

RITUAL, PERFORMANCE, AND THE SEQUESTERING OF SACRED SPACE¹

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I am a ritual studies scholar teaching in a department of religion and culture.² My job description commissions me to boundary-hop, meaning that I cover a sprawling domain labeled “religion and the arts in contemporary North America.” The arts on which my research concentrates are the performing arts, and my usual way of studying these is ethnographic. I observe, participate, and interview. In dutiful obedience to this rather grandiose job description, I also work as consultant for a diverse group of arts and science institutions such as the Society for Ecological Restoration, the Irish World Music Centre, the Cranbrook Institute of Science, WordBridge Playwrights Lab, and the Sundance Institute.

Asked by the Byzantine Studies Institute at Dumbarton Oaks to consult on the topic of sacred screens, my first reaction was to wonder why anyone would spend time, money, and energy studying objects that look to the rest of the world like mere architectural decoration. It is difficult to think of a more obscure topic than that of ritual barriers, the best known example of which is the Orthodox iconostasis, a large door-and-wall structure with holy icons painted on it. Attending to the icons themselves makes obvious sense, but these scholars were studying the screens on which they were painted.

Since material culture studies had begun to make inroads into ritual studies as it had in other fields,³ I agreed to consult; I put my ignorance of the topic at their complete disposal. Goaded by this group of scholars who suggested that ritual studies should have something intelligent to say about altar screens, I conducted a year’s research on gateways, portals, altar rails, curtains, barriers and other devices that had been interposed between, ritual leaders and ritual followers for thousands of years. Altar screens and barriers appear not only in Byzantine churches but in ancient Hebraic temples and contemporary Christian sanctuaries. Screens, sometimes decorated with saints, spirits, deities, or demons, occur in many religious and performing traditions. The question is why? What is the function of

¹ The lecture on which this article is based was first delivered in 2003 as a plenary address for the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Symposium, *Sacred Screens: The Origins, Development, and Diffusion of the Byzantine Sanctuary Barrier*. Then, in 2004 it was presented in revised form at the University of Windsor for the Humanities Research Group’s Distinguished Speakers Series, *Ritual Economies*.

² For essays by important writers in the field see Ronald L. Grimes, ed., *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996).

³ See, for instance, Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

these architectural features? What do they mean? And more generally, how should one think about such objects?

I read a mountain of art history and archaeology and was surprised to find how much ink and photography have been dedicated to depicting and describing altar screens. I was astonished at how little sustained inquiry was being conducted into their meanings and functions. Art historians seemed largely content to repeat the theologians' and liturgists' claims that altar screens enshrine messages of otherness and yet render mystery apprehensible. A few of the younger scholars suggested another possibility: altar screens mystify sources of authority. It seemed obvious that sanctuary barriers might accomplish both tasks, but somehow the analyses seemed superficial and entirely too tame. But for almost a year I was mute. I had no idea what to say that might lend either a cross-cultural or a theoretical perspective to the discussions.

Then one afternoon I literally leaped out of my chair. The leap was provoked by recalling another consultation to which I had been invited as a peculiar kind of court jester. In 2001, I was working at WordBridge, a playwrighting laboratory designed on the model developed at the Playwrights Lab of the Sundance Institute. WordBridge brings actors, directors, dramaturgs, and "others" to develop nascent plays. My job was to serve as a non-theatrical other, a wildcard consultant. Wildcards crosscut the usual workshop activities on the court-fool premise, namely, that if you do something sufficiently provocative, you may constellate a working group's latent creativity into a boiling cauldron of generativity.

I first met Jeff, the other wildcard, a few minutes before taking on our first play together. Jeff Wirth was, and is, an improv artist.

"Have you read it?" Jeff whispered.

"Sure," I said. "Several times. Have you?"

"Nope," he replied, without a trace of shame.

The crowd of theatre professionals began to move inside the studio. Jeff entered, hesitated, then turned on his heels.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Outside," he replied.

I assumed he was embarrassed about not having read the play manuscript.

Now seated at a table, ready to read it aloud for the first time, were the actors. Behind them was a large set of sliding glass doors partially obscured by a black curtain. As the actors began to read the play, *Polar Bears on U.S. 41*,⁴ Jeff's thick glasses gradually became visible. From behind the closed sliding glass door, he was peering in at the play from outside. Occasionally, his antics would evoke audience laughter, leaving the actors puzzled, wondering what was funny in the line they had just read.

⁴ Written by Marisa B. Wegrzyn.

