

DREAMING AWAKE: MASS MEDIA AS RITUAL

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Consciousness has increasingly become the environment of the unconscious until we begin to dream awake, as it were, losing the boundaries between private and corporate.

Marshall McLuhan
From Cliché to Archetype

I would like to work within the general thematic focus on ritual of this year's series of lectures¹ by exploring the notion that the mass media function in ritual terms. I will discuss television primarily and will draw on the work I have done on Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan in my book *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography*,² and on the research that I am doing for my new project, *The Fate of the Acoustic*. My approach will be largely historical and theoretical. The topic of mass media is immense and bears on many issues crucial to our present (and future) social configurations, including the role of corporatisation within the media, political structures and attendant issues of policy and legislation, ideological frameworks, and so on. However, without a language to speak about these issues we remain mute. Theory gives us the language to speak about media as well as the perceptual shifts occasioned by media, which change the way we understand social space and even what it means to be human.

Let me begin, however, by talking about the connections between Marshall McLuhan and Windsor. McLuhan taught here in the early 1940s, at Assumption College, before moving to Toronto, where he was associated with the University of Toronto for the remainder of his life. The job at Assumption was McLuhan's first appointment in Canada after a brief period teaching in the U.S. As Philip Marchand, one of McLuhan's biographers, suggests, McLuhan's tenure at Assumption College gave him an abrupt introduction to academic life in Canada as well as to questions of technology. His classroom was in a hut heated by a coal furnace, and "[o]n one occasion," as Marchand writes,

an officious janitor walked into the hut in the middle of a lecture, loaded the furnace with coal, and switched on the motorized hopper [the device that feeds the coal into the furnace], causing a tremendous racket. McLuhan . . . switched off the motor. The

¹ The rubric of the series, "Ritual Economies," invites speakers to consider the "scripted regularity" of rituals within the context of the "dynamic secular systems" of economies.

² Richard Cavell, *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, reprint 2003).

janitor promptly switched it back on. McLuhan switched it off again. The two continued this comedy for a few minutes until McLuhan dismissed the class, marched to the president's office, and demanded a new classroom and the dismissal of the janitor. The president . . . granted both requests.³

While at Assumption College, McLuhan met the British artist, novelist, and cultural theorist, Wyndham Lewis, who was living out the war years in Canada as a conscientious objector and whose work significantly influenced McLuhan. In particular, McLuhan drew on Lewis when he formulated his famous concept of the global village,⁴ a term that most of us are familiar though we may not be aware that it was coined by a Canadian. By this term McLuhan meant that as com-munications increasingly brought people into a greater awareness of one another globally, there was a counter-tendency to heighten experience of the local. The notion of the global village is related in terms of the process it describes to McLuhan's other famous formulation, "the medium is the message." This well-known aphorism highlighted the implosion of meaning into media, such that it's not so much what the media say as how they say it that becomes important. This notion that the media operate as a form of rhetoric, shaping or "massaging" (mass-age-ing) the meaning of that which they communicated, was central to the pioneering media studies that became the focus of McLuhan's academic career.

I want to focus this essay, however, on another of McLuhan's statements, one that is less well known but equally provocative. It is his comment that "we . . . 'dream awake'," a remark that he made in two key places: in an article on the mass media as environment⁵ called "The Future of an Erosion,"⁶ published in 1965, and in his 1970 book *From Cliché to*

³ Philip Marchand: *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Toronto: Random House, 1989), 73.

⁴ Wyndham Lewis writes that "while *in reality* people become increasingly one nation . . . they *ideologically* grow more aggressively separatist, and conscious of 'nationality'," in *Time and Western Man*, ed. Paul Edwards (1927; reprint Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 78.

⁵ McLuhan used the term "environment" in a contrarian way at the beginning of the environmental movement in the 1960s, to argue that the "natural" environment had been superseded by the one we ourselves had created and which now encompassed us completely. What was once the "natural" environment had become an artifact that we tend.

⁶ McLuhan, "Environment: The Future of an Erosion," *Perspecta* [Yale Journal of Architecture] 11 (1965): 164-7.

