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Trying to Make a Difference with “Ritual Design”

The papers presented at the Ritual Design panel were largely oriented towards pushing the “ritual dynamics” envelope: granted that ritual innovation is the norm rather than the exception, just how innovative can a ritualist afford to be? What myriad forms can ritual creativity take? This accounts in part for the diverse and somewhat outlandish character of some of the topics: ritual activities at a Marian shrine in India, Christmas celebrations among “ordinary” Swiss families, Masonic rites in France, but also newly crafted funerary ceremonies, as well as various Neopagan, New Age, on-line, fictional, and artistic ritualisations involving such unlikely non-human entities as digital parishioners (and their ghosts), reprogrammable cellular memories, Vulcan Starfleet officers, and Cinderella look-alike goddesses. The whole shebang was both intellectually challenging and great fun, and there is no way that I am going to be able to stuff all that exuberant toothpaste back into the rigorous analytical tube from whence it came.

From the onset, the notion of “ritual design” was used to subsume a wide range of innovative processes: incremental transformation, deliberate revival, speculative re-creation, intentional invention, and so forth. One happy result of this was that the various case-studies discussed were tacitly posited as theoretically equivalent, the implication being that it was analytically expedient to consider them all as instances of ritual practice.¹ However, while this was self-evident for some cases, for others, such as “human potential”-based teacher training, artistic initiatives on All Souls’ Day, or the use of on-line ceremonial prescripts, it was much less so, although the ways in which these latter activities diverged from more canonical sorts of ritual events remained unclear. The problems raised by such possible divergences, barely addressed during the panel sessions, continue to badger me: might attending to ritual design point to essential differences between distinct modes of ritualisation, or even to the limits of ritualisation itself? This question lies at the heart of the envelope-pushing issue: how far can ritual dynamics press on in the “dynamic” direction before “ritual” gets left behind?

¹ Similarly, other concepts recently introduced within the ritual dynamics paradigm, such as “ritual transfer” (Langer et al. 2006) or “patchwork ritual” (Radde-Antweiler 2006), have been mobilised chiefly to legitimise heretofore marginalised or discredited ceremonial phenomena; their use thus tends to emphasise continuities rather than discontinuities.

In other words, are there important conceptual distinctions worth making within the field of ritual design: should some kinds of innovation be deemed more radically innovative than others? In a nutshell, the question is Gregory Bateson's: what difference makes a difference?² Is there some empirical novelty pertaining to ritual design that implies a significant discrimination on the level of ritual theory?

One possible candidate is simply the presence of change. However, as a discriminating criterion, this is a total non-starter. As has often been stressed, all ritual performances are continually evolving over time, existing patterns of ceremonial action being progressively reshaped as a function of ongoing transformations in the larger social field. Jan Snoek's account of changing Masonic rites, and especially Matthias Frenz's analysis of contested space at the Marian sanctuary of Velankanni, provided examples of this type of ongoing ritual reconfiguration. Moreover, on another, less historical level, no two ritual performances are ever strictly alike, if for no other reason than because from one performance to the next, the participants are either different people or the same people who, for any number of reasons (such as their participation in prior ritual performances), don't act in exactly the same way. I cannot but wield the sacrificial knife differently, both from the way you do and from the way I used to when I was younger – to say nothing of the fact that the goat to be immolated is different every time. Because rituals are not undertaken theoretically, but by particular persons in particular times and places, they always incorporate a measure of creativity and improvisation.

In this light, practitioners' claims of ritual invariance are worthy of attention. In many cases, as in both the above-mentioned examples, ritual participants maintain that the modifications their rituals may have undergone are but contingent aspects of ceremonial events whose essential nature has remained unchanged. The ability to make such assertions is upheld by considerable cultural work, pertaining, among other things, to the organisation of the ritual performances themselves. This is not the place to elaborate further on this idea. Let it suffice to remark that such statements amount to saying that, while innovation may be present (indeed, it is often readily admitted to), it is in no way constitutive of the ritual's efficacy as such: it is held to contribute only very marginally to what makes the ritual in question the extra-ordinary enactment that it is deemed to be.

