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# Media Rituals: Follow the Bodies

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### **Abstract**

This essay looks at media as part of an ordered system of bodily gestures, or rituals, that hold enduring groups together. Enduring groups are those for which members may be persuaded to lay down their lives. They include, but are not limited to, nation-states, ethnicities, and sectarian faiths. In contemporary mass media, nation-states are the most visible enduring groups. By mass media, I mean the complex of national print and electronic outlets that share a similar agenda of stories on a periodic schedule. Ritual is a more complex term. By ritual in the largest sense, I mean memory-inducing behavior that has the effect of preserving whatever things or ideas are indispensable to the group. On the presumption that all important things in society are ritualized, this definition deliberately encompasses a large range of events.

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Operationally, I follow Roy Rappaport's (1979) definition of ritual as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by performers (175). To explore mass media as a ritual genre, I examine the first part of this definition. Bodily performance is so fundamental to ritual that theorists conventionally assume that only events in which all necessary components (meaning performers, congregants, and objects) are immediately copresent may count as ritual.<sup>2</sup> Since the body cannot be physically alienated from ritual time or space in this strong definition, mass media presentations appear to be strictly disqualified from being classified as rituals. I argue that mass media presentations are a type of ritual genre because they do satisfy the bodily

performance requisites of ritual practice, even if they seem at first glance to be the antithesis of whatever ritual means.<sup>3</sup>

Bodily performance in ritual is a kind of bodily re-presentation. It quasi-magically re-presents every body that has previously incarnated whatever ritual archetypes offer a model for contemporary reenactments. Whatever power such re-creations have derives partly from these antecedent performances. Even a wedding that consciously departs from previous ritual forms depends on the accumulated memory weight of previous reenactments of the archetype to make the departure meaningful. Just as ritual archetypes confer conviction and transforming power on subsequent reincarnations, every reincarnation confirms the archetypal status of the model to which it hearkens.

While notions of performance and drama have always been central to cultural studies, they are modeled on the playful distance from life that typifies art or fiction. Bodily performance in ritual and dramatic performance in this discursive, textual sense function differently. In cultural studies, performances are treated as distant from what is dead-serious in the way that texts may be said to be distant from embodied life. Just as symbols are not what they stand for, performances are treated as constructed and not to be taken at face value. They are suspect, in a word. Because of its focus on discourse and language as the key to the social, cultural studies has not been much interested in ritual, though discourses of the body have received plenty of attention, most famously from Michel Foucault (1972).

In the most basic sense, the chief task of societies is to organize and dispose of bodies. Mary Douglas (1982) argues that our notions about the body are always notions of social order. Foucault is more radical, arguing that power in society is registered directly on the physical body. Jean Comaroff (1992) claims that the constitution of social relations is a visceral matter. This is why, as the fundamental mode of group communication, the body is the medium and focus of ritual. Through bodies, rituals address who belongs to the group and how to keep it together through cycles of birth and death. Roy Rappaport (1979) makes the most useful statement about ritual: it is the basic social act (174). The reason, explains Mircea Eliade (1959), is that it repeats the act of creation. In human experience, creation begins with the body. Ritual works on bodies, is performed by bodies, and models them in significant ways.

Conceiving of ritual form as bodily re-presentation instead of discursive representation is a departure from the usual cultural studies approach. It proposes consequences in the world for sociability based on the universal human experience of having a body. Discursive textual culture

floats free, as symbols do, from social action. The discursive sign is insubstantial. In ritual, by contrast, the body is an indexical sign of performers' relation to the liturgical and social order they incarnate and to which they submit (Rappaport 1979). The ritually performing body is not insubstantial; it is what it communicates. The body is a real and constitutive element of social action. Its impact qua body must be taken into account. By *body*, I mean the heat-seeking skin packages we all inhabit. *Heat-seeking* refers to our desire for connection and warmth, our innate social capacity. Our skins are "social skins," culturally permeable boundaries. As cultural studies theorists recognize, the body is also a model through which social actors imagine themselves and the world. It can be argued that this model also travels more successfully than text across human experience.<sup>4</sup>

Though it is no surprise that academicians find a congenial model for culture in text, the reach of that conceptualization across less textually focused cultures remains limited.<sup>5</sup> Even in highly textualized cultures like our own, the body is never absent or unimportant. The unending struggle for dominance between bodies and texts is one of the constitutive dramas of advanced industrial societies (Marvin 1994). A theoretical and empirical focus on the body offers a remedy, finally, for a sometimes too blunt-edged social constructivism in cultural studies by exploring the tension between what is given in human experience, as the body is, and how culture emerges from social wrestling with that given.