Jeff watched, quietly and intently, shifting his position every now and then. A few of us audience members began to squirm as it dawned on us that, by gazing at our faces and postures, Jeff was turning us into actors. I envied him a little. Whereas scholars are expected to behave, improv artists get to play the class clown.

Later, after the play reading had concluded and the crowd was mingling, Jeff sauntered back into the studio.

“What on earth were you doing?” I asked him.

“Ahhhh . . . , well,” he said, “preserving my theatrical virginity. If I learn too much, too fast, I miss what’s essential.”

There was a pause, then: “Hey, Grimes, where d’ya think the play’s centre of energy is?”

I hesitated. “I’d have to speculate,” I said, a little wary.

“And?” he urged.

I said I supposed the centre of energy was offstage—with the polar bears, who are wandering on the highway in a Wisconsin snow storm. (Because of their colour, they are in danger of being run over by cars.) No bear, I said, ever appears on stage. No character ever suggests that the bears are the “real” actors, since they loom outside, rather than participate in, the play. They are outdoors; the play is set indoors, inside a diner. Their presence is metaphysical. I thought he would wince at the word, but he did not. I hedged my bet by warning Jeff that the playwright may well think otherwise; he should ask her.

Then it was time. The playwright was coffeed up, the director was ready, and it was our turn. What would these two wildcards do? We had no sooner reconvened than Jeff, not prone to wait for authoritative scripts, much less defer to ritual studies scholars, snatched my backpack, put it on, covered it with a baggy sweatshirt, and began to lumber around the room. He *became* the polar bear. Without rubrics, plot, or direction, he roared and ate and slept and farted and swam and gobbled fish, providing the actors and the rather overwhelmed young playwright with a truckload of fish for thought.

After an hour, the bear, now caged in a zoo, began responding aggressively to the bidding of a girl up on the catwalk. To her mom’s horror, she desperately wanted the beast to climb out of the pit and over the barbed wire fence when, suddenly, two actors became cops and shot it.

The polar bear crashed heavily to the floor and died.

The bear was about to pull off his improvised mask and hump in order to re-become Jeff Wirth, when, under the force of divine inspiration, I pressed his head back to the floor and whispered in his ear, “Your life—I mean, death—is not finished yet; stay put.”

I was the appointed court ritualist, and I had not yet earned my keep. So without a ritual text and, for the most part, without words, we conducted a funeral, which not only laid the polar bear to rest—may he forever roar in peace—but also ensured his spiritual and artistic continuation forever and

ever, amen.

The makeshift words and gestures left some actors crying—not actor tears but real tears. As the shift from acting to ritualizing deepened, the salty drops sprang up in surprising quantities. No one was entirely sure how to respond to this intrusion of hyper-reality into fictionality.⁵ By the end of that year's lab, though, some were paying proper homage to education-by-unlearning, to going forward with sideways moves, to seeing through glass doors, darkly, and to ritualizing by improvisation.

Peeking Behind Doors and Curtains

For scholars the gods lurk in details; for ritual studies scholars, sometimes in quite ordinary details. So I return to a tiny detail of the scene: Jeff's, what shall we call it, "othering medium," the sliding glass door. During an actual play, a door transparent to exotic Florida birds strutting and preening outside, a glaring piece of glass through which an intruder might gawk at the action in this theatrical incubation chamber, would not have escaped notice. An alert stage manager would have pulled the black curtain over the door, rendering it invisible. However, during this initial reading, the door had been ignored. Audience members, almost all of them theatre people, would surely exercise good sense and ignore the door.

One of the great difficulties in studying ritual is that we miss the utter ordinariness that suffuses rites, even those that are formal and elevated. So a typical ritual studies tactic, especially when investigating things sacred or sequestered, is to search out the ordinary beneath the special and sacred.⁶

⁵ A provocative treatment of the relationship between play, thus fictionality, and the sacred is Robert Neale, *In Praise of Play: Towards a Psychology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

⁶ Regarding the relationship between ordinariness, ritual, and the sacred consult Ronald L. Grimes, *Marrying & Burying: Rites of Passage in a Man's Life* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995) and Lynda Sexson, *Ordinarily Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). A more typical move among religious studies scholars would be to frame discussions of sacred screens in the rhetoric of sacred space as articulated by Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1959) or his critics, e.g., Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," *Journal of Religion* 52, no. 134-159 (1972). The most successful attempt by a religious studies scholar to tender a theory of religious architecture that is inspired by, but not enslaved to, Eliade, is Lindsay Jones, *Hermeneutical Calisthenics: A Morphology of Ritual-Architectural Priorities*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press for the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000); also see Lindsay Jones, *Monumental Occasions: Reflections on the Eventfulness of Religious Architecture*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Cambridge, MA:

However true it is that altar screens may embody deities and saints, mediate between heaven and earth, and visually constellate cosmologies, it is also true that they are merely wood, stone, or plaster. They are ordinary items of material culture, not altogether different from sliding glass doors through which breeze blows or freight enters.⁷ Even ordinary doors, like gilded gods' gates, simultaneously provoke a desire for entry and block passage. Even ordinary doors can mystify things by framing—which is to say, by revealing, concealing, and focusing the actions of performers.⁸

Popular conceptions often construe ritual as, by definition, religious, thereby putting it in a cultural domain different from that of theatre and the arts. In ritual studies, however, liturgical enactment and theatrical performance are construed not only as different but also as akin.⁹

Ritual studies is not wed to a particular theory, but since its inception in 1977, it has been closely allied with religious studies, anthropology, and performance studies. As a result, much ritual studies research is ethnographic, drawing heavily on participant observation and interview. It is also doggedly comparative, committed to charting cross-cultural similarities and differences.

In field research on ritual, observation and interview are the usual correctives against stereotyping and projecting or other ways of misunderstanding data. However, before arriving at a field site, it is crucial to know what one knows, to disgorge what one takes for granted or imagines. I encourage students bound for the field to imagine, or better, act

Harvard University Press for the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000).

⁷ In the past decade religious studies scholars have become more adept at studying items of material culture. See the May issue (vol. 18, no. 3) of *Spotlight on Teaching*, an insert in *Religious Studies News* (published by the American Academy of Religion). The entire issue is on teaching about material culture in religious studies. See also Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁸ The master of the “framing” metaphor is Erving Goffman. See, for instance, Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1959); *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1967); and *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁹ Tom F. Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), pp. 79-127; Ronald L. Grimes, “Ritual and Performance,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and American Cultures*, ed. Gary Laderman and Luis León (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clio, 2003).

out, what they expect to encounter. They record these imaginings and later, check them against what they actually find.

So let us imagine. Pretend that you are as ignorant as I was about screening devices. Let us say you hardly know what the terms iconostasis and *tramezzo* refer to. Suppose you do not know what such things are for, and you cannot imagine why scholars of things Byzantine and liturgical spend their time on stuff that looks to the rest of the world like mere trappings. What would be your ignorant-outsider answers to the question: What *might* a screening device do?

These are among the possible answers, divided roughly into types:

Aesthetic answers:

- provide something pleasing to look at
- provide a frame through which to look
- cordon off actions—hiding, half-hiding, revealing, or focusing them
- evoke surprise
- change the quality of sound and light
- select for certain kinds of action and not other kinds
- create distance—a here-space and a there-space

Practical answers:

- serve as a support, for example, for pictures and statues
- divide a big space into smaller sections
- provide carpenters with work
- provide painters with a task
- keep “the ladies” busy with holy cleaning
- reduce the visibility of unsightly things

Social-political answers:

- grant certain classes of people access¹⁰
- keep other classes out
- protect those behind the barrier
- engender or enforce a hierarchy
- offer a substitute (“Since you are not permitted to see that, watch this instead.”)¹¹

¹⁰ Women and lay people were strictly forbidden to enter the Orthodox sanctuary.

¹¹ Words and images in Byzantine churches served as a way to enter the sanctuary without physically entering it. See Sharon E. J. Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary* (Seattle: College Art Association in association with University of Washington Press, 1999), p. 13. See p. 11, regarding other kinds of substitution.

Religious answers:

- make hierophanies possible, actual, or apprehensible
- incarnate powers that would otherwise seem absent or ineffectual
- concretize a topocosm (a “this place” that functions as a prism for “everyplace”)
- transpose a divine throne room into a divine bedroom (as happens in Sikh ritual)

Ritual answers:

- back up, evoke, or continue liturgical actions
- constellate a gestalt with a center and periphery, rendering some liturgical actions more important than others
- make one performance locale more valuable or important than some other
- provide a contemplative focus for wandering attention

Isn't it surprising what we can “know” before we even arrive at the data? The role of imagination in research is, in my view, seriously underestimated. The particulars of the list are less important than disrupting the impression that altar screens are merely accessories. The list of possibilities would, of course, have to be recast if one were to carry it into an encounter with the particulars of a specific historical era and site. Even so, the act of imagining helps form a ritual studies attitude, which differs from that of a theologian, art historian, or archaeologist.