Archetype.⁷ In the article, McLuhan argues that our “natural” world has now become the world produced by media effects; it is in this world that we now find our “being,” the world to which we refer for self-definition and understanding. Likewise, in *From Cliché to Archetype*, McLuhan argues that

[c]onsciousness has increasingly become the environment of the unconscious until we begin to “dream awake,” as it were, losing the boundaries between private and corporate. . . . This process appears sufficiently in the world of advertising. As the means of advertising have greatly enlarged, the images created by advertising become an even larger portion of the needs and satisfactions of the public. Eventually, people could look to the ad image as a world in itself. . . .⁸

This dream world was defined by McLuhan as early as 1951 in his classic study of advertising, *The Mechanical Bride*.⁹ In that book, McLuhan argues that advertising reflects back to us not our waking selves but our unconscious selves and deepest desires, and acts, thus, as an immense desiring machine, a machine designed to make us want more and more and to spend more and more to get it, according to a libidinal economy of consumption and expenditure. As McLuhan put it in his 1964 classic *Understanding Media*:

[p]hysiologically, [people] in the normal use of technology (or [their] variously extended body) [are] perpetually modified by it and in turn find ever new ways of modifying their technology. People become, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. The machine world reciprocates [this] love by expediting [our] wishes and desires, namely, in providing [us] with wealth.¹⁰

⁷ McLuhan with Wilfred Watson, *From Cliché to Archetype* (New York: Viking, 1970).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 200-1.

⁹ McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951). *The Bride*, who owes much to Marcel Duchamp’s *Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, is also McLuhan’s version of Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *The Future Eve* (1880; 1886), about the creation of an artificial woman; Villiers’ book owes as much to Charcot as to Edison. See *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin-De-Siècle France*, ed. Asti Hustvedt (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 520-750, and Hustvedt’s introduction, 497-518.

¹⁰ McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 46.

And what advertising illustrations could do, electronic media could do all the more powerfully and all the more seamlessly, such that the distinction between “reality” and our unconscious desires becomes ever more difficult to discern.

For if mechanical objects had extended our bodies and our senses, the electronic world extended our very consciousness, and it was our tendency to take this world as real and natural that prompted McLuhan to say that “we dream awake.” The world of electronic media is equally subject to a libidinal economy, he said, except that here it was the realm of the unconscious that was the currency, producing an economy of flows rather than of teleologies (even if these technologies were constantly re-invented according to the requisites of “progress”). It is as if we were living out, in real time, our most subliminal thoughts and feelings, exposing for all to see our most intimate urges and expressions. This tendency was evident in the 1960s and 1970s through the increasing importance placed on the self—the so-called “Me” generation—and its desires, on the politicization of the personal. Public discourse became increasingly open to personal issues and “personalist” discourse entered into the academy, whereby the author of an academic paper sought to focus the paper through a form of self-revelation.¹¹

But these inversions—of the public and the personal, of the conscious and the unconscious, of the real and the simulated—are themselves part of a much more fundamental shift in which technology has superseded “nature” (and mediation has replaced presence), such that our very beings have been turned inside-out (because media are *extensions* of our bodies) and extruded into an “environment” which is at once ourselves and utterly “other”: a prosthetic environment which appears foreign to us—even though it is us—because it is now outside us.¹² The “natural” world, in other words, has now become the world that we have—for better or worse—made by

¹¹ See Sam Brenton and Reuben Cohen, *Shooting People: Adventures in Reality TV* (London: Verso, 2003), 26-7.

¹² David Summers remarks pertinently that “[t]he great transition from an assumed world of forms to one of *forces*, working within what I shall call a universal *metaoptical* [i.e. deriving its conceptual framework from visibility] framework, is basic to the rise of modern science and technology; in this world the human mind becomes a kind of *counterforce*, definition of which is the ongoing project of defining subjectivity; that is, of defining the terms in which we have come to speak of the experiencing individual as the *subject* of external forces.” See *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 551. In effect, one’s subjectivity constitutes a counter-environment to the forces which constitute its environment; our humanity might thus, deconstructively, be said to be a trope of technology, in the same way that nature is a trope of culture (as Derrida argues in the Rousseau section of the *Grammatology*).

ourselves; it is this world that we now find ourselves living in. These paradoxical notions are brilliantly captured in the *Alien* movies¹³ (and particularly *Alien 4*),¹⁴ movies that represent in the most visceral way possible this sense of the *prosthetic*,¹⁵ of the way in which living within a totally technologized environment (the spaceship) has as its concomitant aspect the extension of our selves through technology. At the opening of *Alien 4*, the “human” protagonist, Ripley, has been cloned, and is thus technologically extended “outside” herself; as she approaches earth at the end of the movie and prepares for re-entry, we see the globe hovering in space, a purely esthetic object—“It’s beautiful,” remarks her surviving shipmate, who asks Ripley what it’s like on earth. Ripley replies with the harrowing line “I don’t know; I’m a stranger there myself.” Here the earth—*terra firma*—has itself become an exercise in virtuality—something experienced through a screen—and the “human” has collapsed into the “other” which is misrecognized as the “self.”

It is through such shifts of perspective that the mass media now constitute our “natural” environment; and it is through this notion that I wish to investigate what the concept of ritual might mean within our highly mediated society and to determine what the concept of ritual can tell us about mass media generally.

2.

