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RECONSIDERING JAMES CAREY

HOW MANY RITUALS DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE AN ARTIFACT?

Carolyn Marvin

Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again: finally it can be reckoned beforehand and becomes part of the ceremony.

— Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China*

WHEN JAMES CAREY FORMULATED the distinction between *ritual* and *transmission* more than a decade ago in order to interrogate the direction of scholarly thought about communication, it could have been said that he became one of the leopards in the temple, and that as a result, the look of the ceremony changed.¹ Along with other students and critics of culture contemplating a similar range of problems, Carey struck a resonant chord in a congregation dissatisfied with the liturgy. Over the years, his provocative distinction has continued to capture the imagination and energy of students and scholars seeking ways to formulate unfolding intuitions about what to pay attention to and why. Today the leopards *are* part of the ceremony. We have embraced what Joe Turow, quoting Clifford Geertz, calls the "rise of the interpretive turn."² There are audiences, journals, and scholars eager to take up the cultural perspective Carey called for. This is an important achievement in our field. Its acknowledgement, appropriately symbolized in the publication of Carey's essays spanning that period of transformation, provides an opportunity briefly to replenish and drink again from the chalice of that originating provocation.

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1. James Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," *Communication 2* (December 1975): 1-22, reprinted in Carey, *Communication As Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 13-36.

2. Joseph Turow, "Media Industries, Media Consequences: Rethinking Mass Communication," in *Communication Yearbook 13*, ed. James A. Anderson (Newbury Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1990), 478.

In person and in print, Carey has always been the most generous of teachers. As one who has felt that gift deeply, and in the spirit of that original challenge, I shall suggest that Carey's initial distinction could also be drawn in an arena where it has had less development and attention. This is the arena of technology, entering the field as a fashionable subject area during the last decade in the guise of "new technologies," where it took over (though this was not its exclusive presentation) some of the very behavioral and functional perspectives Carey had questioned. What I wish to argue is that Carey's notion of communication as ritual, or cultural code, should be applied to technology, and not oppositionally contrasted to it. Though Carey is too subtle a thinker to dichotomize good-communication and bad-technology, there are aspects of his writing that do seem to point in that direction, and about which some stirring up of the waters may provide a useful clarification of his work.

Carey argued that applying a transmission view to communication obscured it as a human and cultural exchange by overlaying an alternative analysis of how technically constructed message features such as speed, reach, volume, and efficiency could be used to control citizens and workers more or less well.³ We should consider whether framing technology in the vocabulary of transmission conceptually dehydrates social life, to use Victor Turner's phrase, in a comparable way. By a "transmission" notion of technology I mean the view that technological forms irresistibly structure symbolic space in the vocabulary of speed, size, and control, that technology's primary effect is to distance us from one another, and that technology is of a different substance than culture. It reflects it; it may or may not determine it; but it is not *it*. An alternative "ritual" frame extending both the logic and spirit of Carey's original distinction might question these primary assumptions about technology, broaden the range of artifacts and practices commonly thought of in connection with communicative exchange, and in particular examine the up-close, performative aspects of technological practice. It would elaborate for a specific domain of practices Mary Douglas's dictum that consumption, broadly defined to mean every facet of our cultural appropriation of goods, "is a ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events."⁴

In fairness, the frame I mean is a frame that Carey himself has touched on over the years. Things, he says, quoting Kenneth Burke, are the way we talk about ourselves, and artifacts are products of human action on the world. But as I read Carey, technology is for the most part anti-ritual and its meanings more pathological than not. While I suspect Carey may not be per-

3. For a classic analysis of this kind, see Ithiel de Sola Pool, "Tracking the Flow of Information," *Science*, 12 August 1983, 609-13.

4. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 65.

suaded to extend his ritual view in precisely the way I am suggesting, and that he will not lack for subtle and eloquent arguments to the contrary, I hope to engage him nonetheless.

