

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 4: Weaving the Ritual Tapestry

Rituals, by their nature, create a community stage for cultural experience, symbols and values. They can generate change, destroy and maintain meaning, and in the U.S. as Deegan notes, engage in them all rapidly at the same time. The patterns emerging from this complex dynamic create a tapestry with recognizable and meaningful images and symbols. Sometimes this results in a replication of rules and values across widely scattered groupings of diverse participants. Sometimes they produce an echo reinforcing each other; sometimes they meld into a collage with a barely discernable unexpected pattern for social behavior. The tapestry is woven from these echoes and clashes, where everyday life makes sense even though at times alienating and unstable.

“American rituals,” Deegan says, emerge from a hyper-modern society where multiple rules and meanings flourish in a fast-paced, new version of modernity. One characteristic is that such rituals can be transplanted to other cultures where they can grow and adapt in turn. Some people in other cultures find these rituals dangerous and destabilizing, while other adopt them to fit a different, new ritual tapestry of their own (e.g. eating at McDonalds).

Yet, unlike the postmodernists who see society as capable of endless possible interpretations and meanings, reflecting a structural difference of irrationality where life is rootless, fragmented, manipulated and different from appearances, Deegan believes this inaccurate, itself a source of alienation and anomie. As complex and sometimes bizarre as our rituals often are, we find and create our culture every day through ritual. As did George Herbert Mead, she believes that humans have the capacity to take the role of the other, to create meaning through mutual and collective action.

Critical Dramaturgy: A Theory of American Ritual Dramas:

Hyper-modern life is increasingly organized on the basis of theatrical metaphors that are controlled by anonymous and powerful elites. A dramaturgical society is one in which the technologies of social science, mass communication, theater, and the arts are used to manage attitudes, behaviors, and feelings of the population in modern, mass society. Such techniques provide images of equality, democracy and service while advancing the vested interests of the elite.

The structure of everyday life in such societies is manipulated by elites who control symbols and images of the self and community that are incorporated into ritual events and products. An emancipatory community based on democratic control could be achieved, however, but first we need to understand how inequality and alienation are incorporated into rituals and how human experiences emerge from them.

Deegan researched this emancipatory potential in 2 major forms of American ritual. The first is participatory rituals involving everyday people in its performance (e.g. amateur sporting events, poker parties, picnics, etc that are often organized through families or voluntary, community

associations). Secondly, there are media constructed rituals with professional performers supported by corporate patterns of control, marketing and funding (e.g. music videos, popular magazines, TV, film, corporate web-sites, etc). Combinations of these two types are particularly potent and capable of generating deep emotions, devotion, even frenzy (e.g. sports events, concerts, Star Trek conventions). The former type (1) involves face-to-face, participatory interaction; (2) is situated in a matrix of roles, social statuses, institutions and culture; and (3) are organized by a set of rules for ritual action. The latter are (1) constructed by professionals who work 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.

Both types are intended to be part of the leisure life, thus viewed as less serious than work. They generate a typical experience called “fun,” itself a product of hyper-modern society. Deegan argues that “fun” involves enjoyable experiences presented in a context of discrimination and technological control - more an appearance than a reality of playfulness. Indeed, it allows partial incorporation into the group, but maintains inequality and alienation because it only seductively creates the appearance of an escape from these problems. It is a great contrast to the nature of work, and thus strongly defended by alienated individuals resistant to any critique of the structural inequalities incorporated in the production of their good times.

Fun in North America is considered a dimension of private life, supposedly insulated from public control or critique. Yet it predictably only generates short-lived, incomplete escapes from mundane routine, simultaneously strengthening and reproducing the core oppressions and repressions of everyday life. Habermas, who has studied this, advocates “communicative competence,” a skilled participation in social decision-making, as a mechanism to better connect individuals with the larger social group. The current nature of “fun” stands in the way as those who resist ending social injustice fear that their sources of enjoyment will be taken away as the “price for justice.”

Still, American fun gives consumers ritual experiences that have their attractions despite the alienation. This double-edged feature characterizes most media-constructed rituals, those where the core codes, pervasive and significant rules organizing everyday life are incorporated through ritual play. This has gone so far that the delightful, liminal joy of undifferentiated play not structured along sex and class lines or unbounded by time rules or bureaucratic scoring rules seems puzzling to many. The increasing pressure to have fun has all but pushed genuine play to the peripheries of experience.

