

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony
Lecture 4: Weaving the Ritual Tapestry

- * Rituals create a community stage for cultural experience, symbols and values, generating change, destroying and maintaining meaning, or all of the above.
- * Emergent patterns create a tapestry with recognizable and meaningful images and symbols
- * Sometimes this replicates patterns across boundaries, sometimes produces a reinforcing echo, and other times merge into a collage
- * “American rituals” (Deegan) emerge from hyper-modern society, growing, adapting, and disseminating with globalization
- * Yet, there is no lack of meaning, nor a morass of meaninglessness, as people construct meaning through mutual and collective action (Mead)

Critical Dramaturgy: A Theory of American Ritual Dramas:

- * Hyper-modern life is increasingly organized through theatrical metaphors controlled by elites and used to manage attitudes, behaviors and feelings
- * Deegan distinguishes participatory rituals from media-constructed rituals.
- * Participatory rituals involve everyday people in their performance, involving:
 - (1) face to face participatory interaction;
 - (2) situation in a matrix of roles, social statuses, institutions and culture; and
 - (3) are organized by a set of rules for ritual action

* Media-constructed rituals involve professional performers supported by corporate patterns of control, marketing and funding. They are:

- (1) Constructed by professionals working in the mass-media industry;
- (2) products that are presented to an audience; and
- (3) organized by a set of rules for portraying ritual action

* Combinations of the two are especially potent

* Both types are part of the leisure life, seen as less serious than work and related to “fun” - enjoyable experiences presented in a context of discrimination and technological control

* “Fun” maintains inequality and alienation as it is a temporary escape. It has a double-edged character generating resistance to domination as the “price for justice.”

* This is to be contrasted with undifferentiated play, which has been pushed to the periphery of experience

* Hyper-modern life is driven by core codes of oppression and repression that order wider cultural patterns, from face to face encounters to large social institutions (e.g. sex, class, bureaucratization and the commodification of time)

* This contrasts with the “anti-structural” nature of rituals and “communitas” in traditional societies: in hyper-modern societies many are excluded from “fun” if they are of the wrong background

A Note on American Rituals and Social Change:

* American rituals are flexible, appearing and disappearing rapidly: some fads, others fundamental to social institutions

- * Massive social change runs through much work on American ritual

Racism as a Core Code in American Ritual:

- * Schorer: white-nationalists' media-constructed rituals
- * Ball: racism linked to the cultural “good vs. evil” script

Sexism as a Core Code in American Ritual:

- * Calhoun et. al: amateur stripping as indicative of the persistence of sexism
- * Neilsen: the Miss America pageant and the “beauty code” of “winners and losers”
- * Globalization of the “meet/meat market”
- * Resistance? (e.g. beauty contests for the disabled)

American Rituals and Globalization:

- * Globalization of American movies, novels, dress and consumer images despite academic and cultural critique
- * Advancing over time (e.g. Europe)
- * Examples: Euro-Disney; Santa Claus. Both have a dark underside

American Rituals and the Sacred in Hyper-Modern Society:

- * Secular “fun” has started making inroads into religion (e.g. “contemporary services,” mega-church spectacles, the “gospel of prosperity”)

* There is a whole religious media industry that challenges traditional anti-structural codes

* There are similar variations in fantasy and sci-fi literature, some perpetuate existing structures, others are more emancipatory

* Traditional rituals can also backfire (e.g. Mexican-American girls' coming of age rituals in the context of American society today).

Conclusion:

* American rituals are flourishing, changing, and increasingly powerful

* The Ritual tapestry is being woven and re-woven constantly, often generated by and supportive of an elite that benefits from inequality and injustice

* Old ritual symbols can be co-opted or renewed; sacred life can be distorted or reinvigorated; cultural diversity can be celebrated or erased

* Ultimately rituals underscore our emotional lives and rational discourses: some liberate and connect us; others subjugate and divide.