

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 3: Communication Theory and Ritual Problems

Now that we have come up with a tentative definition of ritual as “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically affect or participate in the serious life,” we move on to lay out some principles and implications of communication theory relevant to understanding it. We do this by: (1) laying out a propositional argument regarding ritual as one of the strongest forms of effective 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. They are always written as if to be read. Regardless of its other aspects, ritual is also a way of saying.

However we may reduce the definition, we cannot go past the fact that it is a form of behavior with non-intrinsic significance. Its movements, patterns and forms have significance or meaning, independent of whatever is physically accomplished by the body movements themselves. These ritual movements are signs of something else, and it is these signs that accomplish the goals of ritual - not the mere movements in their own right (e.g. giving someone the finger). It is these signifying, communicative aspects of ritual, then, that are primary and essential. If they do not function to communicate, they do nothing.

(2) The Effective Mechanisms of Ritual are Communicative Devices:

If such signification distinguishes ritual from ordinary behavior, this also distinguishes ritual effectiveness from ordinary behavioral effectiveness. Ritual effectivity works through communicative devices. Thus if the initiation makes an ordinary man off the street into a Mason - a brother - it is through the constitutive power of symbols, speech acts, persuasion, etc. This is not mere cause and effect, not a mere behavioral phenomenon. It reflects things being worked out in the logic of sign systems, understood in terms of shared human meaning, morality, habit, and cooperation.

One implication among many is that rituals work in the way that communication works: it is subject to the ambiguities, the ups and downs of human agency, efforts, choices, interpretations, attention, biases and misunderstandings. It is not something external to human affairs, but something people do - sometimes well, other times not so well; sometimes for worthy, other times for malevolent reasons. Hence, ritual is not only ordinary and human, but specifically is one of the ways in which we say things.

(3) Ordering (and Other) Effects of Ritual Are Subject to the Vicissitudes of Communication:

As what we say must be interpreted before it can have effect, an important consideration is that the meaning of any given ritual is subject to the interpretations of its participants, witnesses, and those who remember it. Whether actively engaged in an effort at interpretation, or one's understanding is wholly reflective of one's group membership, social position, personal history, and engagements, interpretations are largely pre-judged (e.g. terms like "freedom" and "democracy" used in speeches by some great historical figure are taken out of context and used for opposing, partisan political purposes. These mean different things to people from differing social backgrounds - as does their use when political conventions are observed by proponents and opponents). If then, as we argued last class, ritual is a way of doing social order, its effectiveness in doing so remains subject to the vicissitudes of communication.

(4) Symbolic Effectivity is Real Effectivity:

If rituals serve as part of the way that social systems work, and rituals operate through sign and meaning systems, we must take the effectivity of signs and meanings seriously. Communication is not only useful for doing things ("fetch the hammer for me, I've got to hold this in place"), sometimes it is the actual act that makes things so ("I do").

Other things like speech acts go on all the time. The performance of courteousness is courteousness; symbols of power are part of the exercise of power; the regalia of office are part of the office. Within the bounds of acceptance or rejection by others in a situation, when one presents as a type of person, one is that kind of person. In effect, human behavior is symbolically conducted.

The potential of symbols to affect physiology is perhaps the strongest test of symbolic effectivity (e.g. the placebo effect, faith healing, the curing effects of shamans on believers). Two things can be learned here: (1) ritual and symbol, in the social context of supportive belief, can (though does not always) cure the sick; (2) more generally, while a key factor, the individual is not in complete control. Much depends on the quality of the ritual performance in a social context where the shaman is perhaps free to choose from the cultural repertoire, but not free to choose outside it. Much the same thing could be said about seeking a cure from an appropriately accredited physician in our society.

(5) Socially Constructed Reality is Real Reality:

If one misses the point that the individual is not entirely in control, it is hard to take symbolic effectivity seriously as it appears to have irrational or empirically false implications. If symbols effect things, and symbols depend on human performance, then it would seem individuals have that power. There are two problems here: solipsism and the condemnation of the arbitrary.

The former - solipsism - would hold that any individual can construct any reality he or she so chooses. This is not a practical position. We all face what Prus calls "obdurate reality" (e.g. we can believe with all our heart that we can fly, but jumping off a building will soon find you meeting up with a hard - and final - lesson). Beyond this, symbolically constructed realities are just as much part of our physical environment that individuals must adapt to - and work

around - as are physical ones. Languages, cultures, traditions, social roles, etc are given to us: we are natives in this land, not its creators.

The second error - condemnation of the arbitrary - is more common. Once it is stated that some element of reality has a social foundation, it is dismissed as “socially constructed” - as if it were a second class reality, merely arbitrary and with no legitimate force or effect. This is not only empirically indefensible (as cultures, beliefs and so on do have a significant impact on behavior), it also contains the unfortunate implication that the only thing to be trusted is brute physicality.