Hyper-modern life and the rituals that give it meaning is driven by core codes of oppression and repression that order a wide range of cultural patterns, from brief, face-to-face encounters to enduring, large-scale social institutions. Four core codes (sex, class, bureaucratization and the commodification of time) in particular, give recognizable contours to today’s American rituals and contribute to the seductive character of fun - structuring everyday life and the larger social system.

Rituals in traditional societies use anti-structural rules, guidelines different from the everyday, to order action and meaning during that extraordinary period of activity. Rituals in hyper-modern society, however, mix anti-structure and structure to attach emotions and social

meaning to everyday rules of oppression and repression. Globalization through market forces exacerbates and accelerates all of this by disseminating the core codes through fun around the world.

Thus, while Turner portrays traditional societies as generating a “*communitas*” experience through anti-structure (i.e. where each participant’s essential humanity is recognized and shared *across* social boundaries), in hyper-modern societies many people are excluded from the fun rituals if they are of the “wrong” sex, race, class or social status. Indeed, many more grounds of exclusion exist.

A Note on American Rituals and Social Change:

American rituals are highly flexible, appearing and vanishing quite rapidly. Some are fads while others are linked to fundamental social institutions, though also in flux. These affect the very foundations of American society (e.g. funerals being affected by changing family structures and religious secularization). Massive social change runs through much work on American ritual, from changing definitions of the Sacred, morality, styles of wedding and religious worship, the introduction of pop culture characters into ceremonies, etc.). All invite us to think about the growing complexity of the American ritual tapestry.

Racism as a Core Code in American Ritual:

One core code, racism, is explored by Schorer, who considers the hyper-modern forms of racism found in white nationalists’ media-constructed rituals who draw on technology to disseminate traditional, formulaic hate and fear - in the process expanding the old face-to-face practices that groups like the Klan used in the old days. As well, Ball examines the core code of racism with a philosophical analysis of evil connected to the American dream. He argues the fit between the scrip of “good vs. evil” makes it hard to eradicate racism in sports like wrestling and even video games, where anyone or anything considered evil can be justifiably destroyed.

Sexism as a Core Code in American Ritual:

Sexism as a core code is discussed by several authors. Calhoun et.al. review amateur stripping, ritualized behavior, at least in part voluntary, that poses problems of determining how liberated these women are. Who is enjoying this? What does this say about changes in women’s status? Do they challenge repressive norms of self-presentation, or is it just porn? The challenge in this work is to confront how sexism is ritually supported by many while condemned by others. Another writer, Nielsen, similarly studies sexism in the ogling and “beauty code” inherent to the Miss America Pageant, a competition where “winners and losers” are sorted, intellect and critical thought are disdained, and the sweetness of front-stage performances are offset by “bitchy competitiveness” backstage.

Sexist rituals of one sort or another are shared increasingly due to globalization, international corporate sponsors who expert American rituals, core codes and “fun.” This goes beyond pageants to include meet/meat markets of singles bars where people and sexuality are implicitly commodified. Nevertheless, sometimes things can be turned on their head, such as in

the innovative idea of beauty contests for physically disabled women, or programs that help teach young girls positive body image.

American Rituals and Globalization:

Incredibly powerful, American rituals of fun are evident in the widespread distribution of movies, novels, television, dress and consumer images. Even despite academic critique in other nations, there remains an undertone of welcoming, even celebration in unexpected quarters (e.g. academic conferences). This indicates an increasing Americanization process in dress, language, symbols, media and everyday interactions. Deegan noticed, for example, a big difference in her separate visits to certain countries in the 1970's and 1990's (e.g. American cars and music many places in Germany; paying for "authentic" local experiences; bus tours of wealthy Americans with "scheduled free times" insulating tourists from locals who themselves, ironically, consume and reflect American culture).