Carey has never explicitly limited the transmission view of communication that he wished to problematise to what is technological, though he argues that the metaphor of communication as transmission is characteristic of industrial cultures. Industrial cultures are technologized in their very name, of course, and it is hard to know what could make communication transmission-like, if not technology. That observation must be tempered by the recognition that we define technology in peculiarly tribal ways. The best known of these definitions lean heavily on efficiency, rationality, instrumentality, method, and replication. These are one-dimensional, totalizing definitions of the kind Carey has warned against in treating communication itself. As a discursive writer and a critic of neat, exclusionary systematizing beloved by the academy, Carey has consistently objected to behaviorist, functionalist, and critical models too reified and formalistic to capture the complexity of human experience. We might similarly question the assumption that similar artifacts serve the same purposes in all societies, and indeed, in all social exchanges within any one society. We have learned that such assumptions about speech and myth are treacherous.⁵ They are equally treacherous about technology. What we might propose instead is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's observation, sounding not unlike James Carey, that "men and women make order in their selves by first creating and then interacting with the material world."⁶

Perhaps the least controversial and most serviceable definition of technology is also the simplest. Technology is material culture: artifacts. This is a useful definition if it is admitted, as it generally now is, that artifacts have no cultural existence except within a symbolic milieu that generates, explains, and sustains them.⁷ That symbolic setting could be a factory in which artifacts are a focus and a medium for human relationships accomplished around the moment of production, a museum or art gallery in which artifacts perform as memory objects or are deliberately distanced from customary contexts in order to notice certain things about them, or a wedding shower in which artifacts are

5. Dell Hymes, "The Anthropology of Communication," in *Human Communication Theory*, ed. Frank E. X. Dance, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 1-39; G.S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures* (New York: Cambridge, 1970).

6. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (New York: Cambridge, 1981), 16.

7. One exemplary instance of the current crop of definitions: Wiebe Bijker and his colleagues include objects, activities or processes, and knowledge as essential components of a notion of technology, which they argue cannot be fruitfully defined with greater precision. See Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, Trevor Pinch, eds. *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 3-4.

given the role of gifts. The boundaries of technological definition tell us less about what technology is than what it is that people want to debate about. Invariably, the topic of this debate is the social relations called into question by a particular (indeed, every) system of artifacts. Definitions of technology thus lead away from artifacts to focus on social relationships. The boundaries of technological definition and debate reflect prejudices and predispositions—not analytic precision, but culture.

Carey's own treatment of technology is polemically distinctive. Carey recognizes two general classes of technology. One, by omission, contains artifacts that do not concern him. Technology is what Carey associates with communication-as-transmission. If I understand him right, communication at a distance made possible by modern, industrial, shiny, male-identified for the most part, capital-intensive forms of "high" technology for the purpose of control ("the more important manufactures," according to a 1909 *Webster's Dictionary* definition⁸) is the kind of communication that is undesirable. By extension, it furnishes the kind of society that may be undesirable as well.

It cannot be objected that a technology or society so characterized is arbitrary and partial in its rendering of the world, since the notion of the legitimacy of culturally idiosyncratic frames is what motivates cultural analysis to begin with. There is presently a surge of concern about technologies or societies using technologies that seem to undermine the conditions of cultural diversity for other groups by structuring ever more controlled and rationalized environments. This position has substantial moral appeal, but also serious analytic difficulties. An important but rarely undertaken task of such a critique is to specify what counts as acceptable change and transformation among cultures in contact, and for that matter, among classes, groups, and persons within a "single" culture. Another task is justifying the categories we have constructed to describe cultural diversity and the views we may hold about their significance and value outside any cultural frame but our own, and finally, explaining how observers socialized in a particular cultural tradition and history can have valid knowledge of cultures, thoughts, and feelings outside that frame.⁹ These are, of course, the kinds of objections typically raised in response to the "interpretive turn," which its critics charge has told us a lot more about ourselves as interpreters than about culture.

8. Quoted by Langdon Winner in *Autonomous Technology: Technics-Out-of-Control As a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 8.

9. For a useful discussion of both sides of this argument, see Richard A. Shweder, "Anthropology's Romantic Rebellion Against the Enlightenment, or There's More to Thinking Than Reason and Evidence," and Melford E. Spiro, "Some Reflections on Cultural Determinism and Relativism with Special Reference to Emotion and Reason," both in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* ed. Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine (New York: Cambridge, 1984), 27–66, 323–46.