Ritual touches all of our lives, through birthdays, initiation rites, marriages, funerals, welcomings, graduations, promotions, retirements, parties, reunions, and so on. At the same time, the idea of ritual is related to profound issues having to do with religion, identity, sexuality, violence, social interaction, and processes of scapegoating.¹⁶

Traditionally, ritual has been most closely associated with religion; the dictionary defines a ritual as “involving religious or other rites” and as the “prescribed order of performing religious etc. rites” (*OED*), and these

¹³ A Canadian example would be Robert Lepage’s recent film *The Far Side of the Moon* (based on his play of the same title); the film works out ideas of prosthetic extension much more gently, making the concluding scene all the more startling.

¹⁴ *Alien 4: Resurrection*, dir. Jean Pierre Jeunet (1976).

¹⁵ McLuhan’s interest in prosthetic functions dates to *Understanding Media* and its discussion of ablation, 5. See also my *McLuhan in Space*, 80-81, and the chapter “Prosthetic Esthetics.”

¹⁶ Eric W. Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 3.

elements of order and repetition are crucial to our understanding of the term. One way of speaking about rituals, following from the writings of Émile Durkheim, is to say that they are instances of “society worshipping itself,” while at the same time creating intense personal communal experiences that confirm social solidarity.¹⁷ Rituals are very important at transitional stages in life, or rites of passage, during which the individual moves from one social identity to another; such rituals are often deployed in terms of death and rebirth symbolism, and death remains one of the most ritualized passages in secular society, as the media frenzy around the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, demonstrated so tellingly. The element of repetition in ritual means that they are always the same, even when they appear most different. Rituals tend to be conservative, insofar as they process change through repetition of the familiar, and this recursive element often invokes primal emotions.¹⁸

Rituals are often associated with myths, which function similarly, in that they maintain a constant character in changing historical circumstances; however, unlike rituals, myths tend not to be constituted by an action. The so-called myth-ritualist theory¹⁹ has been broadly applied to literature, including by McLuhan’s University of Toronto colleague Northrop Frye, who developed the theory of archetypes or recurring literary patterns as a way of understanding literature.²⁰ This way of approaching literature had been

¹⁷ John Monaghan and Peter Just, *Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 120.

¹⁸ See Horace M. Newcomb, “One Night of Prime Time: An Analysis of Television’s Multiple Voices,” in James W. Carey, ed., *Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), 88-112.

¹⁹ See Robert A. Segal ed., *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology* (London: Blackwell, 1998).

²⁰ In the *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), Frye writes that “[r]ituals cluster around the cyclical movements of the sun, the moon, the seasons, and human life. Every crucial periodicity of experience: dawn, sunset, the phases of the moon, seed-time and harvest, the equinoxes and solstices, birth, initiation, marriage, and death, get rituals attached to them. The pull of ritual is toward pure cyclical narrative, which, if there could be such a thing, would be automatic and unconscious repetition. In the middle of all this recurrence, however, is the central recurrent cycle of sleeping and waking life, the daily frustration of the ego, the nightly awakening of a titanic self”; quotation 105. “The union of ritual and dream in a form of verbal communication is myth. . . . The myth accounts for, and makes communicable, the ritual and the dream. Ritual, by itself, cannot account for itself: it is pre-logical, pre-verbal, and in a sense pre-human”; quotation 106. In ritual, continues Frye, “we see . . . an imitation of nature which has a strong element of what we call magic in it. Magic seems to begin as

encouraged by poets such as T. S. Eliot out of whose essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* largely emerged. It is significant that Eliot's great poem *The Waste Land* (1922) referred its readers to Jessie L. Weston's classic text, *From Ritual to Romance*,²¹ which is a study of rituals surrounding the story of the Holy Grail. Myth-ritualists such as Frye were especially critical of McLuhan, whose work on media seemed to be promoting a de-ritualized and de-mythicised culture.²²

It is true that McLuhan did not support the exclusively religious reading of ritual and myth promoted by authors such as Jessie Weston;²³ indeed, he threatened their elitist readings of ritual and myth by suggesting that advertising and other popular cultural forms were equally structured by myth and ritual. As he writes in "Myth and Mass Media,"

advertisements . . . strive to comprise in a single vision the total social action or process that is imagined as desirable. That is, an advertisement tries both to inform us about, and also to produce in us by anticipation, all the stages of a metamorphosis, private and social. So that whereas a myth might appear as the record of such extended metamorphosis, an advertisement proceeds by anticipation of change. . .²⁴

something of a voluntary effort to recapture a lost rapport with the natural cycle"; quotation 119.

²¹ Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920; reprint New York: Doubleday, 1957).

²² See Segal, ed., *Myth and Ritual Theory*. For Frye on McLuhan see chapter 8 of my *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography*.