This way of thinking about ritual possibilities:

- avoids either/or alternatives, for example, either mystery or politics
- makes space for multiple points of view, for the perspectives of several classes of participants. It is not content with only theological or solely official voices; it inquires into ordinary, folk meanings
- attends to all kinds of ritualizing and performative activity, not just to canonical actions in liturgies
- treats objects and spaces as animators of the behavior that transpires around them. Objects and spaces are not rendered as inert backgrounds for human activity¹²
- implies methods and values that may evoke dissonance when

¹² Even art historians sometimes render “things” as “actors.” For instance: “Decorated with saints who gesture across empty space and speak to each other by means of scrolls, the church need not be inhabited by people to be fully active. The sanctuary decoration participates in this idea of the living church by mirroring actual celebration. Momentarily joined by the priest, the painted celebrants included him in their prayers” (Gerstel, *Beholding* 79; see also 48).

brought into contact with the points of view expressed by ritual participants

I am no historian of Byzantine art, nor am I a theologian of Orthodox persuasion, but, lured by Byzantinists, I not only imagined functions but also ransacked their writings, hoping to learn how to speak their language. As an ethnographically inclined religious studies scholar, I began asking, What do the “natives” (scholars in fields other than my own) call these barrier-things? Are there clear definitions and compelling examples?

As I read major works in these other fields, I did what one does in *the* field: compile a glossary. I was delighted with the sonorous, chantlike terms associated with the topic of altar screens: balustrade, rood screen, monumental gateway, god’s gate, firmament. There were ordinary labels too: parapet, grille, screening apparatus, screening paraphernalia, portal barrier, gate, veil, screen, chancel, perimeter fence. And then there were the imported exotic foreign words, laden with etymological milk: *soreg*, *mechitzah*, *devir*, *paroket*, *katapetasma*, *templon*, *temenos*, iconostasis, *fastigium*, *tramezzo*. Finally, I happened upon some wonderfully au courant jargon words one could drop at wine and cheese parties in order to pass postmodern muster: substitutive spectacle, interposed visual spectacle, architectonic membrane.

This foreign tongue I was learning was so enthralling that I became delightfully disoriented. Which words, I wondered, were synonyms and which actually referred to different things? What things, I wondered, are in the centre, and what things are on the periphery of scholarly discourse about screening paraphernalia?

The “indigenous” term that most fuelled my reflections was one of the simpler ones: veil. The altar screen, suggested one writer, is a kind of veil. Perhaps the image struck me so forcefully because *hijabs* were so much in the media that week. The altar screen *is* a veil? Really? Or merely *like* a veil? Or perhaps historically derived from the temple veil?

Soon I was drunk on simile, analogy, and metaphor. I could not distinguish pairs of words that were synonyms from pairs that were the result of metaphoric equations. If an altar screen is a veil, shielding and shrouding, can a veil be an altar screen? And if a screen is a veil, does that mean it functions like a mask? And if even a poor Protestant chancel rail functions something like a mask, isn’t looking *through* a mask (from the back) a different experience from looking *at* the mask (from the front)? In other words, what an altar barrier or facial barrier means depends on which side of it you are on.

To gain comparative perspective I began to pose crude questions: “What are other things, things non-Byzantine, that define a sacred space, have doors in them, and that people paint sacred pictures on?” One answer: a plains teepee, of course. Made of skin, it becomes a canvas for icons, pictures that do not so much depict as embody the constitutive powers of

the universe. A dyed-in-the-wool comparativist, I could not help recalling how Apache children who, after being thoroughly *enchanted* by watching masked spirits dance, are soundly *disenchanted* by being forced to look through the eye holes of sacred masks.¹³

Once I grasped the connection between a veil and an iconostasis, then between an iconostasis and a teepee, other examples began to cascade. In Calgary's Glenbow Museum, as well as in the Canadian Museum of Civilization, sacred pipes of First Nations people are put on display in glass cases. Native people find the curatorial ritual of enclosure disconcerting. Whereas white folks say they are protecting pipes from deterioration induced by oily, greedy human hands, native people say sacred pipes are alive and that glass cases are not good for living—therefore dying and deteriorating—beings. The glass case inhibits a good death. The paradox of enclosing sacred objects in glass cases is that holiness is trapped in, while observers are trapped out, reduced to voyeurs.¹⁴

The paradox of a sanctuary is that it not only keeps the uninitiated out, it also traps the initiated in. In Miguel de Unamuno's novel *St. Immanuel the Good, Martyr*, the priest masturbates, then goes, hands unwashed, to serve communion.¹⁵ And he's on the inside, the sacred side, of the altar rail. Closed doors and less-than-transparent screening incubate mystery, for sure, but they also closet away abuse. There is no way that a room divider can divide a room into only one space. Whatever shuts out necessarily shuts in.

