

**S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony**  
**Lecture 3: Communication Theory and Ritual Problems**

\* Now that we have tentatively come up with a tentative definition of ritual, we move on to lay out some principles and implication of communication theory by:

(1) Laying out a propositional argument of ritual as one of the strongest forms of ritual communication; and

(2) Analyzing layers of the communicative properties of ritual to understand its power

**(1) Ritual is a Communicative Form:**

\* All forms of ritual are communicative, symbolic behaviors in social situations.

\* Their movements are signs of something else. If they do not function to communicate, they do nothing.

**(2) The Effective Mechanisms of Ritual are Communication Devices**

\* The effectiveness of ritual operates through communication devices (e.g. the logic of sign systems, shared human meaning, morality, habit and cooperation)

\* Rituals work in the ways that communication works, subject to all the human failings thereof

\* Ritual is specifically one of the ways in which we say things

**(3) Ordering (and other) Effects of Ritual**

### **Are Subject to the Vicissitudes of Communication:**

- \* The meaning of a ritual is subject to interpretation
- \* The same ritual may, within social bounds, mean different things to different people and groups
- \* If ritual is a way of doing social order, its effectiveness for doing so remains subject to the vicissitudes of communication

### **(4) Symbolic Effectivity is Real Effectivity:**

- \* If rituals help social systems work, and operate through sign and meaning systems, we must take signs and meanings seriously
- \* Such communication is not only useful for doing things, sometimes it is the thing done
- \* Presenting oneself in a certain fashion may help create that reality
- \* Symbols may even affect physiology
- \* Yet the individual is not in complete control: the cultural repertoire is key.

### **(5) Socially Constructed Reality is Real Reality:**

- \* It is often hard to take symbolic effectivity seriously as it appears to have irrational or false implications
- \* Common critiques lead to either solipsism or condemnation of the arbitrary
- \* We cannot simply construct any reality we so choose (“obdurate reality”). Symbolically constructed realities are part of the environment

we must navigate

\* Dismissing an element of social reality as “socially constructed,” of an arbitrary, second class or illegitimate reality is both empirically indefensible and implicitly favors brute physicality

\* This also suggests something dark and manipulative is at play.

\* Stark dichotomies oversimplify to a fault, getting in the way of understanding ritual and communication

### **(6) Within the Limits of Communicative Effectiveness Ritual is a Strong Form:**

\* The reality of social construction is a structural phenomenon for individuals, even limiting interpretation, ritual is a strong form of communicative effectiveness

\* How does this work?

### **(7) Symbolicity and Generality:**

\* All human communication is constructed of signs

\* Signifiers are signs that stand for what they are not (the signified), to someone, for some purpose

\* Indexes are signs that depend on a causal relationship between signifier and signified

\* Icons are signs that depend on a relationship of resemblance

\* Symbols are signs that depend on a relationship of convention between signifier and signified

\* As we move from indexes to symbols, we move from the particular to the general

\* These distinctions help us understand how rituals, which gear toward transcendence of particulars, work

### **(8) Materiality and Indexicality:**

\* Ritual communication brings together inner and outer worlds by shaping material to express ideas.

\* Material elements operate causally; together they can be interpreted as indexical signs

\* Ritual is special as it brings the performance of the indexical to prominence, making it a prop of ensurance against potential indeterminateness

\* This is done through bodily participation in form

\* Balance between correctness and felicity important

\* Performative aspect is what counts, regardless of subjective feeling

\* The world as lived and imagined are fused in ritual under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms: making real in this world an ideal world

### **(9) Backward and Forward References:**

\* Rituals always refer backward to the social order in which it is embedded and forward to the world of those performing it

\* It is about both position in a cosmic order and alignment in a practical world

## **(10) The Relation of Witness and Spectator, Ritual and Spectacle:**

- \* Spectacle is often distrusted today
- \* What of the role of witness?
- \* Spectating is a mode of participation

## **(11) The Phenomenal Status of the Ritual text in the Actor's Environment:**

- \* To engage in ritual is to voluntarily submit oneself to an order of signs
- \* Interpretation is not complete freedom: ritual depends on both an actor's performance and operates as a condition of that performance

## **(12) Some Implications:**

- \* Rituals are not always substantively voluntary or representative of the actor's internal state
- \* Socialization devices can shape these without enforced coercion
- \* Proposals and responses can be structured according to consequences, role taking and role making, and subtle identity construction
- \* Because ritual performance must be according to form, it is a more constraining presence in the environment than any other form of communication