

Lorenzo Buj

1.

This volume is built around the idea that ritual isn't what it used to be, or more precisely, that it never was "what it used to be," and that this discovery, now over a third of a century in the making, is still fresh and very much in the forefront of ritual studies today. There is much to be said for such a situation, for it puts the study of ritual into a relatively free and unsponsored position, where disciplinary boundaries may and must be violated as the need arises. The essays following my introduction give good proof of this, and for this reason they also need to be understood as emerging from a powerful current in the humanities that goes under the name "postmodernism," and that names, among other things, a specific historical stage in the academic production of knowledge.

My impulse is to give ritual studies the same quote/endquote treatment as "ritual isn't what it used to be," with the "" intended to suggest something fluid and opened-outward about the field itself. This question of the field, and the related issue of disciplinary foundations, will recur throughout this introduction. But ritual itself must be part of the reason that ritual studies has had to be so flexible in its approaches, borrowing frequently and opportunely from different disciplines. I take it as self-evident that ritual is a mode of symbolic action, like language usage, but that it possesses certain qualities that are so subtle and so prolific that aspects of ritual lurk in all sorts of behaviour, human and animal. This last point is addressed later on in this essay and the four others that follow it, usually under the term "ritualization." At the outset, however, it is important to determine what ritual actions are meant to effect. Tom Driver, one of the leading figures in the field, describes ritual as "an efficacious performance that invokes the presence and action of powers which, without the ritual, would not be present or active at that time and place, or would be so in a different way."¹ What these powers are (nature, society, the state, the psyche, are the candidates that Driver lists) and how they operate is, of course, something that ritual performance is meant to symbolically or actually co-determine.

Beyond this base-line understanding of the ritual action, with its performative modes and their generative powers, lies the concept of "liminality," which recurs across the whole scope of *Ritual Economies*. It is most commonly identified with the anthropologist Victor Turner, who took it from Arnold van Gennep and *The Rites of Passage*, a book that did not reach an English-language readership until the 1960s, which is a good half century after it first appeared in French. Perhaps circa-1960s is a good date to linger over, since this the period in which what is now called "theory"

¹ Tom Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 97.

begins to gain English-language currency, transplanted from its continental homes in France, Germany, and elsewhere. By the end of this introduction I hope to make the case that liminality can, with some judicious widening of the concept, be used to describe postmodernity as a temporal movement within the larger dynamic of globalization, whose metropolitan command centres— economic, military, and cultural—are for the most part located in America and Europe. Postmodernity names a passage in the annals of capitalism, though the direction and the larger historical meaning of that passage is far from clear. This passage generates its own cultural and intellectual practices, usually grouped under the title “postmodernism.” The characteristic attributes of postmodernist culture or postmodern thought are by now well known: a critique of authorship and originality; ironic self-reflexion; schizophrenia; heterogeneity; anti-totalism; ad hoc or ersatz universals; meta- ; pastiche as a principle of composition; aporetic pluralism; trans-generic modes.

But what may seem celebratory in its subversions and its eclectic reshufflings of former norms, is also riddled with anxieties about the enveloping global order to which it cleaves. Pervading its seemingly symbiotic relationship with late capitalism is a conspicuous, and searching, postmodernist unease with the “globalization” plateau of historical development. This order and its immensely flexible mechanisms of commodity production, its control technologies and policing systems, its ideological uniformity carried forth imperially under the flags of democracy and human rights, and its Hobbesian sanctioning of state terrorism by the stronger international players, has caused no end of cultural unease or global instability in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Many of the leading voices and texts of what has fast-become a postmodern canon register this unease and anxiety. How else to explain the thematics of paranoia and the conspiracy and control models that pervade the novels of Thomas Pynchon, some cyberpunk fictions and Hollywood films; the “archeological” analysis of power and its detailed disciplinary regimes in Michel Foucault; the post-Auschwitz unease with Jürgen Habermas’s claim that the ethical and civic reason of the Enlightenment subject (that most instrumental of modernity’s fictions) constitutes, today, a ruined or as he says “unfinished” modern project; or Frantz Fanon’s analysis of the schizophrenia of the racialized “other” and his righteous violence in resisting colonial domination, which serve as controversial but compelling reference points for Edward Said’s critiques of Orientalism and his polemics on the Zionist seizure of Palestine?²

² The reference to “post-Auschwitz unease” over Habermas’ revival of the Enlightenment project should be understood in relation to Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). Said’s debt to Fanon is not only invoked in relation

What ritual studies has to do with these issues and where it finds a place on the map of disciplines and research domains is the substance of my introduction, and, implicitly, of all the essays in *Ritual Economies*. At the root everything is ritual itself and the problem—as seen from a scholar’s viewpoint—of what it means to *know* it when you see it or do it. “Ritual isn’t what it used to be” is a statement that bids farewell to traditional models and epistemologies of ritual, which in some sectors of earlier scholarship, and in certain naive conceptions that may still be current, held to the view that ritual is an essentially liturgical or cultic business embedded within a mythical and cyclical as opposed to a rational and positivistic vision of the world. Instead, the statement assumes that simply the making of such a distinction in which specific cultures or even all of human history divide into rational and pre-rational segments is as much an epistemological as it is a needfully mythical claim. I’ll return later to the question of how the entire enterprise of contemporary or postmodern scholarship founders rather complicitly on the shoals of myth-making, especially the myth of being able to divide “truth,” which is a value, from “knowledge,” which is a practice. My immediate concern, however, is to feed Émil Durkheim’s distinction between the sacred and the profane into a meditation on the relationships between ritual and economic orders of behaviour. To do this properly, I will have to follow up with a look at some of the “economic” ideas bandied about by Georges Bataille.

“All known religious beliefs,” writes Durkheim in the opening sections of *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*,

present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred*. . . . But by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred. A rite can have this character; in fact, the rite does not exist which does not have it to a certain degree. There are words, expressions and formulae

to Said’s position on the Middle East and its ills. Fanon is the ammunition for a series of sharp ripostes to Jean-François Lyotard’s much-heralded claim that postmodernity is signalled by the breakdown of two Western master narratives (*grands récits*): enlightenment and emancipation. Lyotard is accused of “amnesiac vision,” for “without due recognition allowed for the colonial experience, Fanon says, the Western narratives of enlightenment and emancipation are revealed as so much windy hypocrisy; thus, he says, the Greco-Latin pedestal turns into dust.” See “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” in Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 314.

which can be pronounced only by the mouths of consecrated persons; there are gestures and movements which everybody cannot perform.³

When Durkheim goes on to reinforce his point he introduces an all-important factor. The distinction between the profane and the sacred isn't, he says, an insurmountable separation. Indeed, it has the intrinsic quality of a "relation," perhaps of correspondence and perhaps of reciprocity, as he argues elsewhere in the same book. He writes,

the real characteristic of religious phenomena is that they always presuppose a bipartite division of the whole universe, known and knowable, into two classes which embrace all that exists, but which radically exclude each other. Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things. Finally, rites are the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects.⁴

Durkheim has by this juncture already established that ritual is generative and relational, a type of transitive regime that invokes the gods as specular dependents of human wants and fears and, more crucially, as somewhat unpredictable players in a contractual economy: "if it is true that man depends upon his gods, this dependence is reciprocal. The gods also have need of man; without offerings and sacrifices they would die."⁵ Ritual, therefore, must at some irreducible level be concerned with one of the root meanings of the word "economic" (*oekonomikos*). It is dedicated to the upkeep of bilateral relations, of cajoling, bribing, and reminding the gods that they should keep to their commitments; it is in their interest that the universe (the seasons, food supply, human fecundity) function like an orderly home. To be economic, or to economize, means to regulate the homesite, a distinctly human praxis bound up not only with the maintenance of order for the sake of efficiency but with survival itself.

At another level, Durkheim's observation about the reciprocal dependency of gods and humans doesn't mean that rituals or religion all on

³ Émil Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (1912; New York: Free Press, 1965), 52.

⁴ *Ibid*, 56.

⁵ *Ibid*, 53.

their own create the transcendental realm, that they determine its existence and ordain the modalities of relation between the natural and the supernatural. Ritual isn't the *ursprung* and matrix of the sacred. Rather, ritual helps set the criteria by which a primordial intuition of divine existence, for example, can function and have value. This is what it means to say that ritual is efficacious and economic in its operations; and in this sense, ritual is perhaps less mystified than speculative theology or transcendental philosophy. Nevertheless, ritual remains oriented in a transcendental direction, toward higher powers or ultimate values, those qualities that classical philosophy has enunciated as a metaphysics of truth. I will return to the "metaphysics of truth" and examine this in relation to the values and rituals of a secular society, but this discussion will come in another section.

Meanwhile, Durkheim's comments on the interdependencies of the sacred and the profane have additional consequences for how we view ritual. Rites and rituals may be seen as modes of commerce, albeit with sometimes immaterial "things" and principals. Ritual is rooted or immersed in materialities, some of which it "magically" transforms. It is, furthermore, a type of conduct for which it wouldn't be amiss to say that it is occupational in both the behavioural and spatial senses of the term: one is, for such an such a time, occupied doing something (performing?) in a place or an environment that belongs to that doing and is saturated with its values.

The question of which came first, the creator or the creation, the profane world or its sacred other, is a paradox masquerading as a logical choice, but ritual whisks us away from such nonsense. Whether it carries us off in a beneficial or gainful direction is an altogether other matter, as we know well enough from the politically retrograde uses of ritual in twentieth century fascism. Suffice it to say that ritual grows up on sacred sites, or occupies and establishes such sites through its consecrations, whether these are spiritually, politically, or otherwise motivated. But it limits our understanding to conceive of ritual as primarily retracing the sacred topography of a particular place, effectively saturating it with homage. Ritual expresses a "rage for meaning," to paraphrase Wallace Stevens.⁶ Objects, spaces, actions, and gestures are combined in the activation of a spirited zone, irrespective of ties to a specific site. This is important, for the performative blueprint and the physical locus of many ritual activities is in a sense modular, though not invariant. We know well enough from history that rites and rituals are transportable and transplantable, and that they can operate in societies whose dominant profile is not sacred or whose majoritarian values may be hostile by default to an alien presence. In such cases, threatened or marginalized communities ensure their survival partly through

⁶ In his celebrated poem "The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens writes of the "Blessed rage for order." See *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 130.

ritual. If we shade Durkheim away from a fixed distinction between profane and sacred, which he does himself when speaking of “relations” that are “sustain[ed]” between the two, we can say that ritual is not so much a sacred as a spirited social form. Its spirit, moreover, serves social and communal needs, and, as we shall see, functions within or alongside economic parameters.

2.

When it comes to examining the metaphysical coordinates of our value systems, ritual studies looks for groundings and materialities. It promotes a thick appreciation of site- and time-contexts and their function in the production of serviceable or needful truths. The intellectual consensus is that we in the West live in a post-sacral society, one where the old liturgical rituals and calendars no longer infuse our public world with spiritual coherence, which we tend to imagine was the case in the middle ages or in nineteenth century peasant societies of the pre-industrial and pre-national type. But even if this fantasy of an organic past was effectively true, not an outright illusion in other words, it wouldn't mean that we are exiled on the enlightened side of a historical divide, dispossessed of ritual and dismissive of its mystifications. It doesn't mean that our lives, secularized and hedonistic as they might seem in superficial terms, are free of ritual or that we don't locate and celebrate metaphysical value in forms such as the nation state, the democratic ideal, the earth as a total organism, youth as a paradise of health and sexuality; or that a whole array of ritualized practices haven't evolved in response to an economically overdetermined society where the dominant social logic is (mass) entertainment, telecommunication, and shopping. Far from it in fact, and ritual analytics now cover an expanded area of research that still includes but has also moved well beyond the specifically sacred or liturgical spheres.

As ritual scholars push forward on many fronts, from teenage drug rites at skateboard parks to pangolin cults and internet religion, we are made to see why the purportedly secular present does not divide so neatly from a purportedly mythical past. We end up understanding a lot less about our life and times when we assume that our values and our social networks are radically different from the pre-positivist worlds and experiences of our ancestors, who presumably lived in an organic, seasonally-circumscribed cosmos where gods and spirits could alter or suspend the laws of physics. We shouldn't comfort ourselves with the primal fiction that prehistoric human rituals as well as those of the earliest civilizations were somehow more metaphysically organic, channelling the arduous physical verities of

our earliest hominid forbears or the corporatism of the first settled peoples into an imaginary communion with animistic and cosmic forces.

On the other hand, if we are to take our bearings from Mircea Eliade,⁷ humanity has travelled a great distance, travelling out of cyclical, archetypal time and into the inessential temporality of linear history. Our material surroundings and our sense of time and space do indeed differ from the past, having been sharply altered by ceaseless technological innovation. And while many of us in the humanities remain skeptical of crude then-and-now differentiations, we've also evolved methodologies and probes that are suited to the special contexts of our lives. This is where the issue of critical theory and modes of postmodern knowledge, mentioned at the very outset of this introduction, come into play. *Ritual Economies* exhibits all of the intersecting, cross-disciplinary valencies that characterize the shattered fixities of postmodern times. But before I turn to an overview of the contributions and to a broader discussion of where ritual studies is located within the humanities, it is necessary to state where the idea of combining rituals and economies comes from and how it serves the interests of the field.