Once the notion of ritual screening is softened under the impact of repeated comparative moves, one begins to notice how ritual authorities, even when they stroll outside sanctuaries, still carry portable curtains and screens with them in the form of collars, shirts, or gowns.

Gestural Screening

Students of artistic and ritual framing devices should not only expand the repertoire of objects classified along with altar screens, we should attend

¹³ On a similar process among the Hopi, see Sam D. Gill, "Disenchantment: A Religious Abduction," in *Native American Religious Action: A Performance Approach to Religion* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1977).

¹⁴ The full discussion is in Ronald L. Grimes, "Ritual Criticism of Field Excavations and Museum Displays," in *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on its Theory* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Miguel de Unamuno, "Saint Immanuel the Good, Martyr," in *Abel Sanchez and Other Stories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1956).

to acts of screening as well.

Imagine this scene: most of my colleagues are kindly folk. They sit behind their desks facing the door. They can see students pass, greet them, and earn teaching awards that reward them for their open door policy. When a student enters a faculty office staged in this manner, the desk is between the teacher and the student. The faculty member rocks back, while the student leans in, elbows on desk.¹⁶ There is no door-barrier, but there is a desk-barrier.

Being of the cantankerous school and deeply desirous of reading and writing, I inhabit my office a little differently. I face the window, turning my back on people outside the door, rendering it, perversely, a kind of sanctuary barrier. They are out; I am in. When a student enters, however, I swivel around. Even without a room divider, the gesture of swiveling divides the room—first this way, then that. Once I swivel, there is no desk between the student and me.

I have chosen a set of virtues and vices that differ from those espoused by most of my colleagues. Whereas many of them opt for a permeable outer barrier (an open door) and substantial inner barrier (an intruding desk), I choose a solid outer barrier and a pivoting, permeable inner barrier. Divergent messages are encoded in these two different ways of setting the professorial office scene. They are distinctly different ways of performing one's accessibility and authority. They dictate different rhythms of screening oneself from the world and then reconnecting with it.

Perhaps you are beginning to see where I am heading. One can divide a space with a mere gesture; you do not need walls or room dividers or rails. Because of the nature of the human body, sectoring happens, even when there is no altar screen, glass case, or desk between an actor and audience. The human body is quite enough; and clothed, well, it is doubly enough.¹⁷

A piece of clothing, a thin layer of skin, or a mere swivelling gesture can act as a screening device that blocks or filters entry. Like an ear lobe or a tee shirt, a gesture flung into the air or inscribed reverently above a dying person acts as a screen on which it is possible to post a portrait of oneself or an icon of some sacred other.¹⁸ If the likeness has been ritually executed,

¹⁶ On proxemics, the study of social meanings encoded in spatial construction, see Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor, 1973).

¹⁷ For more on the language of the body see Ray L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970).

¹⁸ For more on material culture studies see Daniel Miller, *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (New York: Berg, 2001); W. D. Kingery, *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies* (Washington,

duly honouring the conventions, even observers may be inspired to pay homage to the image that resides there. The enacted gestural image will have become a metaphoric embodiment—a tangible positing of identity and difference.¹⁹ In the moment of the devotional act, there is no difference between the icon and the iconized.

Conceptual Dividers

Ritual partitions, then, may be architectural, but they may be sartorial or gestural as well. In fact, screens may be completely immaterial; they may be purely conceptual. To define anything—a space, a word, a field of study—is a way of carving up territory. Classificatory boundaries, like shared New England fences or Orthodox iconostases, both fracture and heal the shards of a culture.²⁰ The resulting whole, variously imagined as a grid, a system, or a tapestry, conveys a cosmology that can be either strikingly consistent or powerfully dissonant.

Any means of ordering or classifying reality creates a set of conceptual boundaries. Although less tangible than altar rails and room dividers, epistemological screens are no less determinative of action than physical barriers are. Consider the slashes between these pairs: black / white; east / west; good / evil. Each pair creates two conceptual zones with a slash, a strip of nobody's land, down the middle. The slash dividing these two *conceptual* zones operates like a sacredly guarded barrier. Such a boundary both divides and connects.

Sets of polar distinctions organized into cultural cosmologies or religious traditions can be diagrammatically represented. As anthropologist

DC: Smithsonian, 1996).