What about deliberate innovation? Intuitively, this seems a more likely possibility: taking a conscious decision to modify one's ritual behaviour surely betokens a watershed of sorts. Well, not really. To begin with, as Simone Heidbrink had occasion to remark during a discussion, basing a conceptual distinction on speculations regarding participants' states of mind is a hazardous undertaking at best: how does one go about evaluating the extent of their premeditated intention to introduce

2 Bateson 1972: 453.

change? But, above all, the fact is that most, if not all ritual innovations, such as those already alluded to, involve a fair amount of conscious deliberation on the part of those concerned. Indeed, rituals are social practices and, as such, their evolution typically entails such mindful activities as confrontation, factionalism, wilful intimidation, soliciting support, negotiation, and compromise. I am tempted to suggest that, as a rule, people are at least as thoughtful about their rituals as they are, say, about their cooking. Ceremonial changes, like culinary experiments, may be prompted by boredom, elicited by others’ desires, or dictated by happenstance (having no rice, I use pasta; in the absence of a cow, I sacrifice a cucumber); they never “just happen”. To use a more contemporary vocabulary, ritual innovation, as suggested, for example, by Roland Hauri-Bill’s survey of family Christmas rituals in Switzerland, is an inherently reflexive, context-dependant process.

A third imaginable criterion for a radical distinction within the framework of ritual design is purposeful invention. It seems reasonable to expect a newly created ritual to be of a markedly different nature than one hallowed by enduring practice. Although I initially imagined this to be the case, the introductory talks by the panel’s co-organisers, Gregor Ahn and Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, as well as the discussion that followed, convinced me of just how difficult it is to draw a line between innovation and invention in so far as ritual design is concerned. First of all, as Gregor Ahn made clear, this distinction depends a great deal on one’s point of view, for what may appear to be a freshly forged ceremony for an outside party may be conceived by its practitioners as a reworking of an already existing rite. In addition, the very process of ritual crafting, because it invariably incorporates some sort of ritual transfer, makes such a discrimination highly problematic. Typically, “invented” rituals are composed by relating bits and pieces, gathered from a variety of sources, to a more or less familiar ritual schemata or frame. This also came out clearly, for example, in Thomas Quartier’s account of contemporary funeral design in the Netherlands. Moreover, as Kerstin Radde-Antweiler showed for newly minted rituals posted on personal web-sites, pre-existing ritual schemata and their attendant, often exotic religious traditions can be convoked in the absence of any substantive knowledge by even the slightest, most superficial of references. As a consequence, no newly conceived ritual can be said to be totally original; it always refers, either explicitly or implicitly, directly or obliquely, to some pre-existing ceremonial performance.³ The same applies to made-up rituals in fictional accounts (e.g. the cinematographic re-embodiment rites analysed by Gregor Ahn), to novel on-line ceremonies (e.g. vendor-machine worshipping in Simon Jenkins’ Church of Fools), and to ritual enactments drawing simultaneously on several different cultural traditions (e.g. the Milky Way Phantasy described by Inken Prohl and “Ger-

3 Such self-referential circuits cannot but contribute to validating the newly “invented” practices in question as instances of “ritual”.

manic” Neopagan rites outlined by Rene Gründer). In short, as several panel members insisted, rituals are never concocted from scratch.

So wherein lies the difference that makes a difference? It is not novelty itself (all rituals change), nor is it deliberate innovation (all ritual change is intentional), nor even outright invention (all rituals are to some extent derivative). Another possibility, if creativity is indeed a constant feature of ritual, is that this difference pertains to the positive or negative role that innovation is expected to play in ritual performance.

