

SEARCHING FOR FORM IN A MEDIA-SATURATED WORLD

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To start with an admission: I fully recognise that when, as a media theorist, I've tried to borrow concepts from anthropology to understand something distinctive about the distinctive conditions of intensely mediated societies (and indeed an intensely mediated world) I've probably unwittingly been intruding into the rightful space of anthropologists! But that's not been my aim – my aim has simply been to understand better some (to me strange) aspects of contemporary mediated societies such as Britain. Admittedly a disciplinary border raid, but perhaps it follows that if media theorists 'steal' terms that anthropologists are heartily sick of and that lie gathering dust by the roadside, there's no need for us to apologise! (Equally, to turn the metaphor more positively, we might, as Mihai Coman suggests, retrospectively redefine the border raid, as the opening of new shared territory in the border zone between broader anthropology and broader media research: 'media anthropology').

I've used anthropological theory (not just the term 'ritual', but also crucially the term 'ritualisation' from Catherine Bell) to try and tell a better story about media and media's entanglements in contemporary social order, or at least tendencies to order. Eric Rothenbuhler in the recent online seminar hit the nail on the head – the reason media theorists are turning to anthropology is to find concepts that might explain form. Or, as I would prefer to put it, tendencies towards form (formalisation).

For as Daniel Taghioff pointed out in the seminar there are many uncertainties about whether form is achieved on particular occasions, or whether particular tendencies to form are stable. This last point, however, is not at all disabling for those wanting to use the term ritual any more than (post-Giddens) the need for the continual reproduction of social 'structure' (structuration) undermines the idea that there are tendencies to structure in contemporary societies. True, as Daniel also pointed out, we have to drop the idea that 'ritual' is some fixed survival from the ancient past - I

could not agree more, the tendencies to form we are looking at are tied in not with an ancient past, but with the pressures towards order in modernity and late modernity. But Catherine Bell's introduction of the term 'ritualisation' (eg in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* Oxford University Press, New York 1992) for me overcomes any residual problems with the term 'ritual' (used by itself) by linking the temporary and occasional achievements of stable form in ritual to a much wider hinterland where the terms/ categories/ bodily distinctions (on which ritual practice relies) are generated, learned and in less formal ways reproduced or 'kept in play'.

Ritualisation is also helpful because, as Bell develops it, the term right away links with wider questions of power and government. And here I unashamedly follow Bloch and Bourdieu in being interested in ritual/ ritualisation, as form/ tendencies towards form that involve 'the use of form for power' (Bloch).

When however we introduce power into our thinking about ritual (in my case media ritual, but maybe it applies more widely, if the term ritual still has any wider use), a key adjustment follows, in my view. It becomes less important to emphasise the instabilities and interpretative openness of particular rituals/ forms in particular locations, and more important to look for the overriding rigidities that may serve power. Here I find the term 'naturalisation' helpful – a term that so far hasn't come up in the online discussion – but I recognise that it has certain problems, not least the assumption that we can decide unanimously on what counts as non-nature! So it may be that Guido Ipsen's introduction of the term 'convention' is more helpful. I particularly like his comment a few days ago that: 'conventions can be so strong that we are, sometimes even despite our own efforts as researchers to remain objective, driven to understand 'natural' or 'causal' relationships when there are none in truth. Hence the analysis of the ritual involves a highly elaborated deconstruction of the myth of causality' – or at least the deconstruction of a certain idea of social causality linked to functionalism etc.

So, to sum up so far, my suggestion for media theorists is to think about 'media rituals' as the (occasional but highly ordered) results of some much wider tendencies towards form within mediated societies, which depend (although there's been no time to get into details) on key distinctions and hierarchies linked to media (such as the

media/ ordinary person distinction which I've argued underlies the contemporary notion of celebrity). But so far, I've not done much more than repeat the argument of my book *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, except perhaps to bring in the notion of 'convention' alongside naturalisation.

What, more broadly, are the possibilities for research, if you accept this particular use of the word 'ritual' in media research?

First, as Ursula Rao suggested in her very useful introduction of Handelman into the debate, to look in much more detail at the varying ways in which order/form is achieved and ritualisation works across societies as a whole. Ironically Handelman ditches the term 'ritual' (maybe he means the older more fixed notion of ritual?) but it's clear he's interested in tendencies towards form and order, and their linkage to, and orchestration by, states. Maybe, as Ursula suggests, we should look again at Handelman's distinctions between events that model/ present/ represent to explore the different ways in which media rituals, once stabilised, can have wider consequences.

Second, there is the question of how much the term media ritual allows us to connect together – clearly it makes no sense to start using the term 'ritual' so broadly that it quickly (again!) loses any specificity. There's a similar danger, I fear, in the way Douglas Kellner (*Media Spectacle*, Routledge 2003) uses the broad term 'spectacle' to develop a notion of 'a networked entertainment society' based on spectacle's universal production and consumption – covering everything from sport to Hollywood to war to symbolic politics.

Which raises a third challenge, that emerged in the interesting exchange last week between Eric Rothenbuhler and Daniel Taghioff around what are the conditions/ the evidential criteria that would enable us to say with confidence: this formalised action is concerned with 'the serious life' (Durkheim) or whatever other large reference-point we see lurking behind the patterns of ritual? That is difficult; it's here I believe where the term ritualisation is as important as the term ritual, but equally this is where we need more and more detailed accounts from the field that test out whether in the end (as is always possible – and as Mark Hobart has so powerfully argued on many occasions) the idea of ritual/ media ritual more is the projection of theorists (or other

interested institutions!) rather than something recognised in, let alone embedded within, actual practice. Time – and more debate and research – will tell.

References

Catherine Bell (1992) *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* Oxford University Press, New York.

Nick Couldry, (2003) *Media Rituals: a critical approach*. London: Routledge.

Don Handelman (1998) *Models and Mirrors*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Berg.

Douglas Kellner (2003) *Media Spectacle*, London: Routledge.