What does any of this have to do with media ritual, which many theorists consider to be an oxymoron or at least an impoverished and corrupt version of more authentic, body-based ritual experiences. The term *media ritual* includes face-to-face rituals presented through media and patterns of presentation and audience engagement peculiar to media, especially news coverage of community triumphs, dangers, and disasters. Logically, the distinction between so-called mediated and so-called face-to-face rituals is an unstable one. Since every ritual refers to already established (previously encoded, in Rappaport's terms) structures of sociability, every ritual recalls persons, processes, and events that are not immediately present. These include ancestors whose ritual deeds may be remembered, reliance on a traditional liturgical order of events, and invocations of prior moments and places of significance. In point of fact, every ritual is mediated.

Still, the most obvious difference between mass media rituals and other mediated ritual forms is the way in which bodies are incorporated in them. In traditional rituals, performers and congregants occupy each other's immediate presence for the ceremonial duration. In media ritu-

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als, performers are physically separated from viewing and reading congregants, and congregants are separated from one another. If all rituals are mediated presentations, differences in bodily presence are issues not of ritual authenticity but of ritual power. The most powerful ritual magic, or transformations, are worked directly on the bodies of supplicants in the physical copresence of congregants, who may include other performers or simply witnesses. The most important rituals do the most dramatic things to supplicants' bodies. The ritual of war, for example, dramatically transforms the bodies of group members. (Since war is the most powerful group-forging ritual in contemporary nation-states, I refer to it frequently.)

Media displays of blood sacrifice images and text that re-presents sacrifice in words are clearly not the referred-to sacrificial event but re-presentations of it. The transforming power of re-presentation differs from that of face-to-face events; the power of re-presentation is generally but not always less.<sup>6</sup> The crucial ritualizing function of media is to re-model blood sacrifice on which group cohesion depends. In concrete terms, media retell important stories of group sacrifice. This happens every time a newscast references these experiences even in passing and whenever books, films, plays, songs, paintings, parades, exhibits, and other mediated forms take these stories for their subjects. It also takes place when mass media re-present body-to-body commemorative rituals for wider circulation.

Enduring groups rely on media, but not just mass media, to learn about foundational blood sacrifice. Media preoccupation with violence may be seen both as a re-presentation of defining blood sacrifice and as a ritual rehearsal for it. "Television dotes on death, the violent kind," writes Max Frankel (1995, 28), expressing a widely shared belief, and David Halberstam (1991) observes that American media are "interested in foreign news only when it happens point-blank to Americans, preferably violently" (A21). This is not all media do. They re-present a great variety of events, objects, persons, and symbols that concern the group to whom they address themselves and of which they are a part. But in times of social emergency, group members go to media. The greatest emergencies are those in which group members' lives are at stake, when blood-letting is imminent on behalf of the group. At such times, media are ritually essential.

The rest of this discussion sketches out some essential propositions for understanding the relation between bodies and rituals and builds a case for classifying media presentations along a continuum of ritual practices that engage enduring groups.

1. *Ritual mimics and transforms bodies.* As biological bodies reproduce the species bloodline, ritual reproduces the social species, the group. Ritual systems for perpetuating enduring groups are homologous with natural systems that perpetuate species. Biological bodies are transformed in the process of producing new bodies. Puberty, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and childbirth visibly transform bodies. Bodies are also imitated in biological reproduction and nurturance. Each generation produces the next by mimicking bodies that know how to do this already. New biological bodies turn out to be reassuringly familiar. There is comfort in seeing the physical features of parents in children.<sup>7</sup> Biological replication thus displays species and social continuity. Across the generations, we value the same gestures, the same posture, the same laugh. Baby Ruth has Aunt Helen's nose, Dad's jawline. A body with discernible similarities to other bodies can be connected to a social kinship system and invested with responsibility for creating future generations. For species to have a future, present bodies must be transformed. Present bodies are transformed by imitating past bodies.