As previously mentioned in connection with Masonic ceremonies and Marian devotions at Velankanni, many rituals disregard, impugn, or challenge the changes they nevertheless undergo. Both participants’ accounts and ritual organisation itself bear witness to the fact that innovation is held to be largely contingent; it is not presumed to be constitutive of the performance’s distinctive effectiveness as ritual. This makes sense, given that this efficacy is alleged to proceed above all from the accomplishment of certain fairly mysterious acts (by the standards of everyday behaviour) – carrying the Virgin’s chariot, prostrating oneself before Mary’s standard, wearing emblematic aprons, etc. – handed down by more authoritative Others (ancestors, divinities, cult founders, church leaders, etc.) and having operative value in and of themselves.

Other rituals, on the contrary, explicitly endorse and encourage innovation. They proceed from the notion that creativity is a necessary, pivotal feature of ritual practice, essential to its effectiveness as such. This applies, for example, to the New Age “spiritualised practices” described by Anne-Christine Hornborg, to the Milky Way Phantasy pilgrimages presented by Inken Prohl, and to the Neopagan ceremonies discussed by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and René Gründer. In all these cases, ritual potency is deemed to rely less on the faithful repetition of certain conventional items of behaviour than on the participants’ experiencing certain equally conventional, albeit somewhat enigmatic, feelings and motivations – unconditional love, the vibration of universal prayer, an intimate connection with nature, spiritual community, etc. – ascribed, here also, to more authoritative Others (one’s “inner” Self, extra-terrestrial fantasy-castle princesses, Celtic druids, ancestral Norsemen, etc.). Although, in fact, practitioners make use of a limited number of recurrent images, formulae, spatial setups, and scenarios, they are expected to exercise considerable imagination and creativity in accommodating their ceremonial practices to their personal sensibilities and circumstances. This is because participants do not envisage their ritual activities as ends in themselves (archetypal actions), but as the means whereby certain exemplary emotional and intentional dispositions may become their own. In this perspective, established religious traditions, the participants’ own or others, are seen as providing not models to follow, but resources to be inventively explored. Hence the byword of ritual traditions of this type, the

symmetrical inverse of assertions to the effect that rituals never change: “Do whatever works best for you”.

My suggestion, then, is that ritual design is structured around two poles representing two rather different modes of ritualisation: change-eschewing on the one hand, and change-embracing on the other, the former organised around the repetition of complex actions, the latter around the re-actualisation of complex dispositions.⁴

There were some interestingly ambiguous cases among the materials presented. For example, it is very difficult to position the rituals composed by contemporary funeral designers in the Netherlands (Thomas Quartier’s talk), mostly because descriptions of the ceremonies themselves were lacking, as was also the case for Roland Hauri-Bill’s Swiss Christmas celebrations. A particularly intriguing case, presented by Erik de Maaker, was that of Dutch artists who created various installations on All Souls’ Day in order to elicit people’s feelings and to provide them “with the ritual means to commemorate the dead”. As the testimonies show, at least some participants were deeply moved. Human-like statues of white wax, for example, lit from within by burning candles that caused them to slowly melt, evoked both bodily deterioration and the presence of souls. However, this is precisely what art is supposed to do: induce complex emotional and intentional states *in others*. For an artistic installation to also make sense as ritual, the exemplary feelings occasioned by the artists’ works would have to provide the participants with the grounds for undertaking exceptional enactments *of their own* whose performance is presumed to be able to affect them in extra-ordinary ways. In the annual Milky Way Phantasy described by Inken Prohl, for example, artistic performances are pursued to create an “aesthetic sensation” among the participants that sustains their ceremonial building of a fairy-tale castle, in whose construction the participants are able to “feel the Gods”. In this perspective, the All Souls’ installations made use of what we might call the idiom of ritual, but fell short of full-fledged ritualisation. Some works, however, came closer than others. In “Objects of Remembrance”, for instance, the artist provided bereaved individuals with a collection of disparate objects from which one was chosen and placed, along with a written message to or about the deceased, in a memorial box destined, for the space of an evening, to be displayed and shared with others. One would need to know more about exactly how objects were selected and messages were written, as well as the ways in which