²³ McLuhan's lack of support for the religious view of ritual runs counter to those critics who have sought to find in his work a crypto-Catholic subplot. Notorious in this regard is Tom Wolfe, who argues in his introductory comments to *The McLuhan Video*, prod. Stephanie McLuhan; dir. Matthew Vibert (Toronto: McLuhan Productions, 1996; six cassettes) that McLuhan's work was deeply influenced by an unacknowledged debt to Jesuit mystic Teilhard de Chardin, from whom McLuhan 'never quoted.' Wolfe repeats such claims in his foreword to *Understanding Me*, ed. S. McLuhan and David Staines (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003). But McLuhan did quote from Teilhard in a number of places, including in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, though he ultimately rejected his work, as Philip Marchand makes clear in *Marshall McLuhan*, 206.

²⁴ McLuhan, "Myth and Mass Media," *Daedalus* 88.2 (1959): 339-348; this quotation 340-1.

This element of anticipation of change belongs to the domain of rhetoric, which, like ritual, produces meaning through repetition.²⁵ McLuhan goes on to say in that article that the English language “is itself a mass medium”²⁶ that gains mythic status through the simultaneous modes of awareness it encourages, especially in its oral modalities, and it was through his interest in orality that McLuhan’s research coincided with a major focus of ritual studies, namely, the ritual practices of oral societies. While there had been a tendency to understand oral cultures as “primitive,” McLuhan belonged to a scholarly group²⁷ that valued such cultures. Indeed, McLuhan theorized that electronic media would create cultural conditions that approximated certain key aspects of these cultures. Contemporary cultures shaped by electronic media combined the cohesiveness of proximity with the factionalism of the tribe, a dynamic that McLuhan also posited in the global village. This interest in formulaic aspects of oral culture already indicates one avenue along which one can explore the connections between media and ritual, and this is in fact where McLuhan begins his study of the transition from oral to literate culture, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.²⁸

It is in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that McLuhan criticizes one of the leading myth-ritualists, Mircea Eliade, for his assumption that ritual is exclusively tied to religion. In fact, McLuhan argues elsewhere that ritual is a function of oral culture, and, as we move into a re-engagement with oral modalities through the effects of electronic media, the element of ritual would assume an ever more powerful role through the shift in attention from the “individual reader” to “the audience,”²⁹ a shift that McLuhan termed “re-tribalization.” As he puts it,

today we live in a postliterate and electronic world, in which we seek images of collective postures of mind, even when studying the individual. In some respects, myth was the means of access to such collective postures in the past. But our new technology gives us many new means of access to group-dynamic patterns. Behind us are five centuries during which we have had unexampled access to aspects of private con-

²⁵ *Repetitio* is in fact a term from classical rhetoric.

²⁶ McLuhan, “Myth and Mass Media,” 341.

²⁷ The key figures here are Harold Adams Innis, Eric Havelock, and McLuhan’s student Walter Ong.

²⁸ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

²⁹ McLuhan, “Myth and Mass Media,” 342.

sciousness by means of the printed page. But now anthropology and archaeology give us equal ease of access to group postures and patterns of many cultures, including our own.³⁰

McLuhan saw himself as an anthropologist of his own culture,³¹ examining not the private dreams of an individual, as Freud did, but the public dreams of mass culture.

To this examination McLuhan added a spatial element that I address in my book. Here we must recall the origins of architecture as a ritual space, an aspect recorded in the ornamentation of classical Greco-Roman buildings, which makes reference to ritual sacrifice in relation to seasonal change.³² These references suggest that ritual produces a certain sort of space, a magical space, as Frye suggested or, to use the term anthropologist Victor Turner popularised, a *liminal* space,³³ which is to say a space that is at once inside and outside our understanding of “cultural

³⁰ Ibid, 343.

³¹ Note, for example, the subtitle of *The Mechanical Bride*, where McLuhan presents himself as a “folklorist” of industrial culture.

³² Alberto Pérez-Gómez, for example, writes in *Polyphilo, or The Dark Forest Revisited: An Erotic Epiphany of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) that “Architecture had always fulfilled its inveterate cultural task of disclosing a symbolic order at the intersection between a ‘situation,’ a ritual or liturgy, and its material, constructed frame. Ritual actions were obviously narrative (temporal) forms that articulated, together and within their architectural (spatial) sites, the order of human purpose in the gap between a mortal humanity and an overwhelming external reality”; xiv. See also Indra Kagis McEwen, who notes in *Socrates’ Ancestor: An Essay on Architectural Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1993), that Athens was founded upon the dance rituals associated with Panathenaea. “The Panathenaea usually lasted for four days and began on the final days of the lunar cycle, continuing through the moon’s disappearance and culminating at the appearance of the new moon, with the famous Panathenaeon procession immortalized in the frieze that surrounded the *naos* of the Parthenon”; quotation 92.