The idea, as indicated earlier, came from Bataille, cultural critic and self-styled sociologist of the French surrealist era, as well as an author of pornographic novels. Bataille identified two orders of economy: the restricted and the general.⁸ The former, he said, is eminently rational, governed by a production and consumption structure that satisfies basic needs and helps capitalists acquire spiralling profits. The latter is not an economy at all, not a strictly kept calculus of cash and material resources, but a more or less loose system of forms and means that allows individuals and groups to expend resources and energies, to exceed utility, and to waste and express themselves freely. Bataille's examples of the unproductive expenditure that drives this latter economy included sacrificial festivals and cultic celebrations from ancient cultures, perverse sexuality, wars and sports spectacles, and the *potlatch* practices of American west-coast aboriginal peoples.

Ritual Economies invited speakers to consider how rituals can cut across these two orders of the economy or can constitute liminal zones and spaces in a postmodern world whose imperatives are almost universally economic. If rituals are defined by symbolic forms and practices, more a matter of deep

⁷ *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard Trask (1949; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954).

⁸ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume I, Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988); two subsequent volumes have also been translated. See also, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 116-129.

play and wish-fulfilment than serious business, economies have too often been seen as “fields” in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense of the term: push-and-pull configurations of competitive power, where the competitors occupy objective social positions and where capital— material, monetary, or symbolic— is the motive force.⁹ Yet to “picture a logical chasm between the two” and to refuse the possibility that these two “corresponding things” might be “confounded”— I am lifting phrases from Durkheim, in his discussion of sacred and profane¹⁰— would be unproductive, a deficiency in thinking that Bataille identifies with an unreasoning attachment to the utility concept in classical economics. Bataille’s criterion of the two economies allows that rituals and economies can have broader or narrower definitions; and that both terms reflect practices and activities that can temporarily invade or usurp each other’s domain or collaborate in reinforcing common values and objectives.

One can cut and study social bonding and group behaviour from different angles, finding where symbolic forms and competitive fields map onto each other. Thus, a computer connected to the world wide web is not only a commodity, a search engine, or a do-it-yourself publishing technology, but potentially a ritualizing appliance that can telematically enlarge the scope of a religious activity or, for that matter, forward terrorist outreach or intimidation strategies (e.g. through websites where anti-imperialist sympathizers are addressed or executions are broadcast). The term “economies” was aimed at expanding the concept of ritual to include not only anthropology, religion, or politics, which are some of its traditional areas of study, but also mass media, consumer society, legal processes, and the like.

We think of rituals as modalities of language, gesture, and action that have limits and forms. Rituals display a scripted regularity. They can ordain the meanings of individual and collective memory. They can transform into empty customs or stand as esoteric performances invested with an occult aura. Economies, by contrast, are dynamic secular systems that are tracked by indicators such as fluctuating currency values and shifting market statistics. Economies are altered by many factors such as climate, migration, war, resource accessibility, and the progress of scientific research. The limits of economies are difficult to establish or police, and the economy as a total phenomenon is imperfectly knowable due to its complexity and its constant transformations under the dynamism of capital.

⁹ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 1990); *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Durkheim, *Religious Life*, 55

Thus, the distinction between the two needn't be a fixed contrast: ritual isn't an unvarying phenomenon and economy isn't an inflexible, mechanistic term that need trump all other accounts of human motives and behaviours.

Scholars have shown that rituals originate and change under specific historical conditions, and that even a strictly formatted liturgical ceremony can vary significantly when performed in different circumstances. Traditionally, as we've seen through Durkheim, rituals have been specifically sited or enacted to delimit a space where profane values may not encroach. But the more recent studies by Victor Turner, Catherine Bell, Mary Douglas, Ronald Grimes, and Tom Driver have extended the meaning and range of the term. With this in mind, I invited the four scholars in *Ritual Economies* to consider their research in light of new scholarly definitions and revisions of rituals by the actants themselves. I asked them to reconsider the genus of ritual from a series of "economic" starting points. Does ritual preserve a space and a value-vision apart from the economy or does it augment economic imperatives? The intersection of rituals and economies occurs when consumption patterns and behaviours are imported into other cultures, when its peoples and institutions adopt or adapt ideas, objects, and discursive forms into their existing cultural matrix. What can ritual tell us about ourselves as economic beings, free agents within the market, and how does this market manifest itself in ritual forms? What kinds of rituals have evolved in an economically interdependent society of global dimensions?

3.

Ritual forms penetrate the civic and economic stratum of modern secular societies in complex ways. I take it, for example, that Bataille's theory of dual economies can allow for a truly layered appreciation of the place and function of ritual in modern social networks. If we put Bataille in the background, but not out of sight, we can get a better feel for the unacknowledged relevance of his theory, especially in those areas of material history where the two economies express distinct class and social interests. To begin with, I have in mind the type of research that Eric Hobsbawm has pursued into socialist workers' movements and the establishment of May Day rites at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the rise of football "as a mass proletarian cult" in the last quarter of that same century. Within a couple of decades, Hobsbawm writes, football

acquired all the institutional and ritual characteristics with which we are still familiar: professionalism, the League, the Cup, with its annual pilgrimage of the faithful for demonstration of proletarian triumph in the capital, the regular attendance at the Saturday match, the 'supporters' and their culture, the ritual

rivalry [The sport] operated both on a local and on a national scale, so that the topic of the day's matches would provide common ground for conversation between virtually any two male workers in England or Scotland, and a few score celebrated players provided a point of common reference for all.¹¹

Hobsbawm's wider discussion helps us understand how traditions may be manufactured and achieve an almost instant ritual rootedness, and how this is contingent on pre-existing conditions of industrial and urban modernity. Such conditions extend down to our own day, but with significant material differences that a contemporary historian or cultural theorist would naturally address.

From the 1920s onward, team sports, for example, were steadily married to the expansion of the mass media, first radio then television. American popular music was by the end of the 1950s unthinkable as a social form without this same technological circuitry of mass consumption, which in turn fed the communalism of the growing teenage demographic and began spawning separate youth subcultures with distinct rites. In the twentieth century, new media and their new scale of involvement and consumption have yielded palpable changes in rituals carried over from the earlier industrial age or the pre-industrial epoch. Fresh rites and customs have, of course, not ceased to sprout. As social energies and media networks drive toward new rituals or renovate the old, including those attached to the invented traditions of the later nineteenth century, academic scholarship proves its viability by studying communication networks, audiences, and postmodern cultural pluralism under the twinned rubric of "ritual economies." Our experiences as individuated subjects on the one hand, and as statistical ciphers in a system of mass consumption on the other, continue to proceed under the twin regimes of the yearly calendar and the workday timetable, and yet these quantifiable but abstract orderings of days, times, and seasons become the very conditions of rituals and ritualized behaviours in new modes.

We can see how ritual practices imbricate with economic values and systems if we think about how and why we use our mass media — and this includes the appliances as well as the visual, aural, and textual information purveyed through these appliances; thus, the television set, the computer screen, the movie theatre, as well as the rock concert, the rave party, and

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914," in *Representing the Nation: A Reader; Histories, heritage and museums*, eds. David Boswell and Jessica Evans (London: Routledge, 1999), 74; May Day discussion, 72-3. The article is a reprint from Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's landmark edition of critical essays on *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

the hip-hop club scene (only in the last two decades has the study of rock and post-rock cultures begun gaining academic legitimacy) are in some demonstrably functional sense the postmodern equivalents not only of temples and liturgical spaces with their cultic scenarios, but of such phenomena as ancient Greek and Roman theatre, epic recitations, orgiastic festivals, religious pilgrimages. But in making these parallels, which are of course hardly novel in terms of existing scholarship, I'm not asserting a trans-historical equivalence between modern or postmodern and pre-modern, for the different material conditions of separate historical periods, and their concomitant expression in social forms, are exactly what I wanted to imply in the *Economies* part of the theme title.

It would be just as dubious, however, to put too much emphasis on the special conditions of modernity, privileging its historical uniqueness. Failing to maintain intellectual distance from the "truths" of our own era, we go on to construct universals, often in the image of global capitalism and its subsidiary mechanisms. We thereby forget that economies, of whatever time or place, are not defined solely by utility. Viewing the economy as kind of calculus whose aims are comprehensive in the planetary sense and whose mechanisms (and this includes consumption) are rational is just one more self-discredited legacy from the Enlightenment. But even within the limited outlook of utility, where economic activity is pictured as an efficient process of upkeep and exchange, a matter of keeping good house and transacting rationally between one body and another, allowance has to be made for heterogeneity and the production of waste as a vital element of functional balance. Yet this picture is also too pat. Needs and desires are served or regulated much too predictably. Everything, including waste, adds up in a rational accounting. In "The Notion of Expenditure" Bataille rails against the view that "productive social activity" through which "humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally"¹² is the governing law of that behaviour which we call "economic." As I pointed out earlier, he argues that this thinking is, in the main, a sign of "*minor*" reasoning; it reflects immaturity in critical self-consciousness.¹³ Instead, he recognizes that productive and non-productive economies exist, not as completely separate species and not neatly "outside" each other, the one rational the other one not. They and their rationality or irrationality are in fact

¹² Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 117.

¹³ Bataille writes that "[i]n this respect, it is sad to say that *conscious humanity has remained a minor*," and is surely responding oppositely to Kant's essay of 1784, "What is Enlightenment?", where in the very first sentence the good philosopher describes Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity"; Bataille, *ibid*, 117; for Kant, see "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, expanded 2nd edition, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2003), 45.

parodies of the other, a point that Bataille made in bio-cosmological terms in his Whitmanesque essay “The Solar Anus”:

Everyone is aware that life is parodic and that it lacks an interpretation.
Thus lead is the parody of gold.
Air is the parody of water.
The brain is the parody of the equator.
Coitus is the parody of crime.¹⁴

4.

What needs underlining as readers begin to work their way through *Ritual Economies* is the consistency with which the separate essays each after their fashion reveal a field whose borders are permeable. Ritual studies is *de facto* multi- and inter-disciplinary, as both William Doty and Ronald Grimes aver in the two essays that, outside of this introduction, frame the volume and reverse the order of their original delivery (Doty’s was the opening lecture of *Ritual Economies*, while Grimes closed the series). Doty calls “non-theological ritual studies” a “subfield” or “subdisciplin[e]” that “appear[ed] formally only in the late 1960s and then develop[ed] rapidly over the two succeeding decades.” Grimes dates the “inception” of ritual studies from 1977 (rather tellingly, the same year that Said was putting the finishing touches on *Orientalism*, which is recognized as having vaulted Postcolonial issues into the critical mainstream).¹⁵ Either of these time-lines locates ritual studies in the thick of that historical passage that for better or worse now goes under the name of postmodernity. It might be argued, however, that ritual studies of any type was always a subdiscipline and that it was always incipiently postmodern, with its postmodern features appearing more forcefully as scholars began researching in areas that extend beyond sacred precincts and liturgical practices.

This is apparent in how Grimes responded when the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Studies Institute invited him to speak on the topic of sanctuary barriers. The story is told in his essay here, with Grimes taking a syncopated approach: he employs performance theory and practice to meditate broadly and doggedly on the function of the altar screen in Orthodox Christian churches; time and again he doubles back along his lines of thought to show that if altar screens are used to mystify, as are most liturgical appurtenances, ordinary “barrier-things” like doors or *hijabs* can and to a

¹⁴ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 5.

¹⁵ Quoting Joseph Bristow, Bart Moore-Gilbert writes that “for ‘the majority of white academics’, the debate about postcoloniality began with Said”; in *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), 35.

relative degree do have the same effect outside of deliberately ritual contexts. His central insight is that the sacred gets built not only when ordinary items of material culture are combined with symbolic performances whose meanings are determinate, but when the imagination of the actors and/or audience projects these same items and actions across a metaphoric boundary that functions as a contact plane between the revealed and the unrevealed. “The metaphoric move implicit in screening generates an atmosphere of hyper-reality,” Grimes writes. This heightening of reality disarms reason and “move[s]” the situation or the events in question onto a plane where mystery, myth, or the imagination may operate. Grimes also argues that artists and scholarly researchers regularly make moves comparable to those that involve ritual screening in liturgical contexts, but “[s]uch moves are potentially more transformative and more destructive in liturgical rites, because they are guarded as sacred rather than critiqued as fictive.”

This returns us to my earlier observation of how ritual may help satisfy our “rage for meaning,” though it might be more appropriate to say, in light of Grimes’ meditations on screens and performances around screening, including atmospheres of hyper-reality, that ritual may answer, almost sublimely (as in any “hyper” state of affairs), to a “rage for transformation” lying latent or dormant in audiences. It may additionally be argued that the effectiveness and the essence of ritual are in fact constituted by the inducement of such a “rage.” Doty doesn’t go quite this far in his essay, but he, like Grimes, is sensitive to ritual as a performative art, and makes a rather crisp summary case for appreciating the transformations that ritual participants will undergo in their varying degrees of ritual involvement and during their different life stages. Drawing on his own work in *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, he reminds us that “the various experiential and age-related levels of persons engaging in myth must always be taken fully into account” and that “contemporary ritology [must] recognize the ways in which rituals are engaged with various levels of emotional intensity across the lifespan or developmental level.”