Treating symbolic realities as somehow lesser reflects the general tendency to dichotomize appearance and reality, image and substance, sign and referent, expression and the thing expressed. Applied to ritual, this would relate to claims that something dark and manipulative is “really” going on, some kind of subterfuge (e.g. the conspiracy theorists and religious fundamentalists who attack Freemasonry). However, this is communicatively naive, suggesting the function of ritual is simply to hide reality. Ritual, like any communicative form, owes its very nature to the fusing of ideas and material forms of expression, individual interpretations and collective structures of languages, symbols, and meanings, the particularities of the communicative situation and the generalities of tradition and culture. Such dichotomies oversimplify to a fault, crippling our understanding of ritual and communication.

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

If the reality of social construction is understood as a structural phenomenon for the individual, and even the range of interpretation is affected by the use of symbols, then it is clear that ritual must be a strong form of communicative effectiveness. Unlike most communication, the forms and even most interpretations of ritual are relatively invariant and traditional. If we add that ritual is usually about primordial things, making use of the most deeply encoded logics of our sign and meaning systems, built on the most basic beliefs and values, most of these structures are lost to consciousness from the earliest stages of our socialization. Collectively, these features of ritual give it greater opportunity to be effective than almost any other communicative form.

But how does all of this work? We now turn to consider the communication techniques and devices by which rituals have their effects.

(7) Symbolicity and Generality:

All human communication, including rituals, is constructed of signs (e.g. words, gestures, images). These are things that stand for something they are not, to someone, for some purpose. Their usefulness depends on it. As this relationship between signs and what they signify is central, it is helpful to distinguish between three types of sign: indexes, icons and symbols.

If the “thing which stands” is the signifier, and the “thing for which it stands” is the signified, then *indexes* can be defined as signs that depend on a causal relationship between the two. *Icons* can be defined as signs that depend on a relationship of resemblance; and *symbols* as

signs that depend on a relationship of convention between the two (e.g. smoke is an index of fire as it is caused by it; smoke in a movie is an because it resembles smoke in the audience's experience; and smoke signals are signals because the relationship between the smoke patterns and the message relates to a social convention. A similar, though more complex, example could be given of the needle on a test instrument).

Indexical signifiers are directly dependent on their *particular* signified: this smoke indicates this fire; this needle movement indicates this flow of current. Icons, however, depend on a *general* pattern instead of a particular relationship (e.g. this smoke is like smoke in general). Symbols, radically more so than icons, open a world of possibilities by breaking free of all particularities. The numbers and units of measure on the instrument dial bring needle movement into the system of arithmetic where, for example, it is not this #11, but how all #11's are the same.

Such distinctions are important for understanding how ritual works. The stuff of ritual is largely symbolic. Though indexes and icons are involved, symbols are the most common type of sign used and the most important. Ritual is about the general - in a significant way. Ritual action is oriented toward transcendence of the particularities of the situation and social circumstances in which it is performed. Rituals emphasize what is generally true, and, as a type of sign, the symbol both depends on generalization for its meaning and promotes generalization in its interpretation.

(8) Materiality and Indexicality:

But rituals also always have an indexical component. Communication, including ritual, always brings together inner and outer worlds by the shaping of material to express an idea. The material element must work through causal mechanisms (e.g. a voice may be heard or not because of the nature of sound energy; an e-mail may or may not be received due to the vicissitudes of computer technology). In turn, such material elements and their causal connections can be interpreted as indexical signs (e.g. the volume of the voice indicates the physical energy that was invested in speaking, whispers or shouts affecting the interpretation considerably). In ordinary communication we pay indexes relatively little regard, being used primarily for orientation or checking facts - such as alternating attention to speakers or seeing who said what.

What makes ritual special here is that its performative aspect gives the essential, but ordinary, indexical element of all communication a special importance. Because indexes do not have the arbitrariness of connection between signified that all symbols do, they are neither as flexible as symbols, nor as unreliable. Performance in a ritual is an index of relationship vis-a-vis the canon, the liturgy, the meaning of the ritual that is usually carried by symbols. The index of performance is a prop of ensurance against the potential indeterminateness of meaning, intention, belief, and other symbolically embedded phenomena.

Ritual cannot be performed without bodily participation, nor correctly without bodily participation according to form. As the ritual is a kind of speech act, its effectiveness depends on its relatively correct or felicitous (inspired) performance. This, interestingly, allows for subtle

innovations, and one way rituals can be classified can depend on their formal correctness or inspired felicity, their domination by liturgy or their contemporary circumstances.

Because the performative aspect of bodily participation is also an index of position vis-à-vis the meaning and effects of the ritual, the surprising result is that a participant cannot lie in ritual, or at least not ritually. Participants may or may not believe in it, but their disbelief doesn't undo what was accomplished by their participation (e.g. regardless of rituals, subjective doubts and questions, a wedding creates a married couple who can be symbolically held responsible to their status. Marriage can only be undone by another legal ritual. Similarly, not tipping one's head and looking downward in the presence of a person of higher status may be mistaken, but will still be read as an index of incompetence, disrespect, or both).

In a ritual, the world is lived and the world is imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world. This is a strange consequence of materiality - and only possible in communicative forms - because of their unique fusing of the material and the ideal (e.g. consecration). The material form becomes symbolic, according to ideas, and this is how it makes real in this world an ideal world.

