in spite of the greater market value of Christmas), and it states clearly in

the book of Corinthians that “If Christ be not risen, your faith is in vain”. Christianity therefore may be interpreted as a zombie-worship cult centered on the resurrection of the Christ figure and the consumption of his physical body through the ritual of transubstantiation. Further implications of the zombie trope bring together questions of labour, slavery and colonialism.

Stratton points to the link between the zombie and slavery, and by extension the worker in a capitalist economy, as well as where the zombies can be read as displaced people, such as refugees (2011: 270). He discusses how the narrative around various “undesirables” in the media often uses similar language and framing to the zombie figure, which indeed possesses some particularly repulsive form of ‘otherness’ not found among the more “sophisticated” vampire or the “wild beast” werewolf. Braidotti takes the concept of ‘otherness’ to remind us that difference usually spells inferiority for at least one of the subjects under scrutiny, and that this acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for those who get branded as ‘others’. In her view, these are sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are thus reduced to the less-than-human status of disposable bodies. Here both the narrative of the slave as well as the at-risk black body in contemporary America remind us that what the role of the zombie as an ‘other’ comes with its own set of problematic implications, especially with regard to the Tupac example due to his perceived image as an emancipating figure for urban black youth in America. Questions of the value of life, and who deserves to live, suffer, or die, persist both in posthumanist discourse and in the particular example discussed in this case. “We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others” (Braidotti, 2013: 15).

Lauro and Embry agree that in its history and metaphors, the zombie is most often a slave. According to its origins in folklore, the first zombie was re-animated in Haiti by a colonist priest in order to work the fields at night. This is identified as one of the reasons why it is useful to read the zombie as a more effective imagining of posthumanism than the cyborg; because of its indebtedness to narratives of historical power and oppression. They also point to what they call an irreconcilable tension between global capitalism and the theoretical school of posthumanism, wondering what might exist for humanity after

capitalism, if anything. “The individual under capitalism is often characterized as a zombie” (2008: 93). Others have speculated that the zombie is sort of a slave’s nightmare, for if the slave’s only hope of release was death and the possible promise of a blissful afterlife, then the prospect of a dead slave’s body being forever (or at least, indefinitely) reanimated for the purpose of labour becomes a particularly horrible, if rather ironic thought (Cohen, 1972: 60). Speaking of the zombie as simultaneously living and dead, subject and object, slave and slave rebellion, Lauro and Embry come to the conclusion that the zombie “presents a posthuman spectre informed by the (negative) dialectic of power relations” (2008: 91). They further present the zombie as a model of posthuman consciousness (critically, as one that is post-cyborg) and in dispute with the capitalist era’s ‘homo-laborans’; as well as a body that speaks to the psyche’s fears of death. Thus the zombie is both “an effective model for imagining the condition of posthumanity 1 and at the same time quite literally “a post(mortem) human” (Lauro and Embry, 2008: 91). They note how the “negative dialectic” reshapes the way we think about the boundary between subject and object, “resonating especially with the roles of master/slave that so profoundly inform our own sense of human embodiment” (Lauro and Embry, 2008: 91). The zombie is described as an opposition held in tension between the subject and object, a negation of the individual in a post-industrial, post-Holocaust era. The zombie makes the subject / non-subject dichotomy obsolete because it is inherently embodying both polarities at once in a manner that is truly posthumanist in the sense that it is a subject that is not a subject. Contrary to Haraway’s resolution of this antagonism by means of hybridity in “The Cyborg Manifesto”, the posthuman zombie acts by negation (Lauro and Embry, 2008: 94). In attempting to negate death, the zombie negates the subject-object nature of the human condition, leading us to a clearly posthuman position.

This dichotomy of the digital (data) and biological (flesh) is evocative of the Christ story; we might even view the digital as akin to the “Holy Spirit” part of the Christian holy trinity, while the corporeal is merely transient (as was, in fact, the physical incarnation of Christ). Hayles further talks about the emergence of the posthuman as an informational-material entity and how embodiment can flow from

cellular automata as easily as from atoms. This paradigm leads to the conclusion that, because we are essentially information, we can do away with the body (Hayles, 1999: 12). However, she explicitly argues for a need of some form of embodiment (or more precisely, the need to “insert the body back into the equation”), and against the notion of being able to survive as a disembodied subject on a server (Pötzsch, 2014). What form this body might take, however, remains uncertain.

Braidotti argues that contemporary embodied subjects have to be accounted for in terms of their surplus value; “as bio-genetic containers on the one hand, and as visual commodities circulating in a global media circuit of cash flow on the other” (Braidotti, 2013: 119). This moves us away from the idea of embodiment as ‘something made flesh’ and towards ‘something made valuable’, reiterating the placement of the zombie in the slave narrative.

Approaching celebrity from the audience perspective, Joke Hermes and Jaap Kooijman (2015) discuss how the various practices of consumption constitute a celebrity’s meanings and social functions (cited in Burgess, 2018). If we return to Hayles’ point about “data made flesh”, Aside from the well known tales of transformation, water into wine etc. as well as the ritual of transubstantiation where catholic believers consume bread and wine as the literal flesh and blood of Christ, we begin to see Tupac as more than the mere embodiment of Christ as savior. He becomes Christ the sacrificial lamb, Christ the cannibalistic Eucharist, even Christ the posthuman zombie.