The complementary insights of Grimes and Doty are bound up with key conceptual developments in how ritual is analyzed and how far ritualized activities permeate daily life and structure the social fabric. Next to “liminality” (which we’ll hear more about below, in connection with questions of postmodernity) “ritualization” is perhaps the most important analytic tool in the ritual studies kitbag, with Catherine Bell and, again, Tom Driver expounding the concept in their very diverse prose styles. Grimes too weighs in with his own definition of the term, which I’ll quote here for its pithiness: a ritualization can be any activity, such as watching television, chairing a meeting, giving birth, and so on, that “display[s] qualities that are

ritual-like without ever becoming [a] rite per se.”¹⁶ Ritualizations can become full-blown rites or rituals, and are perhaps only separated from these forms not by the fact that rites and rituals are deliberately formalized and are assigned a specific slot and a heightened meaning in the taxonomy of social actions, but by the experience of symbolic fusion that ritual is deliberately aimed at. Bipartite ontologies such as those signalled by screening devices (dividing sacred from profane) are brought into adjacency. This is a charged adjacency that the ritual action, when played out with maximum effect, sparks into living being.

In other words, ritual sites and processes set up or sustain analogies and distinctions between two orders of reality, for which the limen (a line, a transitional zone, or a notional boundary) is the mediating threshold. The analogies or distinctions may be between the profane and the sacred, as we’ve said, the temporal or historical and the eternal, the earth and the universe, the racial nation and its barbarous other, the true religion and its heretical other, two distinctly toned periods in one’s lifetime, or between how I am “objectively” and how I wish to see myself as being. The symbolic enactment of these differences and analogies is ritual, that is, the relationship between the two orders is structured as a ritual or a ritualized performance in which a transaction or a crossing takes place. Ritualization, however, separates from ritual in that the former’s symbolic enactments are more loosely semiotic than authoritatively symbolic, though I don’t want to insist too strongly on the specific theoretical nature of this distinction.¹⁷

The term “ritualization” allows us to identify ritual modes of behaviour in those activities where strictly ritual choreography is not an issue and where one isn’t enacting any definable crossing or charged contact between two ontological orders. Nevertheless, ritualizations are like tentative orderings of unfamiliar or semi-familiar territories. In his essay here Grimes speaks of “ritualization by improvisation” in connection with Jeff-the-bear’s death. Any newly formatted behaviour that begins cutting a pathway where none existed before is potentially a ritualization. A ritualization may be any series of acts that instinctively or creatively (“mute[ly]” Bell might add)¹⁸ innovate meaningful patterns of relationality (e.g. verbal or non-verbal communication between parties, responsive bodily actions, etc.) where no systematic patterns existed previously.

¹⁶ “Consuming Ritual: A&E’s *Sacred Rits and Rituals*” in *Contemporary Consumption Rituals: A Research Anthology*, eds. Cele Otnes and Tina Lowrey (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 28.

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (1974; New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 25-6.

¹⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 93.

5.

Driver analyzes how symbols are employed in the ritual petitioning of “unseen powers” and concludes that the actions taken “are so much more fundamental than the symbols that we may even regard the symbols as having been generated through ritualization.”¹⁹ This is credible, for ritualizing and symbolizing are deeply and intimately implicated in each other’s business. Driver is suggesting that symbols answer to the dramatic exigencies of ritualized actions and that this is how the magic efficacy of symbolic modes may be said to arise. A logical explanation, an attempt to demystify the uses or meanings of a symbol will do little to strip the symbol of its power. Quite the contrary. Symbolic magic is often a question of aesthetic potency, provided that we understand here the concrete, sensory as well as the “artistic” meaning of this term “aesthetic.” When aesthetic potency, that is, the power to bypass or even dislocate reason, is factored into our understanding of symbols and how they operate, then no amount of logical demystification can disinherit the symbol of its cognitive effects.

Ritual thrives when it proves itself to be intrinsically rather than conventionally symbolic, a ceremonial process and not much more. It releases or plucks at the symbolic timbre of the flesh and of cognition or consciousness itself. To grasp this idea of “symbolic flesh” we need to alter our mundane conception of the symbol, and need to re-read, phenomenologically, nineteenth-century Symbolist theory and Symbolist verse, beginning as early as Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan” in which the poet, at the end, projects himself as the shamanistic performer of his own poem. Symbols are as significant in their materiality as in their semantic conventionality, and it is the full aesthetic extensions of their materiality (which our scientific and intellectual instruments will never be able to quantify into a fully rational understanding, as in the case of colour, for example) that invest symbols with their powers of mystification.

Doty affirms this materiality at the level of ritual performance: “[r]ituals are directly embodied symbolic expressions . . . enactments, not merely referents to transcendental meanings lodged elsewhere.” And Grimes, summing up a key points in his analysis of the metaphoric moves made during ritual performance, says that a

ritual metaphor is a radically embodied symbol, one in which symbol and symbolized are simultaneously identified and differentiated. This bread *is* my body; this bread is *only* bread. The icon on that screen *is* sacred; the icon on that screen is *only* wood and paint.

¹⁹ Driver, *Liberating Rites*, 97.

The deepest secret of symbolic functioning is not the setting up of X-stands-for-Y relations at some conventional cultural level or within the chambers of private symbolic consciousness (though this is certainly one important dimension of how symbols operate: this object is specifically a fetish or a talisman for me, a signifier in my singular psychic economy); it is, rather, the creation of imaginary identities. Toward this end, rituals or ritualizations can provide a powerful context.

For a better apprehension of this business of “imaginary identities,” and insight into how it links to ritual, we need first to consider the most elementary definition of the literary symbol, for which we are indebted to Coleridge, and through him to German Romantic philosophy. It is a stock definition that I duly impart to my undergraduates, and it shades off into what is nearly a physiological theory of sublimity. For Coleridge a symbol embodies “the translucence of the Eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of that reality which it renders intelligible.”²⁰ From these Neoplatonic commonplaces we can go on to distill a theory of symbolic materiality. But first the obvious: a symbol has two parts, the sensuous and the abstract; or, if you will, the tangible and the intangible. In a poem or a prose narrative a symbol would thus be an image (something that is apprehended through the senses) that suggests something higher, something conceptual beyond itself. The word “suggests” is important, for we are not to confuse a literary symbol with a more systematic and definitive type of symbolic pattern that goes under the name “allegory.” A symbol in literature is therefore a highly suggestive image in which the concrete elements of the image such as the colour and the fragrance of a rose, the texture or temperature of someone’s hand, for example, evoke a conceptual level of significance. However, this higher level of significance is not the other end of an equation, as in allegory, but rather a level where meaning gets made by a vague or mysterious transformation of sensual values.

I want, at this point, to ensure that this “vague or mysterious transformation” is not perceived as merely some sort of willful mystification on the reader’s part, in keeping with the suspension of disbelief that goes on in the reading of fiction and poetry or the watching of drama and film. In order to avoid this, the discussion needs be shifted off the page, as it were, and onto the experiential level of the imagination, which may, like Lacan’s unconscious be structured like a language, and therefore functions much like an amphibious species, both noumenal and textual, immaterial and material in its capacities. Thus, if a rose in its material qualities is said to symbolize the beauty, it is because this perception or feeling of beauty has been triggered by the sensuousness of the rose and remains mysteriously

²⁰ From “The Statesman’s Manual,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, 7th edition, eds. M.H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2000), 490.

imprinted with its qualities without being altogether reducible to these. The powers of the imagination have been awakened and they attach themselves to concrete physical vehicles that seem to promise a revelation of essences, for which the physical vehicles are the nearest and finest approximation. Importantly, the symbolic imagination doesn't dwell on similitudes, analogies, or approximations, but rather experiences identities because of the aesthetic charge of the sensuous materials that it is working with. One doesn't inhale the fragrance of the rose or admire the sculptural delicacies and velvety hues of its petals only in order to say that these are analogies of beauty—they are rather beauty incarnate. Wallace Stevens, rhapsodizing paradoxically, is once again worth quoting: "Beauty is momentary in the mind—/ The fitful tracing of a portal;/ But in the flesh it is immortal."²¹

The discussion of the literary symbol can now afford us a viable perspective on the more performative, if not the theatrical, logic of ritual action, and its multifarious instances of embodied cognition. Symbolic identity is established, conditions for such identity are met, through ritualized action or processual sequences in which a transformation is effected in the minds and bodies of (at least some) participants and/or observers. These participants or observers may occupy remote, mediated locations; or participants may be completely solitary, ritualizing for an imaginary auto-audience. Off-hand I can cite three instances in which a physiological dynamics of symbolism (i.e. a dynamics of symbolic identity) functions transformatively, alongside a reliance on more obvious and more conventionally legible symbols: the stomping on and burning of a hated flag before a live gathering as well as a media audience; pilgrimages to shrines or to sites of mass atrocities, all the more effective when the pilgrim literally follows the path taken to the place(s) of execution; a lip-synch/air-guitar concert played to an imaginary audience in the privacy of one's own house. In each of these instances, the material basis of a performative experience or a ritualized action may directly engender a passage out of the ordinary. Emotional intensity and heightened meaning is generated through a specific concrete vehicle, with one's own body and perhaps those of others acting as the ultimate symbolic resource. In saying this, it is equally important to factor in spectatorship as part of a symbolic continuum whereby meaning is activated outside the arena of a central action.

My reference to a private concert may seem extraneous to the current argument about spectatorship and the symbolic extensions of ritual, but where there is a performative action there is in the very least an implied spectator. Driver writes:

²¹ See "Peter Quince at the Clavier," section IV, in *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, 91.

[a]lthough it is true that some rituals may be performed by individuals in private, these instances are unintelligible except as offshoots or imitations of collective rituals. We have already touched upon this in our analysis of performance, when we saw that performance is a “showing” that always requires an audience, even if the spectator is physically invisible or is an aspect of the performer’s own self. In other words, ritual assumes community and must provide itself with an imaginary one if no other is present.²²

The way in which actions such as flag stomping or private air-guitar concerts register among observers (imaginary or not), and the fact that they may be directly enacted for observation or spectatorship, are a crucial part of the symbolic complex. It is clear from these and many other ritual or ritualized scenarios that observers or spectators enjoy a parallel order of symbolic experience in which the sensuous element resonates just as strongly as it does for the performers. It may even be argued that symbolic experience attains its most intense meaning only in view of an audience, even when the private performer is in the same instant the only audience. This could be taken further, with the claim that the experience of the audience may indeed constitute the deepest or highest moment of symbolic meaning in a given event, exceeding even the experience of the performers.

I’m thinking here of the full impact of a crushing body-blow or knockout punch in a live boxing match, or better yet, a devastating and legal body-check in a hockey game. Is it not possible to hypothesize that if such a knockout punch were delivered between either of the boxers at an USA-USSR match at the height of the Cold War, or the body-check occurred in the historic 1972 Canada-USSR series, that either of these occurrences might be more immediately and powerfully symbolic for the spectators than even for the competitors themselves? The players are caught up in an athletic struggle (competition) in which the field of action is constantly changing its dynamics and demanding rapid reactions, physical and mental. But the spectators— much like Durkheim’s gods who “have need of man . . . [his] offerings and sacrifices”— are positioned in a sort of Olympian dependency; their situation is such that history and ideology, which are contexts for the whole meaning of the competition, are felt like a pulse that draws its force from what the athletes are doing. At the emotionally spiked moment of a decisive punch or powerful body-check, spectators register, quite physiologically as would seem from all visible evidence, the symbolic sublimity of history. History becomes one of those “higher powers” that gains temporal and visceral presence, as Driver suggests (see the citation for footnote 1). History is felt now, in this time and place, and in the tensions of this body, as a surge of significant energy.

²² Driver, *Liberating Rites*, 154.

More drily put, the spectator is impacted with the higher-order significance, whether patriotic or ideological or something else, of that painfully sensuous impact from the playing area. This occurs in a determinate concrete and historical context, and the materiality of the impact is in fact the only way in which the competition between two boxers or two teams is raised to a truly symbolic level; for this is the plane of identity where, as with the beauty of the rose, the imagination generates “higher” or symbolic value from being excited by a sensuous experience. After all, the competition between the boxers or the teams is already rhetorically symbolic in its staging, and this is the “outward” symbolism of the most conventional sort: the binary confrontation of East and West, Capitalism and Communism. But the element of decisive physical contact and its experiential reverberations into a live or even a mediated, television audience, marks the moment of symbolic sublimation, where the essence of symbolism, as it were, is attained. Over and above the lead-in ceremonies, the playing of the anthems, the clashing graphics of the t.v. coverage, the ritualized tauntings between the boxers, it is the body-check or punch, reverberating in its historical or ideological contexts, that serves as the most pronounced symbolic moment within a heightened dynamic of imagination and ritualization.

In the sense that I’m working with it, symbolic meaning isn’t a question of settled significance, something retrievable from a dictionary of signs. Nor is it abstract or meta-historical in that it belongs to a higher or sacred order divorced from effective contact with our profane or terrestrial reality. The meaning of a symbol “happens” experientially and temporally within a situated body, in the passages between the corporeal and the conceptual orders of consciousness (this naturally includes body-consciousness) or cognition, in the interplay between physiology and psychology. This is why I insist on characterizing symbolic meaning as a matter of identity, of a kind of instantaneous and vibrating contact between two polar orders. Such meaning crystallizes and echoes on the imaginative plane where sensuality is sublimated, where the material element nearly reaches its vanishing point as a brain wave. We can describe the happening of symbolic meaning as the aesthetic texturing of material experience, to a point at which the aesthetic matter spills over as a psychological surplus.