From the beginning, physical bodies are fashioned into group-sustaining social bodies. This is done by imitating rituals that have transformed others. Just as every child is a biological homologue of its parent, every ritual event is a homologue of an imagined ritual archetype. Every ritually transformed citizen body is a homologue of the social body. Rituals cease to be useful when their archetypal models no longer convincingly sustain themselves in the present to the group. As biological sociability re-creates species, ritual sociability re-creates groups. New social bodies are intelligible because we see the old ones in them. A ritual quest by the American nation-state to depose Saddam Hussein is worthy because the president designates it as the child of the ritual quest to depose Hitler. As in sexual reproduction of biological bloodlines, ritual reproduction creates long-term stability in social structures by absorbing and exploiting short-term changes.

2. *Blood is the most important ritual substance; rituals about blood are the most important for enduring groups.* First blood for males is a symbol of fighting readiness. First blood also establishes female fertility in menstruation. It accompanies birth. Its appearance at death signals the breakdown of body borders. Its importance for biological bodies makes it central to sacrificial and regenerative rituals of the group. The blood sacrifice of bodies on a scale and in a manner to impress its members is the sustaining ritual of enduring groups. Bodies sacrificially transformed by blood in war are ritually returned to the homeland and "planted" in ritual burial as the socially regenerative seed of future generations. Each



new bloodletting points back to creation-sacrifice, the bloodletting that originates society. Here, too, rituals imitate biology. As each biological birth mimics an ancestral event filled with blood and peril, each group rebirth mimics a generative bloodletting. Group life is ritually sustained by draping new disorders and bloodlettings that imperil the group in the familiar garments of an originating myth about how the group is formed and how to keep it together. Just as birth and death are fundamental to biological bodies, rituals that rivet group attention concern birth and death in the social body. Events full of real or potential death—impeachments, moon landings, hurricanes, wars, and murder trials—get more attention from media than the national budget does. Equating the social body to the natural one by attending to its death and resurrection is what concerns the group in its primitive guise as an entity that constructs the social out of the body.

3. *Gesture is the essential communicative mechanism of ritual.* Society consists of relationships among bodies. Bodies relate to other bodies in two modes. They touch (transform) one another out of affection or hostility. They conform to (imitate) one another in socially coded ways to a greater or lesser degree. These two ritual modes of contact and modeling correspond to Sir James Frazer's categories of magical action. In contagious magic, agency or substance flows communicatively from the ritual object to those who receive it. Substance flows into substance, violating and breaching form. The transforming principles are contiguity, contact, and connection. Contagious magic transforms by touching, by infecting, by suffusing. It crosses boundaries and exchanges substance. The power of sympathetic magic resides in mimesis. It communicates form through re-creation. Supplicants do not receive the ritual object or symbol so much as they perform it by speaking its gestures and putting on its forms. The power of sympathetic magic is acquired through modeling and imitation. Contagious and sympathetic magic has meaning only in reference to the experience of having a body. Both are elements in the most magical of enduring-group rituals, blood sacrifice. To shed another body's blood or to have one's own blood shed, as in war, is to alter bodily and social boundaries and thereby perform contagious magic. To multiply mimetically the contagious magic of killing and dying—to broadcast a war, for example—is magically to re-present the originating body to body event (with weaker transformative effect, to be sure, but without news re-presentation there would be no effect beyond the immediate performers) by sympathetically repeating it.