“Where their pointy-toothed cousins are all about sex and bestial savagery, the zombie trumps all by personifying our deepest fear: death. Zombies are our destiny writ large. Slow and steady in their approach, weak, clumsy, often absurd, the zombie relentlessly closes in, unstoppable, intractable.”

(Pegg, 2008; cited in Stratton, 2011: 269)

## Conclusions

Complex entanglements are found at the root of the ritualistic methods by which we construct the shape of society, at the centre of which is a duality or tension between the sacred and the profane in relation to which the human subject finds itself. In order to mediate between order and chaos we construct sacred ceremonies which are habitual, formal and transcendent. These can be partially unravelled and understood if looked at in terms of entangled structures that function in triadic form, which is a momentary state of stability. These are constructed through a foundation of a concrete materiality, an abstract mythology, and the process of mediation between the two which alters them both. These can be more deeply and reliably interrogated is the first order of environment which is largely materially encoded, a second order of archive which is a palimpsestic mythology, and the third order of embodiment which mediates the link between the two and creates the ritualistic act which affects each of these elements in turn. This embodiment is a choreography enacted within a consecrated space which holds a temporary suspension of the rules that normally govern society, in a manner that is ludic and performative.

The media ritual is a cultural performance which acts as a reflection and reinforcement (or subversion) of norms; it is a drama whose participants are actors and their actions within the consecrated ritualistic space affect the wider social structure. Media rituals are a constituent element of popular culture and the primary way in which it is both produced and distributed. The artifacts of pop culture are constructed through industrial techniques of mass media and active labour of the participating audience, whose participation is contingent on the implied centrality of media which connects one to the social world and enables a certain amount of mobility within it. The media event actively constructs common identities and plot points in the shared narrative. The role that media technologies play in this has been increasingly dominant in the era of technological proliferation and market-controlling media conglomerates, to the extent where they permeate and exercise power over and through the entire ritualistic process. Effectively turning the spectator into a cyborg participant who

contributes the production of culture by the very engagement with it, the production of social cohesion is constructed in such a manner to further benefit the existing technocratic power dynamic and perpetuate it.

This leads to a situation where mass media and consumerism create a spectacle that covers the entirety of social space, in which social life is replaced by pure representation; the subjective stance colonized by the commodity from a state of being, to having, to merely appearing. In this space the celebrity is the ultimate embodying media actor, constructed and reproduced by popular culture and mass media. Distinct from the person whom it simulates, the celebrity figure is a culturally engineered pseudo-event constructed through hype and purchasing power, which is treated in a sacrificial manner within the spectacle. The narrative which emerges from ritual which is constructed and enacted in the new media environment is distributed across various sites which are both material technological devices as well as virtually constructed environments which are a simulated reality acting as a map exactly covering the territory which it represents. In the consecrated space constructed in the virtual realm, the simulation is connected to the real and becomes part of it. The media ritual is not independent from the dominant ideology, and in the case of mass media and popular culture the narrative is tends to reflect the power dynamics and tensions of social hierarchies. Commodification in the marketplace of culture has affected religious practice also, which is increasingly entangled with mass-produced and widely distributed commerce based on pleasure and materialism. This has become an increasingly technocratic process which is mediated through computational artifacts.

Artifacts are things that provide temporary stability in the relations between humans and the world by encoding relationalities and intentionalities. These objects are not offered alone but facilitate the production, use and symbolic exchange of sign values. They also provide extended cognition and shape relations between humans and the world as well as the functioning of the whole of society through the development of socio-technical imaginaries. Much of this is dictated by the power structures within which the media corporation operates, a commodity-driven hypermarket in which the combinatorial narrative



technique of transmedia storytelling is used as a marketing tool to generate revenue across multiple platforms. This has resulted in a distinctly posthuman conceptualization of the celebrity media figure as a material-information entity that is duplicated within the virtual and perfectly manifest as a hologram. This representation and reproduction of the once-human form as informatic data is a method of resurrection which echoes many characteristics of the zombie trope, such as free labour and a lack personal agency beyond the conceptually encoded role that is played out.

Thus we see the technocratic mass media environment as a deeply entangled consecrated space which is partly virtual, and where cyborgs and zombies permeate the landscape as embedded participants. This is a spectacle which raise a problematic set of implications with regard to issues such as labor rights, intellectual property, the use of one's personal image and likeness; as well as broader questions regarding the ethics of cultural engagement and appropriation, and environmental sustainability, among others. These issues are by no means obvious to the pop culture or media participant, and are in some cases even obscured by the very process to which they are pertinent. Therefore it is in the very method of disentangling the various threads which construct the process that leads one to consider them and act accordingly. While this research endeavor has admittedly fallen short of any specific indicators as to what methods one might apply or consider to this end, I sincerely hope that its findings (or, more appropriately, *mappings?*) might prove in some sense useful as a stepping stone to further considerations for our ritualistic entanglements within the cultural and new media discourses.

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