³³ Roger Silverstone has suggested that television is precisely such a liminal space: “the medium of television itself marks a threshold in our cultural experience, and . . . our watching it involves us in a rite of passage, away from and back to the mundane, via an often equally taken-for-granted, but nonetheless significant, immersion into the other worldliness of the screen”; quotation 26. See “Television Myth and Culture,” in *Media, Myths, and Narratives*, ed. Carey; quotation 20-47.

space.”³⁴ Given McLuhan’s interest in the production of space, he was thus particularly attracted to the 1960s phenomenon of the “Happening.” The Happening was a loosely orchestrated art event—partly spontaneous, partly scripted—that trans-formed an ordinary space into an aesthetic space by relying on activities that resembled ritual forms. This type of ritualized spontaneity also foregrounded the effects of media and the immanence of its ‘laws’ in our everyday reality.

One of the earliest and most significant examples of such an environmental artwork was “Bagged Place,” produced at the University of British Columbia in 1966 by Iain Baxter, who is now Emeritus University Professor here at the University of Windsor. “Bagged Place” consisted of four rooms in a mock apartment in which every item was enclosed in a clear plastic bag, the whole work being described as “the first major environment constructed and shown in Canada.”³⁵ The work can be understood as a critique of consumerist society, as well as an embodiment of the mediatization of that society. Baxter also emphasizes that the museum is itself a site of ritual, of pre-processed activity, an issue on which he and I will focus in tomorrow’s public conversation at the Art Gallery of Windsor.³⁶

3.

One of the crucial issues invoked by understanding mass media as ritual is that of involvement.³⁷ As Catherine Bell writes in her book *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*,³⁸ the wedding of Queen Elizabeth II in 1952 and, more recently, that of Princess Diana and Prince Charles, were noteworthy as ritual events that attracted large television audiences.

³⁴ Turner draws on the work of Arnold van Gennep, who employed the concept of a “liminal phase” in rites of passage. See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 94-5 and *passim*.

³⁵ Marie L. Fleming, *Baxter²: Any Choice Works* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982), 24.

³⁶ See in this context Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995).

³⁷ Manuel Castells argues that the possibilities of involvement offered by the internet are so significant as to constitute it a completely different medium. See *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

³⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Paradoxically, while the TV is said to give a flatter, two-dimensional experience compared to attending the event itself, Bell records the fact that during the wedding of Princess Diana many people observing the ceremony sought out a television set to view it on, apparently to gain a more involving view of the ceremony. McLuhan had argued that television is a much *more* involving medium than print (or mechanical media generally), and that it provides a much more sensual experience than one that addresses vision alone.³⁹ Indeed, McLuhan suggested that television was primarily a tactile medium, a notion that stunned his critics at the time but is perhaps less of a surprise to a culture that is familiar with touching screens in order to enter into a communication process. McLuhan took this point further, however, suggesting that electronic media were so powerfully involving that the user became its content—in effect, it is we who are processed, he suggested, when we use a computer.

Bell would agree that television is a participatory medium, though she arrives at this conclusion much more prosaically than McLuhan, stating that “television makes it possible for great numbers of people to participate visually [sic] in the smallest details over and over again. In fact, the audience’s sense of participation is heightened by stressing the personal or domestic nature of the events that they are being allowed to share.”⁴⁰ Significantly, Bell cites the televised coverage in 1963 of the events surrounding John F. Kennedy’s assassination as the first major example of a mass media event as ritual. It had been analysed this way, in fact, by McLuhan thirty years earlier in his book *The Medium is the Massage*.⁴¹ The title, as I have suggested earlier, puns on his phrase “the medium is the message” in order to emphasize the rhetorical aspect of media, the idea that media “massage” meaning in their own way, rather than simply communicating it from one source to another, and that this “massaging” extended to the entire environment—the “mass age” on which his title also puns. As McLuhan writes:

[i]n television there occurs an extension of the sense of active, exploratory touch which involves all the senses simul-taneously, rather than that of sight alone. . . . [I]n all electric phenomena,

³⁹ Compare Victor Turner’s comment: “tribal rituals are anything but rigid. . . . All the senses are enlisted, and the symbolic actions and objects employed are in every sensory code.” See “Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality,” in *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, eds. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Madison: Coda Press, 1977), 33-55; quotation 35.

⁴⁰ Bell, *Ritual*, 244.