As I have been stressing thus far, the dynamic in which symbolic meaning gets made can be contagious. It is not limited to solitary or individuated experience and can mount to a level of ritual delirium. We think of mass rallies and electrifying group phenomena as obvious examples. But there are also events outside the ritual sphere which are overwhelmingly symbolic and become, in effect, pre-cessions of the symbolic essence of ritual. That is, they violently and suddenly manifest a simulacrum of the sacred, and compel, quite irresistibly, ritualized reactions. Spectacular terrorism fits this bill. Awesome and painful proof of how the “happening” of symbolic meaning can function vis-a-vis spectators and attain sublimity

were the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in full view of a city of millions, and a stunned replay audience of many more. Here, symbolic meaning (that instant of overwhelming identity) became shockingly and immediately repercussive for observers and has kept repercussing at the level of psychological terror— that is, fearful doubt of the possibility of another shocking impact— in the culture as a whole. World history, as opposed to intra-American history (e.g. the horrific epic of plantation slavery, the Civil War, and Civil Rights, to cite one popular narrative that has attained the simplicity of a self-exonerating and ethnocentric myth), suddenly erupted into American space, seared onto American minds and bodies. As expected, the location and its surrounding areas became, almost instantly, a pilgrimage site.²³

6.

Turning now from Grimes and Doty, and issues arising from their prominent and widely-consulted contributions to ritual studies, we come to Penne Restad and Richard Cavell, and the special vantages that they supply to this question of *Ritual Economies*. Their essays link more directly to the stated aim of the HRG's yearly theme for 2003-04; namely, that ritual practices and economic processes cannot be kept apart in any serious study of the former, if only for the reason that some dimension of economic activity has always been sublimated into ritual. It is clear from what Restad, leading scholar of Christmas American-style, brings to the volume in her study of the Alexander Graham-Bell and Mabel Bell correspondence during Christmas 1893, and what Cavell evokes from his long engagement with the work of Marshall McLuhan, that the arrow also goes in the other direction: ritual routines pervade economic behaviour and are interwoven with the consumerist ethos of capitalist societies.

Restad's focus on the Bell letters and their see-sawing disagreement over buying and gift-giving, marks off an important historical starting point if we are to consider the cross-hatchings that unite rituals and markets, ritualizations and media formats, and, finally, ritual studies approaches and the postmodernity of a Western- if not an American-styled uni-world. Her tightly circumscribed topic identifies buying and gift-giving as ritualized routines that begin to enjoy wide social acceptance in Gilded-Age America. During this period, "mounting quantities of material goods overflowed and collected in the mirrored and brightly-lit new shopping emporia." Thrift and frugality, those holdovers from the Puritan forerunners, passed away as the

²³ A "symbolic" analysis of a different sort appears in Jean Baudrillard's brief meditations, *The Spirit of Terrorism, and, Requiem for the Twin Towers*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002).

basis of upstanding middle class values, and self-expression through consumption began to redefine personal and social relations. The end of the nineteenth century saw the closing of the Western frontier, expanding industrial production (which would help put America on the road to empire in the twentieth century), immigration growth, and the refinement of advertising techniques. We might in hindsight say that the genius and the banality of American economic success and the nation's current pretensions to full-spectrum dominance of the whole planet have a lot to do with the long victory of Mabel over Alexander, to which Alexander's invention contributed immeasurably. Community-building through consumerism is perhaps as good a mini-definition as any of what it has meant to be American in the twentieth century.²⁴

Cavell's essay comes at ritual from the other end of that same century, when, to paraphrase McLuhan, we encounter multiple forms of ritual generated by new technological environments. In *From Cliché to Archetype*, McLuhan writes, "[u]nder electric conditions . . . Western man is in a great state of confusion as he encounters the multiple forms of space generated by new technologic environments."²⁵ Cavell traces some of Catherine Bell's insights in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* back to McLuhan and his analytic of television as an "involving" yet "violent" medium, "precisely because it tend[s] to substitute a group identity for an individual one, which . . . [is] particularly traumatic in a culture that had been nurtured in the belief that genuine experience was the experience of the individual." One might say that the road to postmodern ritual is paved with the sacrificial remnants of the private viewer. The mass audience becomes the content of the new medium of television, as McLuhan argued, and the self-perception of the individual begins to undergo a qualitative shift whose determining context is actually quantitative.

In this argument, whose conclusions have become postmodern orthodoxy, individual audience members, like the individual subjects that flow like platelets through the bloodstream of mass society, reveal their dependency on networks. They (actually, "we") are "individual" and they manifest (rather than possess) "subjectivity" to the extent that they are plugged-in and interactive agents. Subjectivity here has the form of a self-

²⁴ The historical continuity of national identity and American empire is, in part, tied to consumerism. British historian Niall Ferguson, whose benevolent imperialism, like that of Michael Ignatieff, presents itself as an enlightened shadow of Rudyard Kipling's more forthright and supremacist variety of a century earlier, recently complained that Americans "would rather consume than conquer. They would rather build shopping malls than nations." See Steve Chapman, "The other obstacle we face in Iraq—ourselves," *The Baltimore Sun*, May 25, 2004, on-line edition.

²⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 83.

constituting performance, which produces the self in its embodied contours, its interfacing surfaces, as well as its assumed depths. This postmodern self can shift between reifying rites in the social sphere (as part of a mass audience, a consumer with a specific taste and buying profile, or a libidinally errant body at a rave or night club) and the disembodied consolations of ideology in the putatively self-possessing private realm (as the owner of abstract, universal rights). But the latter is, in effect, only ensured by the suffrance of the state, which, in these days of terror and the U.S. government's patriotic erosions of the Fourth Amendment, means that said state reserves the right to liberate you from those Constitutional entitlements that allow you a protected legal niche within the polity of other "free" women and men.²⁶

In the postmodern world there is indeed no scurrying away toward a disconnected, autonomous individuality, toward a "place" like the "inside" of the psyche or the body where an intrinsic, proprietary essence or identity (legal, sexual, racial, national, etc.) dwells. And it is postmodern culture and its rituals, rather than legal ideals and their trials at the hands of the state, that most commonly reveals this. The unyielding information flow and the instantaneous bounce-back dynamics of the media on which we rely for so much of our every day functioning drive subjects toward performative rather than deep identities. The attenuation of deep subjectivity—which was an accumulated construct, deriving from the Greek philosophical tradition, the articulation of Christian conscience, and the *cogito* of early modern humanism— has been accompanied by a reconstitution of the subject's social relations and social function. A new, postmodern regimen of social subjectivity, of stylized and performative selfhood emanates seductively from the media. At the same time the media cuts ever more finely into the once personal or private dimensions of social life and individual experience, implanting there values and perceptions shaped by commerce.

Lest my rehearsal of this argument slide off into some incorrigible variant of techno-economic determinism, it is important to keep in view the fundamental claim: performative self-production rather than inviolably private and self-grounding reflection is what governs the construction of individuality. This idea can hardly be new, and was already by the late 1950s being examined in the works of Erving Goffman. But there has been a predictably accelerated devolution of the performing subject. Performativity is not just the surface shield of a self-possessed social actor (who equivocates when necessary, who defers strategically, who emotes authenticity, etc.), but the principle of convertibility and reversibility of all social relations. Performativity precipitates into circulation flows and contacts rather than standing as a polar launching point for inter-personal transference. The resulting social truth of postmodern experience is that the

²⁶ See Samuel Dash, *The Intruders: Unreasonable Searches and Seizures from King John to John Ashcroft* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

individual's subjectivity or agency is to a great degree effected by the codes and the flows of the network. This creates subject positions and interpellations²⁷ whose authenticity resides not in the purely personal or private realm, but in performative and, if you will, ritualized identity.

There is a line of development to such a social formation, and to the type of academic thinking— e.g. postmodern “theory” as a genre— that legitimates this as the world-picture of and for our time. The development, which actually isn't just a single unbroken line, is historical, reaching back to the world that emerges from Restad's tenacious sifting of the Bell letters. Mabel's shopping and gift-giving ensures the ritual as well as the economic bonding of giver and receiver; they each hold “membership in the same world of commodities, creating through ritual gesture a modern community.” Restad's scrupulous, delving sensitivity to Mabel's position identifies one key line of development, centering on the agency and the nascent spending power of Western, bourgeois women. Her essay draws sustained attention to the restless morningtime of a world that industrial production and American social forms have since naturalized as the order of things. This order has steadily grown and expanded, spanning in one complex continuum the era of our Victorian, middle class ancestors and the current multicultural epoch of globally-scaled neoliberalism.

Gift-giving and consumption rituals are constituent features of Mabel Bell's “modern community,” which, over the course of the twentieth century, grows into a reticulated mass that consumes itself through electronic media. Cavell's essay, which argues that the ratio of dreaming to waking, of image to reality, has been collapsed through the dominant totality of the media and our mass experience as far-flung television and electronic audiences, provides the proper sequel to Restad's private and intensely localized focus. Everything derives from an economic system whose productivity and concomitant social forms could be narrated in the shift of communication technologies from letter writing to telephone, radio, television and computers. My earlier incursions into Hobsbawm's work help us see that a key dimension of this communications narrative, with its economic and technological variables, is the development of invented traditions and social rituals, including their transmission and evolution in fresh circumstances.

Cavell's discussion, when it weds Catherine Bell back to McLuhan, embodies this very perspective. With the expanded screen size and better resolution of today's models, the television set is an indispensable component in the seamless transubstantiations of rituals, ritualizations, and economies within the corporate structuring of the postmodern world. But to

²⁷ See Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. John Fullerton and Paul Sieveking (1967; London: Rising Free Press, 1979), for a Situationist-inspired analysis of widely-arrayed interpellation mechanisms in mass media and commercial culture.

still speak of the television as a domestic altar is to overextend a tired cliché that better describes the pre-cable era of network dominance and limited channel selection. Today's televisions, like the interactive computer terminal—which more and more begins to take on the functions of television and telephone—are not so much ersatz altars as they are ritual appliances. They not only frame and stylize our subjectivity, but they also pre-condition ritualized forms of social participation.

Grimes in his definition of ritualization speaks of “[a]ctivities not normally viewed as rites but treated as if they were or might be,” and lists “house cleaning” and “TV watching” as two examples.²⁸ Cavell studies “TV watching” as a kind of coordinated activity in which the medium lays down the conditions of ritualized entry into its virtual community. Beyond long distance participation in rites, such as Masses for shut-ins or the Princess Diana funeral, it is the virtual presence of the viewing community that constitutes the actual ritual of television. Television superimposes audiences onto audiences, mediating and shaping a ritualized interchange, even as it pivots around the performers or competitors (sports spectacles, entertainment-industry awards, federal elections, celebrity weddings or funerals, trash talk shows like *Jerry Springer*, and reality t.v.) who remain the ostensible focal points of the viewing experience. The computer furthers this same logic. These new media cannot but force modifications in scholarly approaches to ritual. Instead of thinking of ritual as a metaphysical mime-show centering on the focal object (or primordial concept) of a cultic celebration, we move toward the concept of ritualization and begin to theorize ritual as an immanent potential within all patterns of communication; as a flexible and efficacious response to the felt need for community in a world of long-distance relationships or virtual constituencies.

The re-routing of McLuhan's media reflections toward audience contexts and contemporary electronic culture is Cavell's most leading insight. He centers his claims around the ritual ethos of spectatorship as participation, which I've just noted. But this ethos also signals a mutation in interpersonal subjectivity as capitalism globalizes our relations and shifts the whole social terrain of the local and the sited. With television viewing and internet use transforming the function of the audience, ritual scenarios become folded inside out. This folding action that is effected by the new technologies, and which propels ritual behaviours into new modes and configurations, is distinctly postmodern. It constitutes one more plateau in the plurivalent topographies of modern power.

²⁸ “Consuming Ritual,” 28.

We speak of “interactivity” because this answers to a governing logic of location, dislocation, and, increasingly, trans-location in contemporary experience. It corresponds to the global circuitry of power, technology, and money, as expressed in our evolving television, internet, and cell-phone habits, and in world populations flows. But we shouldn’t see this situation—this interactivity and this nomadic and diasporic dynamic, which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in their magisterial *Empire*, describe as “scrambl[ing]” the “spatial divisions of the three Worlds . . . so that we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second almost nowhere at all”²⁹—as forwarding an inexorable teleology, as driving toward some sort of Hegelian resolution to the dialectic of history, with the economic and political civilization of the West (capitalism and democracy) about to lead the rest of the world toward a plateau of final and absolute “development.”

Postmodernity has a certain momentum, but that momentum cannot be uniformly directional since capitalism and its postmodern cultural forms do not operate as external unfoldings of essential, internal causes. Marx already inferred this in the two main concepts on which he rested his theory of historical change: dialectic and contradiction. The invocation of dialectic, even at the incendiary early stage of his thought in the Communist period, was not simply a projective strategy, which one might reasonably expect from the rhetoricity of the Manifesto genre. Marx never argued that developments in production ride forward on an unalterable rail-route of perfect historical logic. What he said was that capitalist economies breed internal contradictions and crises, yet the system is flexible and dynamic enough that it manages to ride out and recover from these. Capitalism generates and survives its own crises because its expansionist ethos requires constant innovations in production. In the end, a new plateau is always reached and a ruling equilibrium in class relations is effected.