(9) Backward and Forward References:

Rituals always refer in two directions: backward to the social order and culture in which the ritual is embedded, and forward to the people performing the ritual and those with whom they will interact. The former is symbolic and offers the meaning of the ritual; the latter is more indicative and offers the soon to be realized social significance of the ritual.

Many writers emphasize the backward reference, speaking, for example, of ritual being out of time, in a sacred space separated from this world, etc. This has led some to dismiss ritual as impractical, maladaptive, even dangerous. Yet this is overstated as, if nothing else, ritual serves as a communicative form for display and alignment in the present.

Ritual, then, is about both position in a cosmic order and alignment in a practical world. It embeds participants, by these two logics, into an ongoing structure: by symbol and index into past and future, origins and destinations, relatively stable meanings and more changeable significances. In effect, ritual is a communication device for uniting the ideal and the material, the general and the particular, the cosmic and the ordinary, the past and the future, the structures of history and the happenings of individual lives.

(10) The Problem of the Relation of Witness and Spectator, Ritual and Spectacle:

Over the 20th century developed a distrust of spectacle and a worry it was proliferating (e.g. political spectacle is seen cynically; sports are just for money-making; drawing attention to oneself is seen as giving one reason to be embarrassed). The spread of spectacle has been taken as evidence of its debasement (e.g. the electronic media is often trusted less than print).

Enter the role of witness. This is often prescribed in rituals and a form of participation (e.g. wedding guests). But what if a ritual has an audience that is not required to witness? How is

this different? Is spectating categorically opposed to participation?

First, we must remember that spectating is a mode of access. If one's participation goes no further, then the meaning of participation will likely be thinner and its effectiveness small. Yet spectating can provide access to other modes of participating: viewers engagement of festivals, rituals and other social forms (e.g. collectively watching the twin towers fall had major effects on people; the ritual enactment of emotion by fans at sports events; the engagement of Masons on the benches awaiting dramatic moments in degree work).

Thus there is too much casualness in the use of the word spectator and in discussions of spectacle. A spectator is almost never simply looking at something. Rather, most forms of spectatorship are socially prescribed and performed roles and forms of communication. The spectator is not simply a viewer, but a participant in a larger system and another part of certain ritual forms.

(11) The Phenomenal Status of the Ritual Text in the Actor's Environment:

To engage in ritual is to voluntarily submit oneself to the order of signs. Usually one is a member of the community for whom the order of signs is powerful. Rituals vary in formality, of course, but in all there is an emphasis on form, on the sequence of signs. This necessity of this sequence is independent of the will of the actor.

Yet signs work through the will of the individual and there thus is an element of contingency in their ordering power. Ritual signs require our interpretation for their meanings to have a lived presence, and interpretation is a gift of the actor - not a condition of the situation. Yet, once that moment is gone, the order of the signs is as it must and not as we choose it to be.

Indeed, it is because of the stability of sign meanings and uses across individual uses and users that signs are meaningful and useful. Second, anything said or done by another is a condition in an actor's environment, becoming, regardless of how we interact with it, part of our mutually constructed social world. Third, while we can interpret works of art, drama and literature, our interpretation does not change the physical, textual object itself. It will not answer, adapt or interact on that basis. It will not bend to any and every reader's will.

Ritual is relatively unique among communication forms in that it simultaneously depends on an actor's performance and operates as a condition on that performance, narrowing the range of the actor's choices.

There are many text-objects for which a community sanctions only a narrow range of interpretation or response (the national anthem in the US). In such cases, the text-object is being treated in a more ritualistic way: the actor's experience is less that of an audience and more a participant).

Less common are rituals for which community sanction has lost its power (e.g. attending religious services as a form of entertainment, then the ritual is a textual object engaged merely for entertainment value and questions of representation, along with transcendent value, become

moot.

However, when participants operate within the order of the ritual and the sanction of the community, the syntax of the signs - and most of their interpretation - is fixed. Communication theory helps reveal what a unique situation that is.

(12) Some Implications of the Peculiar Phenomenal Status of Ritual:

Rituals are not always substantively voluntary performances or representative expressions of the internal states of an actor. They can be used as socialization devices to shape these, but would not work without some voluntary participation on his/her part. If the importance of behavior according to ritual form could be exhausted by its enforced social conformity, there would be no difference between it and social coercion. Yet, in a socializing ritual, an authority introduces the idea of behavior according to ritual form, but this gradually becomes internalized such that actors make their own choices to behave according to form.

Ritual as display works by making the internal states of the actor public; the socialization and subordination functions of ritual make public states internal. Think of alternating lines, where one is a proposal and one's response refers to acceptances, rejections, and amendments of identities in play. If done in ritual form between a subordinate and a superior, where the former initiates and the latter runs the risk of subordination if s/he does not accept (e.g. a child's teacher and the child), not running the risk obligates the student to the performance of a role. Because we are supposed to be who our behaviors imply that we are, performing a role obligates us to be it.

Such a simple example cries out for detailed analyses of real situations, but nevertheless serves as an effective illustration of ritual in the world of communication. Because it appears as communication, ritual does not exist without someone's performance, and that performance operates as an index of their acceptance. Because ritual performance must be according to form, it is a more constraining presence in the environment than any other form of communication.