⁴¹ McLuhan, with Quentin Fiore and Jerome Agel, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Random House, 1967).

the visual is only one component in a complex interplay. . . . Television [thus] demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being. It will not work as a background. It engages you. Perhaps this is why so many people feel that their identity has been threatened [by TV] . . . [which] has heightened our general awareness of the shape and meaning of lives and events to a level of extreme sensitivity. It was the funeral of President Kennedy that most strongly proved the power of television to invest an occasion with the character of corporate participation. *It involves an entire population in a ritual process.* . . . In television, images are projected at you. You are the screen. The images wrap around you. You are the vanishing point.⁴²

Here the dynamic of television coincides precisely with that of ritual: a group experience having individual signification and capable of infinite repetition. Indeed, as Bell puts it, television

has taken over some dimensions of ritual to become the source of much of the symbolic imagery and shared values in our culture. From this perspective, television can be at times both highly ritualistic and a type of ritual medium itself for the culture. By transposing reality into a spectacle . . . the mass media perform the functional equivalent of what traditional myth and ritual used to do when they imbued reality with a sense of the sacred.⁴³

As Bell further notes, “television is particularly equipped to take over many of the functions of traditional ritual because its emphasis on audiovisual stimuli and communication enables it to express the complexities and nuances of symbolic thinking.”⁴⁴ But it is not only by virtue of specific events that television is ritualistic; it is also ritualistic in terms of the rhetoric it employs to structure or “massage” the events that it communicates.⁴⁵ Thus

⁴² Ibid, 125, emphasis added.

⁴³ Bell, *Ritual*, 245.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Bell is drawing, here, on the essay by Jean Cazeneuve, “Television as a Functional Alternative to Traditional Sources of Need Satisfaction,” in *The Uses of Mass Communication: Current Perspectives on Gratification Research* Jay G. Blumer and Elihu Katz, eds., (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1974), 213-23.

⁴⁵ “Television fosters and favours a world of corporate participation in ritualistic programming,” McLuhan states in “What TV Does Best,” *Understanding Me*, eds. S. McLuhan and D. Staines, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003), 253.

television uses “uniform patterns, timing, and symbols” especially in its news broadcasts, to create “a shared perception of order.”⁴⁶

4.

Here we begin to get at what McLuhan meant by the phrase “[w]e dream awake,” namely, the transposition of reality into a spectacle, though McLuhan theorized a more profound connection between reality and spectacle insofar as electronic media were extensions not simply of our bodily organs but of our psyches as well. McLuhan had explored these notions in his essay “The Future of an Erosion.” The title of the article alludes to a 1927 essay by Sigmund Freud called “The Future of an Illusion” where the illusory element is constituted by religion.⁴⁷ Twenty years earlier, Freud had equated obsessive actions and religious practices in an essay of that title, where he states that “[i]t is easy to see . . . resemblances . . . between neurotic ceremonials and the sacred acts of religious ritual.”⁴⁸ In “The Future of an Illusion” he is concerned to show that “the most important item in the psychical inventory of a civilization . . . consists in its religious ideas in the widest sense—in other words . . . in its illusions.”⁴⁹ Civilization, in short, is built upon illusion; indeed, it requires illusion to exist, as Nietzsche had proposed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he writes that “it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*.”⁵⁰ In McLuhan’s scenario, however, religious ritual has been displaced onto technology; as he writes in *Understanding Media*, “[t]he computer . . . promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal

⁴⁶ Bell, *Ritual*, 246; Bell quotes here from Gregor Goethals.

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Future of an Illusion,” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), 685-722.

⁴⁸ Freud, “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” in *The Freud Reader* 429-436; this quotation 431.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 692.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 52.

understanding and unity.”⁵¹ This argument was in turn founded on Freud’s observation in *Civilization and its Discontents* that “Man has . . . become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent.”⁵²

For Freud, this state of affairs had to be endured, since without civilization there would be bloody anarchy (and we should recall that he wrote *Civilization and its Discontents* in 1929, a fateful year for the fortunes of the Weimar Republic as it would soon wither away with the rise of the Nazi party). McLuhan, similarly, argued that it was impossible to escape from the dreamworld of technology. As he writes in “The Future of an Erosion,” “there is no possible protection from technology except by technology. When you create a new environment with one phase of technology, you have to create an anti-environment with the next.”⁵³ The anti-environment was a practice which achieved—albeit complicitly—a critique of the dominant environment by foregrounding aspects of it, thereby making us aware of it as *figure* rather than *ground*. The anti-environment thus served a liminal function, although unlike the practices described by Victor Turner, the anti-environment did not have a teleological structure: technology does not lead outside technology because there is nothing outside technology (if I may paraphrase Derrida⁵⁴).