4. *The transforming power of ritual depends on its proximate relation to the sacrificed body.* Ritual events vary in how much they struc-

touch

imitative

ture the life of the group. These variations depend on their capacity for sympathetic magic, which is the degree to which they copy ritual events, and their capacity for contagious magic, or transforming power. The chief transforming power that rituals have is to stop time, to cut out and frame from the flow of existence an event to which group history is ever after referenced. Generally speaking, battlefield death is more transformative for those who see it close up than press reports about it are for media audiences. Yet if the press does not capture it (or in a different kind of culture, if storytellers do not pass it along), blood sacrifice cannot become creation-sacrifice and execute its group-unifying function. Media choose and organize coverage of events according to a blood sacrifice myth that maintains the group. Fredric Jameson (1981) has written, "History is what hurts" (102). Body language is necessary to describe it. The biggest history is about the biggest hurt, which is sacrifice. Media witness and model sacrifice. Though media have no power to perform real sacrifice, they scratch the itch in small ways and at regular intervals. They provide maintenance and memory until a big sacrifice comes again. Then they become the channel through which knowledge of sacrifice moves to the nation. Ritual recalls events that in re-modeling become something other than strictly real. They are re-presented, which is to say, mediated, with elements added and subtracted in the service of group myth. Mediation does not ensure ritual success, though in groups that are too large for all members to know one another personally—which includes virtually all nation-states—it is necessary. Media mythically tidy up and polish events that contain ritually usable elements, as all ritual form does. Even failed rituals instruct congregants in what proper rituals should be. Successful rituals give the group a new or renewed sense of itself, and they do it for an extended period. World War II was a more successful ritual than the Gulf War because its unifying effects stayed with group members longer.

5. *Media track the bodily engagement of congregants and participants in ritual events.* The most effective ritual magic is exercised directly on bodies. Though media rituals do not act directly on bodies, they restore the illusion of bodily presence for ritual re-presentation. Media show bodies performing ritual acts and often observe the bodily reactions of congregants. The more media focus on the body, the more important the ritual is likely to be. Media track bodies anticipating ritual outcomes, responding to them, making new connections to one another, and offering testimony about ritual success or failure.

Media restore bodies to ritual by re-presenting them in images and words and commenting on the bodily efforts of congregants and performers. The more ritually engaged the bodies of congregants and performers

and the more media report on this engagement, the more important the ritual to the group. "Read my lips!" declared the presidential candidate George Bush in a 1988 campaign promise not to raise taxes. The electorate punished him in 1992 for breaking his body oath. "I did not have sexual relations with that woman," President Bill Clinton told the American people and punctuated the statement by jabbing the air with his finger. This gesture, more than any other act or statement, came to most represent the president's having broken faith with the American people and precipitated an impeachment trial.

Media rituals convey whether many or a few bodies are ritually participating and watching. Successful rituals engage many congregants. According to the *New York Times*, "More people watched the two-hour long address [by Minister Louis Farrakhan at the Million Man March] on CNN than any other speech this year, including Mr. Clinton's State of the Union Message and the Pope's address to the United Nations" (Holmes 1995, A1). "Millions of people in millions of places seemed to spend 10 spellbinding minutes yesterday doing exactly the same thing," the *New York Times* wrote about the O. J. Simpson verdict (Kleinfeld 1995, A1). "Never before in any election have I seen crowds like these," declared a Quebecer waiting to vote on the future of the province (quoted in Farnsworth 1991, A12). Since genuine ritual magic requires the transformation of bodies, bodily engagement must be apparent. In words and pictures, media charted flag-waving, singing, and painted Quebecois faces, contagiously and sympathetically connecting the bodies of the faithful to their flags: "In downtown Montreal, a crowd estimated at 150,000 waved the Maple Leaf flag of Canada and the fleurs-de-lis flag of Quebec and sang the national anthem, hoping to convince the French-speaking people of Quebec to vote No in their independence referendum on Monday" (Farnsworth 1995, 1).

When the pope visited Sacred Heart Cathedral in Newark in 1995, the media recorded the ritual: "The sounds of the organ and thunderous applause filled the cathedral, echoing off the stones laid in place in 1898 by workmen long dead, as the Pope appeared. Rejuvenated by the joyful greeting, he stretched out his arms, taking 10 minutes to walk up the aisle past moist-eyed priests and nuns, many of whom stood on their pews like excited schoolchildren and reached out to kiss his ring" (Stout 1995, B1).

When Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, metaphors of bodily suffering were plentiful. A CNN reporter described Israel as "paralyzed with grief" (Rogers 1995). An Israeli citizen told the *New York Times* correspondent that "his pain was as searing as an ulcer" (Jehl 1995, A1).

There is ritual consternation when bodies are unavailable. When ValuJet Flight 592 plunged to earth in 1996, rituals for repairing the social trauma caused by the deaths of group members were missing their most important element, as Rick Bragg (1996) reported for the *New York Times*: "Rescue workers found no survivors. They found no bodies. When ValuJet Flight 592 dropped out of the sky and into the Florida Everglades on Saturday afternoon, it was as if 109 people aboard the DC-9 were just erased. . . . 'How can you have a funeral?' said Ms. Hinley, who answered questions about her future daughter-in-law graciously and patiently, until the notion of the burial and how it would be arranged brought her to tears" (A1). How can you have a ritual without a body? By imaginatively restoring it as media do. But as congregants, we know the difference, and *it is not the same*.

Effective rituals build uncertainty about the fate of the group in advance of a ritual outcome and express this uncertainty in bodily terms. In a good ritual, there is doubt (it may be real or manufactured) about how the ritual will come out. There is testimony to this fact. Awaiting the O. J. Simpson verdict, a friend of mine wrote by e-mail, "I keep staring at the clock. I cannot believe the jury came up with a verdict so quickly. The anticipation is KILLING me."

As the Quebec independence referendum approached, this newspaper headline conveyed ritual suspense in bodily terms: "Canada Holds Its Breath as Quebec Votes." The more uncertain the outcome, the greater the ritual magic that must be summoned. The greater the magic required, the more bodily transformation will play a part; the greater the benefit to the social body if the ritual succeeds, the greater the peril if it fails. When a ritual outcome is prescribed in advance, as in a wedding ceremony, uncertainty shifts to the suspense of bringing off the certain outcome. Will Aunt Edna faint? Will the groom make it to the church on time? Will the bride trip going down the aisle?

In effective rituals, well-defined outcomes are rendered in bodily terms. For several days, television repeated the moment in the O. J. Simpson trial that determined whether the group would sacrifice him. When the verdict was read, the press reported that sobs sounded, audiences gasped, jaws dropped, people cheered and spoke. "I felt the verdict in my sinuses," Jeffrey Toobin (1995) wrote for the *New Yorker*. He also registered the time-stopping clarity of the outcome. "I thought how rarely life is like this—a single moment when everything changes. I urged myself to seize it, capture it, write something profound in my notebook" (48). This is the ritualizing impulse. Televisual and print media did seize it, repeatedly re-presenting the transformation of the defendant's face in the

moment that uncertainty became acquittal. Media also endlessly re-presented the postures and facial expressions of congregants in different racial groups reacting to the verdict.

Successful rituals multiply connections among bodies. These are social connections. They include every body-to-body interaction precipitated by ritual events. New rituals of solidarity are generated among congregants. Michael Matza (1995) reported that as voting returns came in on Quebec's future, "separatists gathered for what they hoped would be a great victory party. They banged on drums. They stomped their feet. They cheered and whistled wildly. In front of a giant video screen on which the returns were projected, they swooned with ecstasy with each new village recorded for oui and recoiled at every non" (A6).

The pope's visit to Newark was depicted in the *New York Times*: "The faithful broke into reverent cheers shortly before 6 p.m. as two huge television monitors showed the Pontiff's vehicle circling the block. Murmurs and ripples of excited chatter filled the French Gothic church" (Stout 1995, B1).

*Reuters World Service* described the reaction to Prime Minister Rabin's assassination: "Hundreds of Israelis waiting outside a Tel Aviv hospital broke into screams and tears when a spokesman announced Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's death from an assassin's gun. . . . Others simply clutched their heads in disbelief. Grown men wept openly. . . . Teenagers lit candles, placed them on the sidewalk and sat in circles around the small lights flickering across from the hospital where Rabin, the only Israeli leader to be assassinated, was taken spattered with blood" (Gur-arieh 1995).