Class conflict, says Marx, is what fuels historical change. It puts major social groups in relationships of dialectical opposition. But the notion of class that Marx puts forth is directly related to the revolutionary productive role of the bourgeoisie, and only takes on its proletarian image of immiserated mechanical hands if localized to Victorian industrial conditions. A proper understanding of class must look forward from Dickens’ Coketown, rather than back toward it. The class identity of any social group is determined by its role in a production system where change ultimately prevails. Class is the term that defines a social category of productive labour, but if capitalism advances by diversifying the means and opportunities for wealth, then any sense of class consciousness is directly affected by this. One might appeal to class in the name of revolutionary

²⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xiii.

solidarity, but it is not an identity term or an essence, and in changing historical circumstances it will satisfy that appeal a lot less effectively than do ethnicity, nation, race, or even gender and sexual orientation. If we are to speak of class with any empirical validity, it would be to say that the term refers to multiple levels of productive and social positionality rather than a historical destiny or a set of fixed status stratifications as in the feudal era.

A postmodern reading of Marx (which is what capitalism today actually is) would emphasize that this concept of class, combined with the transformation of First World labour through technology and electronics, explains why the social network and the production system today are made up of a chain of finely graded hierarchies that the rather crude and incarcerating category of an industrial working class, of the nineteenth century type, can no longer homogenize. Traditional First World classes, such as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, have disappeared and even fused in part, while their counterparts in the Third World have become historically invisible and impotent, which explains both the freedom with which neo-imperialism stalks the globe and the rise of anti-globalization activists. Taking a page from Marx, who said of the French peasantry in the nineteenth century that they could not represent themselves and so must be represented, the activists will speak in the name of those corporate wage slaves who, next to their fellow Mexicans or Malaysians, make a relatively better living (albeit still quite pitiful by developed, metropolitan standards) as *maquiladora* or as Nike sweat-shop workers. But even in these instances, the exposure of corporate evils presupposes the extinction of the revolutionary concept of class identity. What is being challenged, through the terminology of exploitation, safety, health, and environmental standards, is the deceptiveness of the corporate buy-out.

In developed, postmodern societies that buy-out is critiqued not as a corporate propensity to violate safety, etc., standards (although these exist and have their watchdogs), but as an implosion into mindless consumerism. Thus, it's the Third World that must be saved from the colonial depredations that feed our domestic blandness. Perhaps this is the old missionary zeal in its last liberal-democratic stages. The discovery that the low-paid international labour force, rather than providing a pivot for a critique of capitalist exploitation, is self-reified and corrupted by the consumption of, effectively, its own products and "our" lifestyle signs (hooked up on cell phones, seduced by Hollywood dreck and American pop music, addicted to soft drinks and developing tastes for McFood, wearing brand name sports lines or urban "gangsta" fashions), is a crushing disappointment. It's as if a crude type of Fordism has won again, and the Third World victims of

corporate greed seek their destiny in collaborative subordination rather than ideological or revolutionary resistance.³⁰

The post-Marxist logic of global development is clear: integration of classes into the trans-national hierarchy of corporate interests, which, if it doesn't promise health care and old age security, or optimal working conditions, does offer employment and consumer lifestyle options that may, residually, revolutionize age-old gender and caste traditions. The historical coming of democracy, with all its rote rituals, would be the political counterpart to such a buy-out, but that isn't the immediate concern of the corporations. Whereas the industrial slum was for Marx and Engels the potential incubator of revolutionary upheaval, the Third World sweat shop, the shanty town and ghetto, and the ravaged rural region, are *not* its postmodern successors. These are incubators of consumption and a predictable volume of crime; politically, their counter-hegemonic forms of self-expression are either tarred with the brush of "terrorism" (e.g. Ogoniland in Nigeria, the population of Sadr City in Baghdad) or are actually terroristic in that they could care less about resisting corporate abuses and responsibility, and would rather wage a shadowy campaign against American interests as a whole, including symbols and civilians.

Suddenly, in the age of terror, the mobile interplay between culture-production, information flow, and people movement, is assigned one side of a would-be ontological divide. On the other side of this divide is Evil, but this is also a phantasmatic and lurking evil capable of erupting from within the proper order of people-mobility and information exchange. It can spring rhizomatically from its inside in a burst of spectacular, terrorizing violence, a measure of whose impact is symbolic as I have argued in a previous section. The proper order with its flows of people and ideas is thus profaned, but not by terrorists, who belong to the realm of Evil and therefore, no matter how despised, share in the ominous charisma of the sacred. It profaned, rather, by its ruling elites who would cynically subject the order to a totalistic "security" regime imposed on the whole globe, every last corner and cave. The globe in its entirety becomes— as the Pentagon now calls the theatre of military operations— a "battlespace."

8.

The economic concept of class has undergone a historical change, following advances in the capitalist means of production and the expansion

³⁰ For an informative overview of Fordism and its aftermath see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990), 121-97.

of commodity forms and market imperatives into all sectors of human experience, including religion, romance and sexual desire, childhood, and other private, spiritual, or communal realities that may once have been more impervious to penetration. Class in the way that Marx spoke of it becomes parochial. Class experiences— if not the very definition of “class” as the term for a coherent economic bloc within the production system— become stretched and pulled by the complex and diffuse network of social relations that we all sustain with each other. At some point, class membership and self-consciousness is superceded by the power of the network or field to open spaces for new identity formations and the construction of apparently individuated economic subjectivities. Of course there are still ruling elites, groups of people (call them “classes”) who permeate society with their ideology and profit massively from the labours of countless others. But, as opposed to the Manichean vision of “The Communist Manifesto,” First World capitalism is structured as a hegemonic rather than an intrinsically conflictual hierarchy.

One of the keys to analyzing this hierarchy is the fiction or rather the living fable of democracy, especially as expressed through party politics. The acts and rites of democracy are what validate hierarchical structure and keep it largely free of multi-sided “class” or identity conflict. More important than what democracy does practically is what it does ideologically. Voting and campaigning don’t quite produce or embody freedoms or liberties, but rather ritualize their mythic presence as forms of social self-expression. And yet voting, parliamentary debate, and all the other rites of democracy that naturalize the capitalist hierarchy are far too slow and cumbersome for the postmodern world. They survive only as far as the managerial powers of the state apparatus require legitimation, and to the degree that they uphold the fiction of effective political communication between the different social orders. Democracy is the civic religion, the transparent mystique of the positionally-tiered capitalist hierarchy of “classes” bound together into official political parties. But hierarchy remains (those few at the top enjoy greater wealth than those lower), structuring the social body and embedding the values of the West. It is an ethnocentric and perhaps a racist mystique, given how frequently and implacably Western nations, with the United States in the van, intervene all over the world in the name of democracy and freedom.

We could argue that democracy domestically in the First World, and abroad under conditions of neo-imperialism, as in Iraq, is a mechanism whereby “the people” through their representatives are ritually complicitous in their own disempowerment. What gives the capitalist hierarchy its form and consensual stability—in the West, at least, with its public sphere founded on the constitutional abstractions of “rights” and “democracy”—is not so much felt coercion or even contractualism, but the triumphant and unbroken buzz of electronic connectedness and consumerism. These social practices, apart from their content, can generate illusions of euphoric

plenitude and modes of ritual self-expression that gird together the hierarchy, giving it the hands-on “feel” of a democratic configuration that has transcended history or the toilsome need for socio-political change. Ergo, where Marx was McLuhan shall also be, which somewhat inverts the situation of the great telephone inventor Alexander and his shopping-oriented spouse Mabel (Mabel being the Marxist and Alexander the McLuhanite in spite of himself). And where McLuhan was, like a circuit-board plateau superimposed on Marx, there too simultaneously is Marcuse, reduced to a philosopher of imploded social pleasures rather than a prophet of revolutionary eros.

Social rites pivoting on the mass media factor directly into a communications model of social structuring in which distinct opposites, such as the economic-bloc concept of class, melt away and coagulate as positions of difference. Democracy respects differences precisely because these accommodate so well to the simulations of postmodern capitalism and rarely threaten the hierarchical ordering. Difference-positions, as distinct from oppositional ones, are established and co-determined by the incessant flow of signs and information that regulate their social visibility. One thinks, for example, how alien and opaque the true *oppositional* “other” looks when seen from the democratic-empire’s perspective. This other falls from view and reappears as a racist caricature or a terrorist threat. The insurgent carrying a grenade launcher in Iraq or preaching in a Shia mosque in Iran has nothing to contribute to democratic dialogue, as against that domestic, *differential* “other” who plays her free part in the sign economy that binds and regiments.

The point, announced by McLuhan, is that the information and image flow, independently of whatever it is that these communicate as “mess age,” generates its own social and cultural laws. Cavell’s essay is not yet another foregone demonstration of how the media is used for ritual purposes. Through McLuhan, it carries an inverse lesson on the historicity of ritual in the media age: with television viewers and internet users transforming the function of the audience and reproducing it under the sign of a new ontology, the ritual scenario itself becomes folded inside out, becoming more virtual and more disseminated than our old theoretical models might have allowed.

Here is what Cavell says about the media strategies of the anti-globalization protesters in Seattle (1999) and Genoa (2001):

[o]nce power is recognized as a key component of media rituals, it can be addressed and critiqued, which is what I think the globalization protesters have increasingly done in their encounters with the media; in effect, they have been able to produce media anti-environments of significant political force, thus learning from their artistic predecessors of the 1960s and afterwardsThe local, in such cases, trumps the global

precisely through the paradox of global mediation which heightens the profile of the local What these protesters have enacted is the understanding that media are social forms, that they are material, that they are not irrelevant to political life but fundamental to it. And the internet has increasingly shown itself to be capable of challenging the dominant media centres.

Cavell is to my mind, a little too sanguine about the lasting impact of interventions into the political imaginary of an electronically mediated public sphere. These are mass interventions that can in short time build a politically alternative tradition on the global level, but the mainstream media also neutralizes these insurgencies by assigning them a rhetorical ephemerality equivalent to everything else that passes for “politics” in the daily information deluge. Nevertheless, Cavell is right to underscore the all-important truism that grass-roots democratic opposition, where it exists at all, must negotiate the media’s power to implode everything into its own networks and disembodiments. Protest masters the art of constructing dissonant signs and environments, and reaches a limit. Anything beyond that, anything that violently breaks through the security perimeters that protect the world’s elites and occupies the exclusionary zone, would be the real moment of opposition and would require that the media not only play catch-up but also reveal the assymetric extent of its allegiances to the capitalist hierarchy (read, in the language of pop protest,— “corporations”) over direct democracy.

Protesters that want to express themselves non-violently do so by gathering, marching, and creating a politicized folk spectacle. They make their demands and stage their entry into the political field not through fixed positions in the institutional superstructure, but through the fluid channels of media discourse. This, however, binds their voice(s) to the spreading technicity of a global communications system whose intrinsic property is the erosion of oppositional perspectives through a mediated exchange—mediated foremost by the technology and the formal properties of the media, and lastly by media personnel themselves. The imperative, in the end, is communication, not strict or decisive opposition. This imperative, moreover, operates on a certain a scale: mass communication. While heterogeneity and positions of difference are respected and represented as global realities, they are not allowed to drop out of the mass network and become independent or sovereign grounds of opposition. Multiple cross-currents, not division and difference-through-separation, are the imperial law.

Those pursuing identity politics or speaking as a special interests constituency must at bottom agree to speak in the idiom of mass connectedness. This idiom is perhaps less of a message than a predigested format, a set of rhetorical forms that Cavell identifies with the media’s patterns of mediation. In political terms, there can be no content to such

mediated, public communication except for the punctuated repetition of a limited set of generic values that enjoy universal communicability: “development,” “democracy,” “national security,” and, most, sacred of all, “human rights.” This last value, perhaps because it touches on that infinitely nostalgic concept of humanity, remains, at least formally, a consensus maker, for it can deconsecrate all other political alternatives, effectively silencing their “oppositional” claims. For victims of UN-legitimated sanctions or humanitarian-bombing interventions, human rights is clearly a myth. But in global discourse it is a summit value whose chief, self-appointed guardian remains the state apparatus.

If we leave aside the ideological differences that separate anti-globalization protesters from the world’s governing elites, who must conduct their business while sheltered away in well-guarded compounds, we are left with the media apparatus as the chief organ of political self-expression. In such a picture, the contradictions generated within global capitalism, whatever these are at the concrete social and political level, do not oppose each other as distinct opposites (that’s what “terrorists,” the ultimate in profanity and nihilism, are for, even to the point of making the racism of the “civilized” relatively more respectable), but rather fold toward each other and even regulate their differences through communication. And when communication, in the ultimate form of a public discourse of universal rights and secular reason, can’t regulate that which power or interests see as requiring regulation, then this same discourse of rights can equally veil the exercise of state violence.

9.

A long word now on ritual studies and postmodernism, since such studies are in many ways so consonant with the privileges and the pitfalls of the postmodern approach to knowledge. That the academic humanities are part of a knowledge economy goes without saying. But what does this actually mean? First, I would venture the Kantian-type claim that there are conditions of possibility that determine the attitude to knowledge in the humanities today. These conditions are those of the industrial and more recently the techno-electronic means of production, which have put “human resources” on par with raw materials and information. They are, following the Kantian line, conditions that are intuitive to us. We cannot think or operate outside of their determinations, no matter how intellectually skeptical or morally humane we might be as humanists.