This notion of implosion, whereby technology and its other have collapsed into a single hyperreality, has been articulated most powerfully by Jean Baudrillard. As Baudrillard writes in his 1983 book, *Simulations*, “[a]bstraction today . . . is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. . . . The real is produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models—and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times.”⁵⁵ Baudrillard’s chief example of the hyper real is one of the first major instances of “reality TV,” a PBS documentary called *An American Family*, filmed in 1971 and consisting of “7 months of uninterrupted shooting, 300 hours of direct non-stop

⁵¹ Page 80 of McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, (1964; reprint Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

⁵² Freud, “Civilisation and its Discontents,” excerpted in Gay, *The Freud Reader*, 722-772; this quotation 738.

⁵³ McLuhan, “Future of an Erosion,” 166.

⁵⁴ I am thinking of Jacques Derrida’s comment that “*There is nothing outside of the text.*” See *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1967; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

⁵⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 2-3.

broadcasting, without script or scenario” and attracting an audience of “20 million viewers.”⁵⁶ This program is significant since it marked “documentary’s first steps away from ‘social issues’ towards ‘social actors.’”⁵⁷ What especially fascinated viewers about the program—including myself; I remember watching the marathon presentation of all the episodes in the series on our old Motorola TV—was that the “typical, California-housed, 3-garage, 5-children, well-to-do professional upper middle class ideal American family with an ornamental housewife”⁵⁸ fell apart during the process of filming. “In a way,” writes Baudrillard, “it is [its] statistical perfection which [doomed the family] to its death. [The] ideal heroine of the American life [was] chosen, as in sacrificial rites, to be glorified and to die under the fiery glare of the studio lights. For the heavenly fire no longer strikes depraved cities, it is rather the lens which cuts through ordinary reality like a laser, putting it to death.”⁵⁹ Reality TV of this sort, according to Baudrillard, is thus “the liturgical drama of a mass society,” and has much in common as well with classical Greek drama, which was at once ritual and theatre.

This tension between the mass and the individual is crucial to understanding the ritualistic basis of the mass media (since ritual functionalises a relationship between the individual and the collective), and especially the violence associated with the media. You will recall that McLuhan emphasized in *From Cliché to Archetype* that “we dream awake” as a result of the fact that through mass media our inner lives are experienced corporately; thus, watching the funeral of Princess Diana on television constituted for many viewers a profound “personal” experience. The tension between these polarities, however, was a source of violence according to McLuhan, who insisted that we try to understand the violence of the media rather than focussing exclusively on content. Television was a violent medium precisely because it tended to substitute a group identity for an individual one, which, he argued, was particularly traumatic in a culture that had been nurtured in the belief that genuine experience was the experience of the individual. This tension between the mass and the individual is profoundly ritualistic in its oscillations between inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, and it is surely no accident that highly

⁵⁶ Ibid, 49, 50.

⁵⁷ Sam Brenton and Reuben Cohen, *Shooting People: Adventures in Reality TV* (London; New York: Verso, 2003), 26.

⁵⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 51.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

successful examples of “reality TV” such as *Survivor* make use precisely of this ritualistic structure.

5.

If involvement is one of the chief myths of the global village, displacement is the other, and both are represented iconically in the various “reality TV” shows that have come to dominate the screenscape. The notion of involvement, however, bears further interrogation, for if, in ritual, one (symbolically) lives through (symbolic) events, then in a television ritual that event has been powerfully displaced and so has the self that experiences the event. Tony Tremblay has argued in a recent issue of *Topia*, the Canadian journal of cultural studies, that the phenomenon of voting in *Survivor*, or for that matter on programs such as *Canadian Idol*, masks the fact that, as McLuhan had suggested, the audience has been displaced into the content of the medium. The audience, as it was in book culture, is no longer private; it has become public, part of the mass itself. As Tremblay writes,

[w]ith their new status as content of the spectacle, watchers become actors, and, as actors the rituals of their viewership change. They turn from the isolationist conditions of solitary watching (rejecting as archaic the detachment of McLuhan’s culture of literacy) to the excited involvement of mass gatherings such as raves, rallies, and public viewings. A new component of their voyeuristic pleasure is watching themselves being watched, as music video producers have started to realize. Audiences have literally ‘entered the shot.’⁶⁰

Social behaviour, in this sense, becomes completely ritualized, without the norms of social continuity to contextualize it.

And in the same way that the dreamworld of ritual is naturalized by television (so that it no longer seems strange), television likewise naturalizes that element of rhetoric that brings it into being, namely power. It was one of McLuhan’s great insights that rhetoric is an exercise of power (in that it seeks to persuade to action); his Cambridge dissertation was in fact on the political currents surrounding the rhetorical wars in the English

⁶⁰ Tony Tremblay, “Reading the ‘Real’ in *Survivor*: Unearthing the Republican Roots in Reality Narrative,” *Topia: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 9 (Spring 2003): 47-65; this quotation 59.