A successful ritual brings the group to a new sense of itself as a corporate body.<sup>8</sup> When rituals are successful, congregants say so. After the kidnapping and murder of eight-year-old Polly Klaas in California, a neighbor explained that Polly "means everything to this town, because she made it really small again. She solidified what we have" (quoted in Gross 1994, A12).

When a talented New Jersey high school senior died in a car accident, her friends put aside (thereby, it should be pointed out, sympathetically sacrificing) their own work to complete her science contest project, which won a posthumous prize. A school official recalled the rituals of bodily connection and group unity her blood sacrifice had created: "Day after day the pain was so intense. . . . Everybody was hugging, touching. We kept pulling together rather than separating apart. I really feel we have a connection through this that will keep us together for the rest of our lives" (quoted in Stewart 1995, 29).

But here is a description of an old photograph, an early twentieth-century mediation of a ritual event that gets closer to the process by which blood sacrifice unifies groups and by which groups gesturally forge and renew themselves: "A large group of men and women were standing near a tree. Hanging from that tree was a bloodied corpse. Smiling men, women and children stood at the base of that tree, pointing up at the dead black man as if directing the camera's eye toward the corpse. These white people beamed. There were great smiles on their faces, as if they took great pride that this bloody black corpse hung from that tree. They had done it, you see. They had killed the man. And they were glad" (Gaiter 1994, 21).

The most important task of ritual is fostering group cohesion. When it does this successfully, it is moral by the lights of the group performing it. The criterion for successful ritual performance is not whether it accords with an elusive universal morality but whether it generates a corporate group sense. As there is testimony about ritual success, there is testimony about ritual failure. "After Quebec votes to stay, it is as split as ever," read a headline following the referendum on independence for Quebec. This is an unsuccessful ritual. The group remains divided and perhaps has become more so. "Jury Clears Simpson in Double Murder; Spellbound Nation Divides on Verdict," reported the *New York Times*. "We knew we were a divided society," the columnist Anthony Lewis (1995) wrote. "But not before had the depth of the division been so instantly dramatized." He concluded with a powerful metaphor of group disunity: "It was as if we lived in different countries" (A31).

### *Conclusion*

Society organizes bodies. Rituals organize society. Rituals recall, mimic, and transform bodies to reproduce the social bloodline. Their transformative power depends on how much they alter participant bodies at key moments of group birth and death. Ritual seeks embodiment because whatever is vital, including groups, must be embodied. While the most obvious attribute of mediated rituals is that the bodies of congregants and participants are separated from one another, media are ritually driven to offer the illusion of bodily presence restored. Since this presence cannot actually be restored, the transformative power of ritual re-presentation in media is weaker than the transformative power of body-to-body rituals. Still, media use ritual formats to sculpt current events for re-presentation, instruct congregants to ritual procedures, and recall rituals past. By this means, they help sustain enduring groups whose

members are physically separated from one another at important ritual moments. By re-presenting bodies at critical moments of group transformation, they play a critical role in keeping nation-states cohesive.

## Notes

1. The arguments in this essay are based on the author's book with David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (1999). See also Marvin and Ingle (1996).

2. This territory has been trod by others but somewhat differently. Ronald L. Grimes (1987) argues for "the primacy of the human body" in ritual studies but limits this primacy to the body's "capacity to enact social roles and body forth cultural meanings" (423).

3. On media ritual, see Rothenbuhler (1998); Dayan and Katz (1992); Bell (1997); Farrell (1989); Coleman (1994); Elliott (1982); Schudson (1994); Ettema (1990); Deegan (1989); and Real (1975).

4. See van Gennep (1960); Mauss (1973); T. Turner (1980); V. Turner (1967); Bourdieu (1977, 1990); Douglas (1982); and Bell (1992). See also Goody (1977).

5. A key argument in this area remains Clifford and Marcus (1986).

6. Sometimes it may be more powerful. See Marvin and Ingle (1999).

7. Not all progeny are accepted. Some biological reproduction creates consternation and fear. Some ritual reproduction works the same way.

8. For a discussion of systematic factors in ritual success, see Marvin and Ingle (1996).

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