For the humanities, postmodernity identifies that historical passage in which tradition becomes an epistemic product. Tradition lives on, not as an aura or a cultural foundation, or even a transmission, but as an archival cache, dispersed and managed through material holdings and museums,

as well as the burgeoning databases that now serve scholarship.³¹ Tradition is perceived as something to be curated; it belongs to historicism and to competing theories, critical “discourses.” Both of these, in turn, are modes of knowledge whose currency and whose value is shaped by economic and technical pressures affecting the academy from the outside.³² What weaves through all this historicizing and theorizing of tradition is, of course, politics. Long-running norms and ideas such as the heritage of great books and ancient verities are revisited “redescriptively” as Doty says. New intellectual constituencies arise by foregrounding their own “othering.” They competitively reinvent or ideologically reframe the contents of the archive, rescuing those voices, stories, artifacts, etc., that the dominant culture subordinated, made invisible, or assimilated to its own master tradition.

These redescriptive or revisionist initiatives, which may include the founding of new programs or subdisciplines, are at one level an intra-academic response to the competition of interests and the division of labour enforced by traditional capitalism. At another level, redescriptiveness advances with the aid of fresh or hybrid methodologies, which are an intellectual counterpart, within the humanities, to the technological research and development systems that mark an evolved form of capitalism in which the older labour theory of value recedes as does the scene of labour itself.

Though they are assessed by the number of books or articles published with reputable presses or journals, humanities researchers do not produce precisely quantifiable and measurable commodities. Where the analogy with capitalist modes of production holds is in the development of critical methodologies and revamped disciplinary domains. When the new revisionists actively fracture formerly unified fields of knowledge (e.g. the Western literary canon) they venture into the production of new disciplinary constructs. Often the rationale behind these new constructs has been that the “other” gains more voice, more visibility, and that the fund of humanistic (or post-humanistic as the case may be) knowledge is updated, is become more reflexive and more technically rigorous in studying its objects. Thus is represented the move from modern (competition of interests, scenes of concentrated proletarian labour, and the industrial division of labour) to postmodern capitalism (speculative financing, accelerated technological research, and the information economy). Scholars working in the new, semi-choate areas have abundant reasons (pecuniary reasons, of course, but

³¹ Jerome McGann urges scholars to engage actively with the shaping of digitized archives and electronic networks. See his earnest overview of what is to be done, “Radiant Textuality,” in *Victorian Studies* 39, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 379-90.

³² I find it symptomatic that *American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines*, eds. Thomas Bender and Carl Schorske (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), begins with essays on the study of economics and ends with a contribution on how identity politics has affected the disciplines.

also personal and political) in playing the academic game in a postmodern way.

However, there are determinants, or, better yet, conditions beyond the economic and the technical imperatives of capitalism, which factor into postmodern scholarly practices. The question of the “other” forms an indispensable ethical touchstone long after man as the measure of all things (the touchstone concept in early modern humanism) becomes man as the instrumental master of all things, including workers, women, and foreign peoples as things. Critical approaches and methodologies may themselves infuse some of these values and sensitivities. Cancelling out the authority of *grands récits* and breaking up the canonical authority that held them intact was much the rage in the closing quarter of the twentieth century, and scholarly fields in the humanities are probably, on the whole, better off for it. The whole process is not about end, and that’s not just because the old verities and the great books held everything harmoniously in place like a necro/alba/andro-centric (dead and white and male) version of the Ptolemaic universe; and now that that cosmology has been exposed as a fictive construct and the crystalline spheres are shattered and lying in fragments, there’s a big void that needs filled. That void is being filled because everything in nature, including humanities scholarship, abhors a vacuum, especially an ethical one.

However, two points need to be made about the process in question, for which the breakdown of the Ptolemaic universe isn’t necessarily the best analogy. First we want to understand that the politics underlying the founding of new fields or subdisciplines such as Women’s Studies, Gay Studies, Asian-American Studies, Diaspora Studies, Ritual Studies, etc., should not be understood as a revolutionary process, as somehow challenging the larger economic and technical consensus of the world outside of the academy by upsetting its reflected values within it. Rather, these are fields in the sense elaborated by Bourdieu, and they have not rejected but critically re-evaluated and re-inscribed that “real-world” consensus within the knowledge-production system of current humanistic learning. But of course no such consensus, extra- or intra-academic, can remain fully fixed, for economies and technologies are driven by a dynamic of capitalist change. Which brings us to the second point: the canonical humanities and their andro-and-Euro-centric values (we can just as easily call these privileges) did not fall because they were ontologically less true, or produced inferior knowledge than what has since been built on or from their ruins. They fell when their ostensible referents (moral, epistemological, material) outside of the text, the picture frame, the proscenium arch, left them with nothing credible to work with. The canonical humanities were incrementally disowned by the wider culture that claimed to be sharing their verities while progressively losing its grip on the values and realities that once grounded these verities.

It is ironic, but the humanities now suffer from the very history that they once legitimated and took sustenance from, namely, “Western” history and its progressive march through time. The humanities have been fractured and disowned by shifting economic and social forces whose values they no longer serve so effectively, or co-produce. Anything less than a direct confrontation with this disconnect is not postmodern, and might result in a drift toward racism, ethnocentrism, androcentrism, anthropocentrism, and so on (such a hearty list of ism-ic sins). Thus arises the equivalent of an ethical imperative. Progressive scholarship, almost as a rule, seeks to displace one’s perception and one’s affect onto the “other,” so as to attach our intransigent per-spectivalism and our egotism to something humane and authentic; if not to redeem history of its wrongs, then to prevent the free-fall of a post- or in-human history from continuing indefinitely. But what could it mean today to argue that man is the measure of all things? That the polis is the civic template for democracy? Or that Jerusalem is the contact point for two orders, the cosmic and the historical? Species supremacism, fanaticism, and ideological and military violence are some of the answers that pop into mind when the questions are transferred into contemporary historical contexts. Critically considered, that first question requires that we linger over it with a skeptical, postmodern eye, asking what kind of construct “man” is and was, and what happens to his “essence” when the construct changes? Not to mention that the question of that fancied essence or those historical constructs needs to be gendered.

The culture of great books and ancient verities was historically constituted within an academic system whose development ran parallel to the formation of American and European nations in the late-eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries. But the development can also be said to reach back into the immediate pre-history of the nation, as in the case of the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, which put the human figure and history painting (a category comprising virtuous scenes from pagan antiquity and Biblical subject matter, including the rites and sacraments of the Church) at the top of the hierarchy of genres, and was founded in order to magnify Louis XIV and his absolutist program of state centralism. The modern humanities curriculum was crystallized over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the immediate context being the rise of the nation state and imperial competition among states. The fracturing and the reordering of this curriculum, which basically had three divisions (the national, the Classical, and the Judaeo-Christian heritage), is correspondingly historical. It attests to the emergence of a post-colonial and neo-imperial global order that is, as Hardt and Negri argue quite convincingly, defined by its attempt at total planetary dominance. Thus, Women’s Studies, etc., are established as zones of postmodern knowledge and their charter calls not for revolution but for resistance and historical revisionism. The logic that compels them is not the toppling of

empire, much as this might be in the rhetorical vanguard of their claims, but the achievement of an institutional restructuring, which is what the much-banded term “counter-hegemonic,” or for that matter “post-colonial,” actually amount to.

But there are internal relativities here as well, across the whole territory of the postmodern humanities. Certain new fields of knowledge such as Women’s Studies and Gay Studies are indeed revolutionary in their first appearance, although they finally submit to criteria of validity that are finally shared across the whole of the restructured humanities and that I claim replicate the economic and technical imperatives of the world beyond the academy. Ritual studies, on the other hand, has not been instituted through a large-scale paradigm shift or, as in some parts of literary studies, a revolutionary insurrection and a deconstructive assault on a profoundly ancient tradition of canons and logocentric practices stretching back through the hegemonic rise of print culture and the beginnings of Renaissance humanism, and then back again into the exegetical labours of monastic brothers, and before that rabbinical hermeneutics, and all the way back through Rome and Greece, perhaps to the offices of Egyptian scribes and the Mesopotamian inventors of writing.

Compared to this, ritual studies possesses, at best, a belated canon. Catherine Bell writes that “[t]he study of ritual arose in [the nineteenth century,] an age of unbounded confidence in its ability to explain everything fully and scientifically, and the construction of ritual as a category [was] part of this worldview.”³³ What has occurred with ritual studies over a relatively short time in the closing decades of the twentieth century is a microcosm of what has happened to the humanities generally: the canons have been shaken and the archive has opened; canonical texts and the critical positions that rely on their authority have been subject to a measure that decenters their primacy; a canon is now measured against the larger and perhaps borderless category of the archive; there has been a move from work to text as Roland Barthes wrote in an essay of that title.³⁴

As Grimes and Doty demonstrate repeatedly in their contributions here, ritual studies has its origins in multiple sources and may avail itself of diverse disciplinary approaches: ethnography, anthropology, comparative religions, literary and historical analysis, etc. Literary studies, by contrast, grew and accumulated its authority from multiple pre-disciplinary starting points which I reviewed above but which can now be enumerated in more detail: Biblical exegesis in the Jewish and Christian traditions; early modern

³³ Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 21.

³⁴ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Image/Music/Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

nationalism in England, in the period uniting Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton; the study of classical rhetoric and *belles lettres* in eighteenth century Scotland; the antiquarian recovery of an indigenous bardic past that would give Romantic-era England, and Great Britain generally, a different cultural trajectory than neoclassical France; the development of a curriculum and national canon that would put the English language and its literature at the service of the imperial mission, particularly in India where the education of civil servants was paramount for the administrative effectiveness of the Raj.

As we can see from the foregoing list, literary studies may be a thoroughgoing discipline, but its disciplinary integrity has evolved in concert with the metropolitan ascendancy of the geographical nation and that nation's imperial agenda. Terry Eagleton writes that

English first germinates in Victorian England as part of a deeply racialized ethnography, and its immediate forbear is a comparative philology which seeks in language the evolutionary laws of racial or national *Geist*. If, for Oxford students today, so-called Old English is compulsory but a systematic reflection on what it means to read is not, this is a direct consequence of the racism and chauvinism of our forefathers. 'I would like to get up a team of a hundred professors,' commented Oxford's Sir Walter Raleigh, with the civilized humanism which was to become a hallmark of his subject, 'and challenge a hundred Boche professors. Their deaths would be a benefit to the human race.' And Raleigh was a good deal more liberal-minded than almost any of his colleagues.³⁵

The rise of postcolonial literary studies, as a successor to Commonwealth literature, may be said to reflect the collapse of empire-nationalism as well as its half-eradicated legacy (i.e. specifically English literature as an imperial standard by which other commonwealth writings in English will be measured) among the formerly colonized. Ritual studies is part of the same temporality as postcolonial studies and it shares in some of its problematics, even to the point that the two may find common ground in aims and approaches, which of course makes them truly sub- and inter-disciplinary. Unlike postcolonial studies, however, which has a larger disciplinary home, namely literature and criticism proper, ritual studies is like a child that was raised by being passed from hand to hand; raised by a village rather than a single family unit. As distinct from the evolution of English, or for that matter French or Russian literature, its dispersed origins

³⁵ "The Crisis of Contemporary Culture," in *New Left Review* 196 (November/December 1992), 31. Eagleton quotes Raleigh from Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 88-9. The Raleigh in question is not to be confused with his Renaissance-era namesake.

could never be unified under the umbrella of a nationalist ideology which in turn attained disciplinary coherence through recourse to philology, classical rhetoric, genre theory, and so on, which are the foundations of all departments of national literatures.

But there shouldn't be anything academically invidious about distinguishing between areas of study that have attained disciplinary integrity and those that haven't and may never do so. Ritual studies is akin to Comparative Literature programs in North American universities, where "theory" is the unifying glue. The likelihood that ritual studies will never leave the disciplinary wilderness and colonize its promised Canaan is precisely why the term "postmodern" or "postmodernism," for all its loose usage and outworn gloss, is still serviceable. The variety of disciplinary tools makes ritual studies refreshingly flexible and, I would say, naturally postmodern. This would seem a paradox, since postmodernism, as a period term with an identifiable set of cultural characteristics should be nothing if not unnatural, at least in terms of the anti-essentialist ideology of much of contemporary critical thinking. And yet this is exactly what makes it natural; it is *natural* after its time, in conformity with larger economic and social forces that have determined its currency as a popular byword and its cultural presence as a model knowledge. Ritual studies is to my mind an exemplary instance of this type of knowledge, with the Grimes essay herein giving noteworthy proof of how a scholar at the top of his powers may move nimbly and laterally into different research domains, upsetting but not all-out toppling foundational pieties. That essay begins, in fact, with Grimes saying that his job description as Professor in a religion and culture department "commissions" him to "boundary-hop," and the rest of his discussion makes it quite clear that ritual studies in its varied strategies typifies postmodernity.

One could quip that ritual studies was always already prototypically postmodern, but only if we appreciate the interplay of cliché and contradiction in an "always already" latent postmodernism. This Derridean coinage, when applied beyond its deconstructive contexts, sounds like the slogan pasted on a ready-to-eat dinner or a 24-hour commercial service—which corresponds perhaps to the interflux of high and low in postmodern culture and to the debasement of the aura that the most specialized concepts may suffer when they begin to circulate beyond their cloistered academic spaces. This debasement, which has also affected the meanings and usages of the term "deconstruction," is inevitable when the characteristic features of postmodernism are prevalent within and without the academy.