Renaissance.⁶¹ So insistent was he on the powerful effects of media that a common criticism of his work to this day is that he was a techno-determinist, that is, that he believed technology to be the determining factor within any given social context. While this critique is an inadequate means of understanding McLuhan, it nevertheless points toward the element of power within media as he theorised them.

Nick Couldry argues in his recent book *Media Rituals* that the power of media rituals is devoted to naturalising media events over non-media events (what Couldry terms “reality”) through a hierarchy of values that privileges mediation.⁶² Media, in other words, tend to privilege media, as with the reporters “embedded” by CNN during its reporting of the recent U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. If the media are understood as rituals leading to transcendence (as Durkheim argued that rituals must), then the transcendent order invoked by the media are the media themselves, in a situation of total feedback, as Baudrillard has argued. Couldry’s argument that media seek to make themselves central to social representations is equivalent to what I have been calling the myth of involvement. As he puts it, “claims for . . . interactivity’s representative significance are highly rhetorical, but it is just such rhetorical claims of social connection that need *ritual* enforcement.”⁶³ Couldry’s mission to re-instate “reality” in the principal hierarchical position, however, merely returns us to the question of power, for who is to say what that reality is? The alternative is to understand our environment as fully mediated and to recognize that this mediation is a site of power.

Once 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 afterwards, who recognized that media cause social change and can thus be harnessed for political change, by de-stabilizing the certainties of the everyday on the understanding that the certainties of the everyday are an illusion. The local, in such cases, trumps the global precisely through the paradox of global mediation which heightens the profile of the local, be it in Seattle in 1999 or Genoa in 2001. What these protesters have enacted is the understanding that media are social forms, that they are material, that

⁶¹ McLuhan, “The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of his Time” (diss., Cambridge University, 1943).

⁶² Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2003), 13.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 109.

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.

To understand mass media as ritual, then, we must understand a paradox: that media rituals enact two opposing myths of the electronic era, that of displacement and that of interactivity. Whereas McLuhan had been concerned with the epistemological issues raised by mechanical culture—that is, issues related to the production of knowledge—which he analysed in his discussion of print culture published in 1962 as *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, his concerns with electronic culture had to do with ontologies—that is, questions about the nature of our being, as signalled by the subtitle of his 1964 book, *Understanding Media*, where he focuses on the ways in which the new media are changing our perceptions of ourselves and of human nature itself. Whereas the great myth of print culture had to do with boundedness—with territoriality, nationalism, individualism—the great myth of electronic culture has to do with displacement—with the nature of being *here* when much of our time is occupied with a sense of being *there*. This state of liminality is at once identifiable with ritual space and with the virtual spaces of media, where it is increasingly taking on the materiality of the spaces in which we live and ‘become human’.

While the humanist tradition of book culture had focussed on the perfection of the individual as the ultimate goal of a civilizing education, the mass media are reversing that enterprise: now it is the mass which is being taken up into the vast vortex of electronic power.⁶⁴ Here the role of education remains crucial: courses in media studies should be much more widely available than at present; only in this way can we bring the detachment afforded by print media together with the involvement of electronic forms.

We could begin these studies by understanding mass media as ritual, which is to understand them as an ordered practice—a rhetoric, if you will—that we have created to comprehend the flux of a global economy whose ultimate product is information, a commodity that is not measurable in terms of production and consumption and hence presents the merging of advertising and programming—and who now can really tell the difference? We have exchanged the mechanical certainties of a libidinal economy for

⁶⁴ It is thus not adequate in responding to the “new media” to seek ways of “humanizing technology,” since technology is already human; what is required is to understand how we are human *through* our technologies, which is far more difficult because in doing so we must confront our humanity as something in process rather than eternal and unchanging. See the introduction to *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, eds. Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2003), xi.

a “liminal materiality”⁶⁵ where we are always on the edge—on the edge of meaning, on the edge of being. This liminality has always been a characteristic of ritual, one of whose functions is to “make strange” the everyday, thereby reminding us that the everyday is not as certain as we might think it to be. The reality programs such as *Survivor*, thus, are not anomalous but fundamentally symbolic of the medium itself in their mythic preoccupation with involvement and expulsion. Such programs tell us that we have re-entered the world of ritual through the mirror of the television screen, like Alice through the looking-glass, only to find that world the same as the one we dream, and utterly different from the world we take for granted. And as the media dream us into being, they force us, at the same time, to undertake on a daily basis a cultural anthropology of ourselves. It is perhaps in this most profound sense—that media understood as ritual permit us to perceive patterns in the apparently chaotic flows of global culture—that we find ourselves, as we enter more and more into the liminality of the virtual, dreaming awake.

⁶⁵ I am using this term in a context that differs from the one argued by M.A. Doel in his article “Deconstruction on the move: from libidinal economy to liminal materialism,” *Environment and Planning A* 26.7 (1994): 1041-1059.