American rituals are attractive internationally as they emerge from and help create a hyper-modern society. More stable, traditional societies with an existing hyper-modern element of their own can more quickly adapt to American rituals (e.g. much of Western Europe, where Disney Paris ultimately succeeded despite some early disdain). Altman is fascinated by this transplantation and ultimate, yet complex transformation of Disney in the context of French culture, where infantilization of participants remains the common thread. Another child-oriented ritual, studied by Larsen, is the mythic figure of Santa Claus, more and more the central figure in American Christmas celebrations that has been marketed and globalized around the world. While criticism is seen by Americans as mean-spirited, this belies the dark underbelly of this image that internationally oppresses the poor by beguiling them to buy gifts they cannot afford.

American Rituals and the Sacred in Hyper-Modern Society:

American religious institutions compete with a secular society that promises fun and meaning through popular culture. Blasi has studied how this has even come to pervade formerly traditional religious activities, mixed with fun to attract audiences. The previously anti-structural nature of traditional religions this comes to incorporate core codes from everyday life and culture - bureaucratic ones or even ones fostering inequality (e.g. the "gospel of prosperity"). This is underscored by the vast media industry of religious TV, radio and other media with a cast of professional performers, etc. There is thus a move of the secular into the sacred where religion as play challenges its core anti-structural codes.

Relatedly, fantasy and sci-fi series by American storytellers that explore the boundaries of danger and adventure often mix structural and anti-structural, fun and liminality, good over evil. While a mix with pervasive cultural elements despite the alternate settings, and some are predominantly reproductive of disempowering myths some go further to suggest heroes that succeed despite multiple disadvantages, continuing sacred, liberating myths in hyper-modern, secular societies.

Rapidly Changing American Rituals:

Death is one of life's greatest mysteries and challenges, and all societies have some sort of ritual. Yet American rituals are problematic due to the tension between the desire for life to mean something coupled with common avoidance of death. Thus, funerals are often alienating, expensive and conflictual, with the rapidly changing structure of the American family adding to the mix (e.g. the "ex wife at the funeral" confronts competing teams of mourners engaged in a self-presentational "community production ritual." Beyond this, the typical U.S. funeral is a capitalist product orchestrated by a "dramaturgical industry" that combines structural, bureaucratic and economic rules with the management of dramatic effect. Beyond the many sectors of the economy involved, TV advertizing has become increasingly sophisticated, now selling the idea that future corpses are responsible for their own funerals. Nevertheless, there are hierarchies involved, such that ex-spouses and undesirables may - and have - been excluded either socially, or by the click of a mouse.

Other groups undergoing rapid and bewildering change include minority women. Thus, some Mexican-American girls who traditionally underwent a rite of passage that ratified for family and friends that they were ready to enter the adult world, this becomes problematic in the world of American adolescents where high school girls who try to behave as adults often end up single mothers, stigmatized and held back in the wider society and reproducing its stereotypes to boot. This poses difficult questions as to how these traditional celebrations should be handled today.

Conclusion:

Research on American rituals often poses more questions than it resolves, which reflects, in turn, their rapidly changing nature and the diverse backgrounds of analysts. Yet American rituals are flourishing, changing, and increasingly powerful.

The American ritual tapestry is being woven and re-woven constantly. It is understandable and subject to community control and interpretation. Thus racism and sexism are not necessary core codes but specific rules that are maintained and elaborated through the ritual acts and emotions of millions, as noted above. Regardless of form, ideology that justifies and organizes American rituals is often generated by an elite that benefits from the maintenance of inequality and injustice, extended through the means of new media that strengthen new patterns of love or hatred.

Old ritual symbols may be co-opted to serve the functions of international economies (e.g. Santa), or renewed and invigorated through writers and media outlets. Sacred life can be limited and distorted by new religious practices incorporating entertainment and core codes, or reinvigorated by thoughtful writers. Cultural diversity can be celebrated or erased through lack of support and organized efforts.

American rituals are extremely adaptable, yet underscore, even constitute our emotional lives and rational discourses. Democratic community rituals can liberate everyday life and connect the individual to the group. Many American rituals do the opposite. They need more discussion, debate, analysis and resistance to their dramaturgic and manipulated presentations. Understanding who we are requires new rules, not a knee-jerk return to a mythical past that

never really was. Indeed, if we are ever to offset the dark side of American rituals, we must incorporate broad social changes into any new forms, otherwise efforts may be irrelevant, unattractive, and find us ending up essentially where we already are.