We know that postmodernism, with all its mixture of happenstance and historicism, represents a particular type of ethical and cultural temporality. Auras of all kinds, pseudo-, retro-, and revisionist, buried and commemorated, can proliferate as freely as intellectual or ethical needs arise. The sweeping liminality of the postmodern shift coughs up all kinds

of paradoxes, especially when auras or foundations are in question. Consider the story that Driver tells about Turner, who “[a]ssum[ed] Latin to be a kind of liminal language” and therefore wouldn’t countenance any tampering with Catholic sacraments. In privileging the Latin of the traditional Mass, not only did Turner “confuse the liminal with the esoteric,” says Driver, but he contradicted his own declared “champion[ing]” of postmodernism. Whatever he had written about creative flux and performative freedom couldn’t convince him that liturgical changes in the post-Vatican II Church were anything but destructive. Turner is quoted warning his co-religionists that “the traditional Roman Rite should not be lightly abandoned to the disintegrative forces of personal religious romanticism, political opportunism and collective millenarianism. We must not dynamite the liturgical rock of Peter.”³⁶

10.

Dominant concepts, such as liminality, ritualization, play, performativity, arise from different disciplinary areas and become indispensable to understanding why a Western world that Nietzsche said was Godless, or from which “God” had been evicted or rendered historically obsolete, should be so awash in behaviours and values that require a ritual frame of analysis. Turner’s personal contradiction translates into larger historical terms. His insistence on foundations (i.e. saving St. Peter’s “rock”), when set next to his professional practice, points toward questions that continue to resonate in the discrepancies and paradoxes of contemporary Western culture. Should Turner practice what he preaches? Or is it not the case that practice and preaching are here substitutions and inversions of each other, incapable of merging, but setting off each other’s trajectories like those interpenetrating cones that Yeats used to diagram his vision of history as an affair of “gyres”? If so, so any demand for consistency from Turner would be rather mechanical and disingenuous. Turner has every right to pose the counter-question of which came first, myth or ritual, and to expect no confident, intellectually honest answer. As to the legitimacy of the question of whether he should practice what he preaches, the proper response would then be this: which is the myth and which the ritual, the Mass or postmodern scholarship?

The questions pull in many directions. How is it that ritual seems to be centered on mystification and magic while ritual studies, as a dimension of serious scholarship, pursues some sort of demystified objectivity? Is the gap between research and its object really bridgeable, or must we settle for

³⁶ The quotation and previous citations from Driver are from his *Liberating Rites*, 201.

a contradictory relation between these two orders of—what shall we call them, knowledge? experience? value? The case of Turner, straddling both sides of the line, is emblematic of this difficulty. Can one be a professional anthropologist and a Counter-Reformation Catholic and not be mystified in either life-world? This is a conundrum worth pondering, perhaps more so than the question of ritual vs. ritual studies, which may appear naive, for there really isn't anything unique about this division between research and its object. Literary studies and art history, with their analyses of creative works, are structured the same way. So are theoretical and applied psychology. But I'm posing the naive-seeming question of research vs. its object in order to begin a reflection on the mystifications that hover around our knowledge-drives in various sectors of the humanities, and to suggest that part of the mystification has to do, paradoxically enough, with the fact that the study of humanities has been restructuring itself in the image of a techno-scientific society.

As humanists, we can't afford to avoid or long suppress the real question: how should we deal with the paradoxes and ambiguities that our pursuit of demystified objectivity, or knowledge, gives rise to on the terrain of truth? Today the burden of this question is felt not so much where we expect to find it, say in clear-cut cases such as Turner's, where the brilliant scholar can't bring himself to live up to his intellectual conclusions when these might interfere with his deepest convictions about personal religion and religious ritual. It is felt more strongly in those situations where we find truth converted into socially instrumental forms such as law, speech codes and codes of public conduct, and regulations or deregulations that pertain to our relationship to nature (including the human body). In short, in all those areas where truth understood as a moral or ethical matter is in question. Meanwhile, the current world system speaks another discourse of truth, one that is practically more foundational than morality or ethics, or even law. This is the discourse of economic truth, which speaks a language of efficiency, profit, and management, and relies on numerous other idioms of instrumentalism and political economy.

Postmodern humanities scholarship conspires with this economy, and its ideology. It pursues "knowledge" and conducts "research" through technical means, by which I mean mostly the specialized vocabularies of the different study fields. Judging from publishers' lists, job postings, conferences, calls for grant applications, etc., academics in the humanities keep themselves busy and do a brisk business producing knowledge around all kinds of truths. Ritual studies is of course part of this fray. Ritual remains associated with symbolism, performance, and mystification; and from these it generates its own truths, whatever these may be in social or personal terms, but it must be studied in the name of technical knowledge (i.e. theory-driven paradigms of knowledge) and under the rule of language, for language and its concepts remains the ultimate tool. There's no other way, it seems.

Lest we balk at the appearance of this rather old and sacerdotal term “truth” among good current concepts, many of them equally old but seemingly more vital and timely, such as ethics, value, knowledge, even humanity, we need to revisit one or two formative issues in postmodernism. And where better to start but in philosophy, where truth and postmodernism meet on what seems like a field of natural antagonism. Jeff Noonan has summed up where philosophy, the queen of the truly liberal arts or humanities, stands on this question of truth and knowledge: “[p]hilosophical thought claims a certain privilege for itself. This privilege is not simply to name the essence of things but, more importantly, to reorganize the everyday world on the basis of this knowledge.”³⁷ Noonan makes the statement in the course of his discussion of Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics, and he does so within the framework of the “danger,” as recognized by Derrida, that such a philosophical approach may pose to humanity. (Actually, it is only over the last century and half that this type of philosophizing has been seen as an “approach”; prior to that, in the long stretch from Socrates and Plato to Hegel, and with a few exceptions to prove the rule, metaphysics was actually the guardian of the “privilege[d]” truths that founded philosophy.) But why then should we speak of the dangerous consequences of metaphysics if no philosopher worth his salt would want to reinstall metaphysics on the high throne of philosophy, effectively turning the clock back to a period before logical positivism, the linguistic turn, or postmodernism?

The danger comes upon us in precisely the measure that the concept of truth is homeless. For while still trailing its streams of former metaphysical splendor, truth now makes expedient alliances with all sorts of authorities, in both the ideological and the economical and technological spheres. Carol Duncan begins her discussion of museums as ritual environments by discerning how the Enlightenment set out to “break the power and influence of the church” and convert “secular truth” into the “authoritative truth” of the West’s secular social order:

It is secular truth—truth that is rational and verifiable—that has the status of “objective” knowledge. It is this truest of truths that helps bind a community into a civic body by providing it a universal base of knowledge and validating its highest values and most cherished memories. Art museums belong decisively to this realm of secular knowledge, not only because of the scientific and humanistic disciplines practiced in them—conservation, art history, archeology—but also because

³⁷ Jeff Noonan, *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 13.

of their status as preservers of the community's official cultural memory.³⁸

It comes as no surprise to learn that this cultural memory is value-laden and ethnocentric, privileging, through the ritualized structuring of the museum experience, the aesthetic canons expounded historically by Euro-American males and the elite interests of the players that make up the contemporary art world.

The partnership of truth and social authority reaches well beyond the quasi-ritual environment of the museum. The ideological signs of collective memory or cultural heritage are in one sense more apparent, more concentrated in the symbolism of the museum or the court of justice (Duncan's examples), than the ideology that truth subtends elsewhere. It is in the conflation of truth and technical knowledge, and the function of such knowledge, in all its forms—material and methodological—in the global economy, that the concept of truth proves how insidious and indispensable it is. Foucault is quite explicit on this point, observing that “[t]ruth is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement.”³⁹ We have here come down from the level of essence, as in Noonan's pithy summary of “philosophical thought,” to the field of knowledge. It needn't take the Derridean re-reading of Nietzsche or Marx to tell us that when truth dissolves as an ontological essence, it re-emerges more strongly as a value form; that is, a form that is not transcendent as in the old metaphysics, but immanent in the field of commodity relations and power interests that play through these. There are consequences in this for humanities scholars.

Foucault calls on intellectuals to throw off their assumptions and abandon the undigested Marxian perspective of ideology as a “false consciousness” that might be scientifically corrected. This perspective still clings to an ideology of truth as a discourse of abstractions, concepts systematically strung together at a meta level and reflecting prior material realities. It is the materiality of truth, its reified presence in the mechanisms of power, in the rationality inscribed by these mechanisms through their productive operations, that must be the foremost concern:

[t]he essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by

³⁸ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 7-8.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon et al (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131.

a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people's consciousness—or what's in their heads—but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth.⁴⁰

Intellectual elites—and this refers not only to academic specialists or to the experts who populate think-tanks, but also to those who sit on editorial committees and shape public opinion through the various media—prefer to talk in terms of discourse, knowledge, or policy rather than truth, and thus truth in our society is either heard on the lips of preachers and moralists or is constrained to appear in normalized, institutional forms as the technical language of regulation: offensive or impermissible speech is policed, gender equity is written into administrative policies, human rights are legislated as universal values. These things are done in the name of justice and social harmony, but what it amounts to, objectively speaking, is an engineered consensus, the universal production of a prescriptive truth about who we are or are destined to be. All the humanitarian field work and the media and diplomatic pressure exerted in war and crisis situations by the myriad world-wide non-profit groups whose goals do not necessarily coincide with the interests of existing governments, serve a similar end. All those divine or cosmic truths that in pre-modern societies ritual engenders, enacts, and normalizes through its mystifications and symbolic appurtenances, will in our world wear the mask of reason. But ritual cannot be dismissed so glibly, nor should its relationship to reason—which of course includes not only scientific research and development but also the sphere of economics, politics, law—be viewed so diametrically.

At a general, public level, Western society has updated or developed ritual modes that suit the would-be permanence of our social values and legitimate their far-reaching institutional presence. One thinks of official apologies, commemorations, vigils, and civic rites performed in the name of atonements for slavery, genocide, and the abuse—systemic or encoded as policy—meted out to different groups at one time or another. These atonements are, in the same breath, narcissistic affirmations of self-renewal, proofs that we are auto- rather than divinely-enlightened and can progressively cleanse ourselves of historical irrationalities. Cynically, one could say that the victimizer nation, in running through the cycle of rites, aims to settle outstanding accounts as to no longer be victimized by its own past. All those public forms of atonement are, in some sense, the emptiest and most hypocritical of rituals: easy symbolic gestures that are meant to manufacture mythical resonance, and yet fail to confront what turns out to be a continuum of paradoxes and contradictions in the chain of values that now structure the social realm as a global site, a multicultural field. There

⁴⁰ *Power/Knowledge*, 133.

is, of course, the over-arching paradox of a secular society whose horizons are metaphysical (a conviction that certain rights, for example, exist and are a true and essential quality innate to the human being once it begins existence outside the mother's body) and yet whose metaphysics, when openly admitted, are expressed through social engineering. Within this horizon emerge as a set of legal and moral crises that attend such issues as cloning and stem-cell research, the abortion debate which pits the sanctity of individual (women's) choice against the transcendental value of unborn life, the consumption of child pornography or the molestation of minors by figures of authority and public repute, the spectre of "terrorism" as a threat to "civilization" and "freedom."

A society so pronouncedly concerned with human rights, and willing to promote and implement these through an array of public mechanisms, nevertheless struggles with all sorts of inequalities, inhumanities, and racisms simmering away underneath the egalitarian veil of its daily life. Sins of this last sort emerge regularly in this or that instance of racial profiling or hate crime by unknown culprits (toppled cemetery stones, playgrounds sprayed with graffiti, defaced campaign posters). But the prevalence of systemic racism and inequality is most prominent, albeit in seamlessly sublimated forms, in the supporting ceremonies and in the media coverage that attends current world conflicts. In these instances we witness the valorization of our own dead over theirs, the privileging of certain victim groups over others, and the appeal to our better selves in those ritualized—is there a more apt word?—confessions, apologies, investigations, and scapegoatings that follow individual or collective betrayals of the public trust.

The precedents for this are always the grave, measured tonalities and the sober, utilitarian analytics that waft from the mouths of media intellectuals and public figures when they gather to debate, and ultimately justify, "humanitarian bombing" campaigns, "pre-emptive," "regime change" wars, or targeted "decapitations" (effectively, assassinations of popular or elected leaders) that invariably harvest thousands of civilian deaths. The discourse surrounding these actions or campaigns is not necessarily racist, inhumane, or baldly imperial, that is, dedicated to the maintenance of hierarchical inequalities across the globe. It is what it says it is: technical and ideological, dedicated to the stark calculus of "national security" and the protection of the international economic order. But the commemoration of particular victims over others, the mourning rituals, the journalism that assigns more presence to "our" equipment, our firepower, our way of seeing over "their" embodiment and exponentially higher death rate, reminds us that the technical and ideological discourses of global order and global governance are nothing short of imperial, and that the imperial approach always tends to pull toward the metrics of race. The relationship of the high-tech soldier to the low-tech native, especially the resistant native, must be deeply perverse if only because of the native has no option

I Introduction

but to resist with her or his relatively unarmed body. When these natives are captured they become almost purely bodies, receptacles of stealth and hate whose human rights are tenuous or simply non-existent.⁴¹

I have undertaken this long digression so as to argue that contemporary ritual studies does us all a great service when it examines how ritual and ritualistic-type behaviours effect and legitimate metaphysical truth. Oftentimes such truth is more of a fiction or a mystification than the actual ritual processes that orchestrate communal unity and edification in the name of that truth. From the scholarly standpoint there are interesting problems here, for the deconstruction of the ideological truths or the analysis of the personal and communal edification that ritual can produce and legitimate, themselves belong to a humanistic knowledge economy that relies on its own forms of ritual. One of the powerful implications of the Grimes paper here in *Ritual Economies* is but a mystification-effect arising from the use of metaphor as a critical device. There is, further, a performative dimension to this, for academic intellectuals, within the ambit of their own professional affairs and precincts—the classroom, the office conference with students, the committee meeting, the yearly conference, the hiring interview—act like priestly guardians of certain indispensable cultural orthodoxies and propound their usefulness as a special social caste devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. Their place in the wider economic hierarchy, meanwhile, demands that they also parrot back and to some degree internalize the slogans (often the fictions and the mystifications) and values that their administrative higher-ups and the corporate system ceaselessly transmits and lives by.