¹⁹ This metaphoric equation is quite characteristic of Orthodox liturgy and a primary assumption of Orthodox theologians. Alexander Schmemmann, for instance, describes symbolism in the liturgy as eschatological, by which he means, "the sign and that which it signifies are one and the same thing" ("Symbols and Symbolism in the Orthodox Liturgy," in *Orthodox Theology and Diakonia, Trends and Prospects*, ed. Demetrios J. Constantelos (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1981), 100). For a more general view of metaphor as it is understood in religious studies consult Mary Gerhart and Russell Allan, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1984); a good general work on the topic is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

²⁰ On classification in religion see especially Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1978); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Mary Douglas characterizes the Levitical grid, creatures, such as pigs, falling upon a taxonomic boundary (that is, across adjacent classificatory spaces), are treated as ritually impure, inedible, even evil.²¹ People kill each other over partitions they cannot see: Northern Ireland / the Republic of Ireland; the West Bank / the East Bank.

As I am playing it out, then, the Byzantine icon screen is but an example of a more widespread, utterly ordinary, quite political, necessarily theatrical human activity, that of partitioning and enclosing. Of course, one could define iconostases in such a way as to deny the connections and similarities between them and other kinds of screens. A Byzantine studies scholar or Orthodox priest might insist on their distinctiveness, therefore upon the need to attend exclusively to their historical, religious, and cultural specificity. But if we did only that, we would be hedging and cordoning our subject matter like academic priests, would we not?

You must forgive me for playing the fool, the jeff, the globetrotter who entertains the crowd by shooting baskets while breaking all the rules of basketball. I am leaping high off the ground, hoping to achieve an impossibly broad, cross-cultural perspective by improvising a grand narrative that links a sliding glass door in St. Petersburg, Florida, with iconostases in St. Petersburg, Russia, with the gestures of swivelling this way and that in a faculty office, with the epistemology of cultural taxonomies. Such is the struggle for a perspective that aspires to the status of a theory. But I am making a pitch—you recognize it as that—for supplementing micro-focussed, art-historical and ethnographic research with metaphoric moves that playfully challenge the data rather than merely confirm or reflect it. In short, I am arguing for a style of scholarship that is inspired by the arts and not merely driven by science.

Metaphoric Moves

Why make metaphoric moves? To answer that question, I return to Jeff. I confess. I have been distracting you with a little side show by calling attention to the sliding glass door (and its analogues sacred and profane). If you reflect on the parable of Jeff the improv man, you will recognize that the most dangerously disruptive act was not really his peering through the door but his becoming the polar bear, and, worse, playing the bear *before* reading the play.

In the playwrighting process at WordBridge, there are four centres of dramaturgical authority: playwright, script, actors, and audience. The playwright is formally defined as the anchor, the centre. The playwright

²¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

authors (and thereby authorizes) the script, which in turn is performed by the actors who present the play to be absorbed by an audience, which provides a feedback loop for the benefit of playwrights busy revising their plays.²² By attending first to the audience rather than the play, Jeff was not only subverting the usual hierarchy, he was putting himself in the position of having to depend on a roundabout version of the playwright's vision.

Why would anyone take such a risk when standard communication theories would require us to treat Jeff's understanding of the play as suspect? Surely, his view of the manuscript would be clouded by all this indirection, this calculated ignorance. Jeff's knowledge was mediated even though the screening device was transparent. Jeff had positioned himself where he could see but not hear, deliberately cultivating auditory ignorance.

When I asked Jeff what he thought viewing dramatic reality through a sliding glass door had accomplished, he said that seeing it in such a manner can provide a peculiar kind of knowledge unlike the lofty kind I was touting, namely, intellectual knowledge derived from multiple readings, careful exegesis, and focalized listening from the front row. He was tuning in, he said, not to the script, the playwright, or the actors but rather to the entire interaction. He first came to know the play not as a script or dramatic reading but as reflected in the faces and postures of an audience responding to actors. He was, in effect, watching the play as a reception, or consumer, critic might have done.²³

If he had not read the script, interviewed the playwright, or listened to the first reading, you would think the chances were high that his contribution to the play's development would be disruptive or just silly. So what is the test of success in a metaphoric intervention? What determines whether Jeff gets it right when he makes his powerful metaphoric move of becoming a polar bear and consuming more than an hour of time from fifteen theatre professionals? The test in a playwright's lab is whether the lightbulb goes on for the playwright, whether, in the end, the script is improved, rendered effectively engaging. Getting a metaphoric improvisation wrong is obvious: it skews the playwrighting process by confusing the actors, thereby sidetracking the playwright.

When the director asked the young playwright of *Polar Bears on U.S.*

²² Since there is a feedback loop resulting in revisions of the script, there are more phases than this simplified summary suggests.