4 For a fuller account of the distinction between these two ritual modes, see Houseman 2007. It is perhaps worth noting the extent to which Simon Jenkins’ online Church of Fools abounds in stipulated, often equivocal gestures: kneeling, the “hallelujah” pantomime, injunctions to “please use ‘tear hair out’ gesture as we think of them”, shaking hands with co-participants who are invisible to all except themselves, etc. As ritual (and not as a spectacle or a play for example), I would situate it firmly in the action-centred, change-disregarding ceremonial camp.

participants (and others) talked about what was being done, to be able to judge to what degree installations such as this allowed people to forge not only a renewed connection with their departed intimates, but also a renewed *ritual* relationship with them.

The half-baked, two-pole model of ritual design proposed above is, of course, not the final answer to anything. I have introduced it mainly as a way of underlining certain of the theoretical issues raised by the notion of “ritual design”: What are its limits? What conceptual distinctions does it imply? Specifically, how should we discriminate among “designed” ceremonial practices that range from Marian pilgrimages to spiritual therapies for developing one’s inner potential to yet other instances of contrived expressive behaviour? I would like to conclude by encouraging those who would tackle such questions, especially the last of them, to avoid a number of easy answers. I can think of at least three.

One is to say that it’s all ritual, loosely defined as symbolic practice. Using “ritual” in such a casual way, “as a metaphor for all kinds of experience” (as Felicia Hughes-Freeland rightly remarked in another panel session), may be fine for practitioners, but a real cop-out for those who make a living conceptualising about this sort of thing. The fact is that for “ritual” and its related terms to have any analytical (as opposed to evocative) value they must be closely defined. There are risks involved, but hey, they’re only academic.⁵

A second type of evasive manoeuvre consists in being satisfied with labels: let’s call some things “ritual” and other things, say, “ceremony”, or some things “ritual” and other things “ritualised”. All this is well and good if we know (and say) exactly what we mean by such categories; if not, their introduction amounts to a pragmatic stop-gap solution (I study ritual, you work on ceremonies) to theoretical quandaries that remain intact.

A third easy way out is to take an insufficiently thought-out relativist position: if “they” call it ritual, then it should be considered ritual. The problem, of course, is that as a rule, “they” don’t call anything “ritual”. “They” make use of any number of local terms, often pertaining to quite different realms of experience, to refer to what we researchers, for either ethnocentric or theoretical reasons (it’s either one or the other), lump together as “ritual”. It should be noted in passing that taking this into account has a troubling implication when applied to contemporary Western societies: that fact that we Westerners do or don’t call certain practices “ritual” is not particularly relevant in determining that which should be legitimately studied as such.

5 I personally find the “polythetic” or “fuzzy set” approach to the definition of ritual (for example Snoek 2006) to be uncomfortably close to this loose “it’s all ritual” strategy. Specifically, it tends to turn a useful methodological precept that allows people to talk together without being hampered by arduous definitional issues, into a dull conceptual tool.

One alternative to these overly simplistic approaches, I would suggest, is to begin, somewhat artificially, by positing certain manifestly heterogeneous phenomena, such as change-dismissing and change-promoting ceremonial practices, as “ritual” in the strictest, fullest sense of the word. This shifts the analytical burden squarely onto the shoulders of the researcher, where it belongs. The question then becomes a potentially constructive one: what conceptualisation of “ritual” do we need in order to be able to account for both their similarities and their divergences as the interdependent features of a single model?

I have tried to show that the concept of “ritual design” raises pressing questions about the very nature of ritual practice. In precluding the easiest of (false) solutions to these questions, all the while having no conclusive answers to offer, I have tried my best to paint us all not so much into an analytical corner, as to the edge of a conceptual cliff. So please let me end on a positive note by borrowing from a legendary blooper: the time has come for ritual studies to take a big step forward!

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