11.

I approach this concluding section by way of a scholarly warning, one issued by Grimes at the very end of an article where he reflects on his

⁴¹ Here we can consider the recent scandals over the criminal misconduct of American and British soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The ritualistic element, we can infer, was perhaps more at play in the human rights violations that occurred during the torture and sexual humiliation sessions, which were repeated and taped and photographed over many months, than in the rote apologies and investigations that followed. The ritualization involved in the grisly “beheading” video of American citizen Nicholas Berg provides another dimension to this. The credibility of this video as an execution performance was immediately challenged in mainstream journalistic coverage outside of the United States. See Richard Neville’s “Who Killed Nick Berg?” at the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s website: www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/05/28/1085641717320.html

troubled role as an academic expert for one of the Arts and Entertainment Channel's programs in the *Ancient Mysteries* series. Grimes writes:

[c]laims that media *are* ritual, that ritual is *really* a kind of performance, that social interaction *is* ritual, or that ritual is *really* social interaction will not get us very far. There is truth in all these equations, but if the tensions between the domains are relaxed by making the one equal the other or by rendering one thing a mere subcategory of the other, then the dialogue among performance studies, ritual studies, and media studies scholars will become monologue.⁴²

The caveat being sounded here is reasonable. It speaks to a legitimate concern about the potential loss of conceptual precision in borrowing each other's tools or wandering opportunistically into each other's unpoliced domains. Grimes claims that humanistic knowledge today is structured like a forcefield of epistemologies whose "tensions" and differences should not be suppressed or relaxed. The result might be an intellectual muddle, or, worse yet, a discursive homogeneity parading as an easy-going pluralism.

Taken collectively, these "tensions" that Grimes wants to preserve are not intended to create exclusionary zones or to put down hard rules for negotiating proper passage across epistemic borders. Rather, they keep the widely-flung field of the postmodern humanities torqued together, as it were. He envisages a heteronomy of conversationalists who never forget or forget to critique their own disciplinary sovereignty. By its nature, this self-critique would recognize that different study fields share affinities and affiliations, and that reaching into each other's disciplines means the making of metaphoric moves. But metaphors aren't the equivalent of the external assessors that academic units periodically engage to review their operations. Metaphor is an empowering as well as a trouble-making way of building bridges, for by definition it spans different or heteronomous domains. A recognition of the challenges posed by metaphor as both bridge into affiliated areas of knowledge, or as a builder of affinities, and as the master trope of a particular knowledge-bloc such as a disciplinary division or subdivision, gets at the heart of *Ritual Economies*. In the diversity of its contributions, the volume proposes a postmodern plurality of approaches to ritual, in which the term ritual itself stretches and takes on new more inclusive shadings. But there are unwanted consequences to such a stretch, which Grimes warns against: loss of disciplinary vigilance, sloppy and indiscriminate reasoning, a disregard for empiricism and concrete nuances.

⁴² "Consuming Ritual: A&E's *Sacred Rites and Rituals*," in *Contemporary Consumption Rituals: A Research Anthology*, eds. Cele Otnes and Tina Lowrey (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 34.

Before closing out, and rather polemically at that, let me therefore summarize the found logic that constellates this volume. The concept of restricted and general economies as articulated by Bataille, and the concept of the field as well as the network, have been used to frame the thinking on ritual that goes on in *Ritual Economies*. Restad's essay on Alexander and Mabel Bell's debate over Christmas gift-giving supplies us with an image of rituals being streamed through the social grooves of an economy whose pleasures and higher ecstasies are more or less "restricted" according to Bataille's standards. Cavell's essay insists that the 24-hour shopping, news, and entertainment society that traces its economic ancestry to late nineteenth century America sustains some sense of its unity (albeit dispersed into far-flung and disembodied audiences) through the ritualizing mediations afforded by television and the internet. By training their eyes on ritual studies as well as ritual, the essays by Grimes and Doty allow us to see how postmodernism, which names a set of cultural and social transformations within a globalized horizon, is liminal, is the mark of a historical passage.

That the term postmodern is much less fashionable these days, no longer appearing with such frequency in academic job postings or the titles of scholarly publications as it did in the 1980s and '90s, says something about the swiftness of cultural cycles and the never-abating scramble for competitive epistemologies in the humanities—i.e. devising research projects that carry enough "relevance" to attract major grants. In some sense, the tag "postmodern" has already become a kind of museological chronotope that typifies the closing decades of the twentieth century, in much the same way that the terms "gay nineties," "decadence," and "*belle époque*" are remembered as the catch-words that closed out the previous century. "Decadence" may have taken stylized and ritualized forms of self-expression among the symbolists and the aesthetes of the *fin-de-siècle*, but for Nietzsche the term was an analytic lever in his critique of European civilization. Postmodernism is even more suited to its late twentieth century milieu than decadence was to its own, mainly on account of its direct linkage to historiography and its theoretical relevance in the field of cultural production.⁴³

As exemplified by the essays within these pages, ritual studies incorporates itself into the folds of postmodernism and its approach to knowledge. It jettisons metaphysical focal points and their liturgical underpinnings as necessary conditions for the definition of ritual. And in

⁴³ As is now widely agreed, postmodern periodization and cultural production is convincingly expounded in the first and last chapters of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) and in Jean Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

giving up the prospect of ever “owning” anything on its own disciplinary terms, ritual studies embraces “ritualizing” perspectives on play, performativity, mass media and mass spectacles, patterns of electronic interaction, and so on. The study of ritual thus joins other research fields that attempt to probe and understand, within newly globalized horizons, the nature of postmodern temporality as an experience exacerbated by the punctuated redundancy of social contacts. These contacts may be random and fleeting or recurrent and formulaic as part of the constant commercial rhythm of our lives, but we can’t easily minimize their powers of interpellation. Ritualization can serve to scale down such pressures (so that they can be sized to personal needs or weakened in the interests of defending a sovereign community. Invariably, various performance strategies are used to re-order or resist the existing social regimes of a world awash with consumption and ruled by a multiplicity of interventions and controls, not the least of which belongs to the police. Much of what ritual studies today does, when training its attention on a secular but far from unmythified society, is what it has always done: it analyzes and situates these strategies materially and it keeps an eye on history. It takes measure of the seemingly speeded-up or ephemeral orders of things and behaviours, as well as their symbols and settings, many of which are increasingly virtual or cybernetic; all of these order, symbols, and settings are then mapped onto the ritual and the ideological residues—ruined orders, one might say—of the past.

This last point should contribute to the suspicion that postmodernism and all that it comprises in the sphere of consumption and the would-be one-world political order is an exacerbated state of collective liminality, in the sense that both Gennep and Turner defined the liminal: a transitional condition, ontologically ambiguous, deeply, even un-consciously uncertain as to its ultimate trajectory, and yet relatively bracketed if not ultimately subordinate to a larger order, which itself is mythical in its foundations and meanings. In other words, postmodernism names but one time-scale within the scope of something larger called modernity, which in the West represents a substantial historical chunk of more than half a millennium. That the West in toto is a modern society is, in relative terms (economic, infrastructural, technological, constitutional), quite true, but this doesn’t prevent this same “truth” from functioning mythically. This is a problem that postmodern thinkers recognize and yet can’t shake off, in the same way that ritual is immune to total demystification and only loses its potency when the social complex has no more need of its transformative functions, or fictions.

The ethos of postmodernism is such that historical consciousness can become aestheticized or slides off into myth even when hard historical facts or their contemporary variants, such as apartheid, genocide, environmental wastage, and other major-league problems in the scale of our “human” relations, stare us in the face. How is it that the discourse of public memory, toward which many intellectuals and academic experts make ready

contributions when called upon, can't respond to these facts without opting for calculated amnesia in some cases while choosing to valorize the partiality of ethnic or ideological interests in others? Rituals can and do, of course, play a role in the construction or validation of public or collective memories. A postmodern culture may turn its back on the strict epistemology dividing reason from un-reason, which became a myth constitutive of the Enlightenment, or may juggle and confound the Enlightenment legacy as it prolongs into nineteenth historicism and its master narratives, such as those of class struggle or Anglo-Saxon empire, but can it really distance itself from the fallout of these discourses? Is postmodernism really a temporal successor to an outmoded cultural modernity or merely its indifferent conscience, its decadent reevaluation? Consider the con-temporary notion that global capitalism and "democracy" are the natural outcome of centuries of "development." There is a lot of bloodshed and barbarism elided into such a statement and many intellectuals are willing to hear the whole thing as baldfaced rhetoric even if they agree with its basic assumptions, namely, that there has been progressive change, especially in technology and in areas of social policy and human rights. At the same time, these same intellectuals, necessarily the heirs of Plato and his anti-sophism, agree that where there is rhetoric there is very likely a problem or a calculated deception— a problem of epistemology, if not a dangerous political ruse of some kind or other.

The historical working through of such an impasse is what I would identify as a liminal condition inscripted (and encrypted) into the most advanced postmodern thought and cultural forms. But it may be that the nature and the strategies of such thought or culture actually prolong the liminal suspension. In theory, postmodernism is marked by a destabilization of explanatory macro- or meta-narratives, while its own discursive pluralism remains relatively stabilized by a key epistemological axiom, namely, that facts can have no meaning outside of contexts and seem to diminish almost absolutely if not nurtured by explanatory narratives. Some of us wonder if, due to this deep-running paradox, which makes us all sophists by a half, and then again not, we are not in the end trading "truth" for "knowledge" without quite understanding the larger order that our knowledge serves. As far as the claim that "global capitalism" and "democracy" are a natural outcome of centuries of "development" is concerned, its epistemic validity but not its social or historical force becomes uncertain. It sounds too much like widely-parroted ideology, crude rhetoric. We find ourselves unwilling to make such a flat-out statement, pronouncing it as if it were knowably "true," and yet there's no disputing that there has been concrete development, that as a species we are more masterful of nature, that life-spans have generally lengthened, and so on. And yet the split between the statement and the world around us cannot be collapsed. We live within the rhetoric and feel how difficult it is to discover whether myth or fact or some deconstructed hybrid of the two is at the bottom of this historical macro-narrative.

Immanent in the temporality of the postmodern moment or condition is a certain seemingly interminable historical logic (and the more interminable the historical logic, the more warrant there is, according to the postmodern sensibility, for appropriation, pastiche, *détournement*, high-low intermixtures). But what is it exactly that constitutes this logic? It is nothing less grandiose than the installation of global empire through the worldwide inscription of Euro-American universals, whether these are the universals of a corporate and financial system that spans the hemispheres, a planetary culture of mass consumption, an ideology of human rights as grounded in the greater ideological sanctity of private property, the providential goodness of America's ownership of democracy, and other global truths. It is within this complex layering of universals, which are not free of internal ruptures and certainly not without their coercive violence, that I have attempted to situate my reflections on ritual and its configurations.

At the close of Act I, after his foundations have been undermined by the Ghost, who moves in the earth like an "old mole" or "worthy pioner," Hamlet reels off a couple of his famous lines:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

The time is out of joint . . .

At the outset of what is certainly his best essay, entitled "Experience," Emerson opens with a question and a powerful, swimming conceit, positioning the reader on what has always seemed to me a helix-like strand of stairs in free-floating space:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight.⁴⁴

And, finally, in what is certainly a Euro-centric list, we come to Nietzsche in 1873, not yet thirty (the age of Hamlet, apparently) and not yet mad. In his essay, "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," he writes:

Just as the Romans and Etruscans cut up the heavens with rigid mathematical lines and confined a god within each of the spaces thereby delimited, as within a *templum*, so every people has a similarly mathematically divided conceptual heaven above themselves and henceforth thinks that truth demands that each

⁴⁴ *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, 1903-4), 45.

Ivi Introduction

conceptual god be sought only within *his own* sphere. Here one may certainly admire man as a mighty genius of construction, who succeeds in piling an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation, and, as it were, on running water. Of course, in order to be supported by such a foundation, his construction must be like one constructed of spiders' webs: delicate enough to be carried along by the waves, strong enough not to be blown apart by every wind.⁴⁵

What is the sum of these three citations? Only that there are no grounds for living and dying the myths that we do. There are only fluid foundations—a metaphor and an oxymoron this last phrase, a catachresis to be sure—as resilient and “true” as any ritual.

⁴⁵ In *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. and trans. Sander Gilman et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 251.