²³ Studies of iconography could benefit enormously from current discussions of visual culture such as Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For an example of fieldwork-based, reception-oriented interpretation of religious elements in popular culture see Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

41 what the play was about, she did not mention bears at all. She talked instead about the waitress in the diner, with whom she clearly identified, and about the boss and a strange customer. Asked why she named the play after the bears, the playwright sounded like many participants interviewed after ceremonies. She said she did not know.²⁴

By playing the bear and making such an oblique move, Jeff took the risk of derailing the process. But the outcome of the improvisational strategy was that it did, in fact, help her get on track. In religious language, we would say that the playwright and actors experienced a revelation. By the end, the playwright had begun to discover what her play was about and what polar bears have to do with waitresses who talk to their alphabet soup, but that is another story.

The Slipperiest Screening Act of All

Like theatre, ritual depends on symbols. When symbols do more than point, when they embody that to which they point, they become metaphoric.²⁵ 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.

Scholars know about the metaphoric dimension of ritual.²⁶ Sometimes, however, they are not aware of their own metaphoric moves, the slickest, slipperiest ones being those that nest in theories. In the humanities, arts, and social sciences, theories are predicated, sometimes tacitly, sometimes explicitly, on generative metaphors, for example, the threshold, or *limen*, that underlies the rites-of-passage theories of Arnold van Gennep and Victor

²⁴ Inability to articulate meaning does not make something meaningless. Two provocative discussions of ritual and symbolic meaning are Frits Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26 (1979), and Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

²⁵ For example, Maximus the Confessor imagines a church as a man: "Its soul is the sanctuary; the sacred altar, the mind; and the body the nave." Maximus the Confessor, *The Church, the Liturgy, and the Soul of Man: The Mystagogia of St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Julian Stead (Still River, MA: St. Bede's, 1982), 71.

²⁶ See James W. Fernandez, "The Mission of Metaphor in Expressive Culture," *Current Anthropology* 15, no. 2 (1974); James W. Fernandez, "The Performance of Ritual Metaphors," in *The Social Use of Metaphor: Essays on the Anthropology of Rhetoric*, ed. J. David Sapir and J. Christopher Crocker (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977).

Turner.²⁷ Applying a theory, like performing a play or enacting a liturgy, amounts to a metaphoric move. To apply a theory is to interpose a sliding glass door between oneself and the data. To query data with theoretically driven questions is to play the polar bear, because to theorize is to know what to expect *before* one has read the script. It is this fact that makes theory provocative; it is also what makes theory dangerous.

The dedicated comparativist tries to gain perspective on things doggedly local by setting up parallel columns and then mapping out similarities and differences: an Orthodox iconostasis is to a temple veil as a sliding glass door is to a Plains tepee as human skin is to a museum display case as swivelling this way and that in a chair is to a conceptual grid.

When studying comparatively, items selected for comparison need to be discrete and stubbornly local. Researchers ought to choose these items from *differing* cultural domains in order to challenge the interpretive scope of their models. Then, sometimes, when spinning out cross-cultural comparisons, an electric, metaphoric arc occurs: the icon screen *is* a veil, *is* skin, *is* . . .

Seeing such equations on the conceptual screen, historians and ethnographers may be tempted to shut down their computers, lest the big bear of imagination eat up their data and them along with it. But please, at least for the moment, stay the course and play out the metaphoric move with me. Be the jeff. If all goes wrong, we will at least have had fun, and you can blame the mess on me (or him).

Let's improvise a little metaphor-driven theory of altar screens. Here is the generative metaphor: an altar screen is altar skin.

What Skin Does

- Skin contains.
It is a stretchable, flexible bag.
- Skin protects.
It is a boundary, keeping out rain, sun, and foreign organisms.
- Skin regulates.
It maintains consistent body temperature.
Cold, it tightens into goose bumps. Hot, it sweats.

²⁷ Arnold van Gennep, ed., *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Victor W. Turner, "Liminality and the Performative Genres," in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John MacAloon (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1985); Victor W. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1987).

- Skin conducts.
It is a sensor, a conductor. It grabs vitamin D from the sun, channels inward the vibration of a lover's touch.
- Skin communicates.
Embarrassed, it turns red. Skin advertises who we are: "See my pimples; I eat too many greasy fries." "I am a Black person." "I am very hot." "I am alive."

Now, let's make the metaphoric leap by asking: understood on the model of skin, what might altar screens do (that skin does)? The answers are already implied. Altar screens:

- contain
- protect
- regulate
- conduct
- communicate

Of what use is the metaphoric move, "an altar screen as an altar skin"? For one thing, we now have the beginnings of a fourfold theory, rather than a singular or bipolar theory. For another, we have several directions from which to begin a creative push-pull with data provided by art historians, liturgical theologians, or ethnographers.

When one sets an icon screen in a comparative, cross-cultural context, the larger, almost universal, question that arises is this: how permeable or impermeable are these thresholds of sanctity? It's the skin question: is this screen, or act of screening, like a solid wall, or is it like a membrane? Every boundary creates an inside and out, a here and a there. And the most fundamental question about ritually maintained borders concerns their permeability—not only to bodily passage but also to sound, light, smell, and sight. Again and again, we humans try to understand boundary markers such as screens and classificatory grids by inferring the rules for passage through them: this can pass through, that cannot. This can pass, but only in the presence of such-and-such an agent. If we cannot discover the rules of passage either by direct inquiry or by inference, then we will likely discover them the hard way—by violating them accidentally.

What makes a screen work is what makes a veil work is what makes a mask or a beard work: something is back there. We out here wonder what is up. From outside, it may seem that the power behind the screen knows me intimately, better than I know myself. The screen does not merely point to this felt sense; it creates it by performing it.

Even though magic men behind curtains can generate blazing auras and stunning light shows, reality backstage can seem pretty flat for a stage

manager. But for the profane crowd, the great unwashed who are kept out, screening heightens interest and focuses attention.

Lest you complain that I have *only* played with you and did not earn my keep by tendering a scholarly argument, I will summarize it, making it an easy (though moving) target:

- The logic of ritual screening encompasses not only architectural devices but clothing, gestures, and even conceptual framing devices.
- Ritual screening is an act of stage managing. Screening constructs inside spaces in ways that cast others as outsiders; or, alternatively, outside spaces in ways that trap others inside. Screening is a calculated act of unknowing. It is conducive of conceptual humility but also expressive of epistemological arrogance.
- The metaphoric move implicit in screening generates an atmosphere of hyper-reality; as an act of theatrical supererogation, screening is risky but potentially revelatory sort of stage magic.
- Metaphoric moves are explicit in both ritual and the arts. Such moves are potentially more transformative and more destructive in liturgical rites, because they are guarded as sacred rather critiqued as fictive.
- Metaphoric moves also determine scholarly research. Metaphors suffuse theories that frame and drive research in the humanities and arts. Like the metaphoric moves of priests and actors, those of scholars consume as well as reveal their subject matter.

Arts theories are less important for outcomes that they predict than for perspectives that they provoke. At the heart of every arts theory and method are metaphors so pervasive and tenaciously guarded that they function as ultimate, or sacred, postulates. Pregnant with fructifying metaphors lying curled deep in their bellies, theories facilitate interpretations that are at once stronger and deadlier than untheorized approaches. Scholars, like celebrating priests and enterprising stage managers, screen their performances, (and not just when they return home to show PowerPoint presentations on dances that natives do). Interpretive screens are knitted not only of theories and methods, but also of images, preconceptions, definitions, values, hunches, and stereotypes interposed between ourselves and what we study.

Like Jeff, seizing upon a sliding glass door to provide him with a less captive, more creative, more critical perspective, we scholars use theories to gain perspective, to tune in to undertones. But whatever tunes in, also tunes out. Whatever reveals also conceals. Whatever selects for this, selects against that. Theory-using is a form of screening, and, like it or not,

it is, in this respect, both priestly and performative.²⁸

Whether artistically inspired, religiously prescribed, or theoretically driven, making metaphoric moves is risky. When one improvises the bear in order to play the data, dormant values and meanings may awaken, emerging into daylight, hungry for recognition. But the other possibility is that the bear escapes the zoo. And having escaped, he gobbles up the little girl who wants to take him home as a playmate.

By jeffing, by posing as outsiders who ask disturbing questions to insiders, scholars can perform a valuable intellectual and social service. But the blessings of scholarly arrival upon scenes ceremonial and sacred are mixed. Scholarly research is a form of hunting; it is predatory upon whatever it studies.²⁹ Things studied are soon deadened. Scholarship necessarily, not accidentally, consumes what it studies. For having transposed persons, gods, spirits, and the departed into data, we scholars repeatedly incur social and ecological guilt. And the only acceptable form of paying off the debt is a good sideshow fearlessly imagined, skilfully curtailed, and disarmingly improvised.

²⁸ Ronald L. Grimes, "Performance Theory and the Study of Ritual," in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Peter Antes, Armin Geertz, and Randi Warne (Berlin, New York: Verlag de Gruyter, forthcoming).

²⁹ This case is argued more fully in Ronald L. Grimes, "Performance Is Currency in the Deep World's Gift Economy: An Incantatory Riff for a Global Medicine Show," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 9, no. 1 (2002).