But in the matter of technology Carey is no cultural relativist. His positioning of mass media and transportation as high-tech destroyers of community makes him a cultural positivist for whom transmissive technology is what is not original oral communication. The result is that distillate "effects" in mediated and face-to-face communication (which is mediated by language, costume, cosmetics, and all the other apparatuses of personal exchange) are community and culture determining. Distal artifacts, extending the operations of the body across space, threaten communities undisciplined by the constraints of face-to-face interaction. These are dislodged from their "natural" centers by the irresistible pull of distant groups through the agency of distance-controlling artifacts. Technology is problematic because "it" constitutes the suspect mechanism that interferes with what Suzuki calls the "direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities."¹⁰ The debatable assumption here, besides the belief that people always treat one another better close up and worse at a distance, is that distance-controlling technology is not routinely filtered, structured, interpreted, or molded through close-up customs and meanings.

Technology is a problematic in Carey's analysis partly because *community*, as he has used the term, remains an uncertain social condition. Whatever might be the elastic vitality of communities, their ebb and flow in communication, remains in doubt, explorable but unexplored, since the implication of a critique of distance-controlling artifacts is that communities cease to be authentic or moral or manageable when their boundaries enlarge. This resistance to contact and transformation, and the related lack of a dynamic to explain whether and how there could be boundary changes and symbolic shifts of a non-pathological type, suggests a view of culture as product rather than process, and is puzzling, at least to me. It was John Dewey, after all, whose notion of society *as* communication is basic to Carey's theoretical posture, who argued for the transformative possibilities of communication. Dewey, of course, was alarmed by the inability of the great community created by transport and mass media to achieve the conditions for such communication. His point of reference was the New England village (artificially symbolized by its covered bridge, its steepled church, and its wooden fences) and its ritual town meeting. We need not restrain our admiration for those things to notice that this community was racially exclusive, ethnically homogeneous and unwelcoming, and unwilling to offer women the vote. These elements are too far from a historically altered sense (some of it achieved with the help of distal printed discussion, since racism can be a very face-to-face prejudice) of what is necessary for the demo-

10. For a useful discussion of identity and cultural performance, see Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Publications, 1982), 102-23.

cratic spirit to flourish for us to idealize it as any but a nostalgic alternative to a society that takes cultural diversity up close more seriously, if not without pain.

Carey's criteria for evaluating the worthiness of technologically various communities are unclear because the lost communities he admires—Dewey's New England, traditional Ireland, classical Greece—were themselves enriched by writers, travelers, and other citizens comfortable with symbolic distance. Distance is in fact essential to symbolic action, since symbols are displaced from what is symbolized. Can distal technologies enhance community? Is orality not so fragile? Can it be that speech and technique serve different purposes in different settings that must be established encounter by encounter? Social exchanges are simultaneously local and distant, personal and collective, past and present, space- and time-binding. Distance-controlling media need to be analyzed with due regard for local features of symbolic exchange. Nor is it clear that distant meanings chiefly govern and elaborate technological practices. To speak simply of technology, or distal technology, as perilous to community may obscure in a reifying metaphor (the kind Carey rejects in descriptions of communication) intricate and complex sequences and hierarchies of social practice, and elaborate networks of relations among actors, including bonds and oppositions of interest and friendship that should provide rich fields of inquiry for students of communication. We must entertain the possibility of *Gemeinschaft* at every point in the *Gesellschaft*, and look for it.

Can, for example, Carey's distal-proximal model help us understand Henry Adams's perception of the electric dynamo? Adams spoke of it as "a symbol of infinity . . . he began to feel the forty-foot dynamo as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross. . . . Before the end, one began to pray to it." No cultural analyst could resist the suggestion that symbols and rituals of the sacred migrate from content to content or that feelings of communion and participation are projected on things as well as gods, animals, and persons. This is not to deny the less than salutary aspects of human uses of technology with respect to other persons and the planet itself, but it is to argue that "features" of technology are found in human notions about technology rather than in structures issuing independently from artifacts, and these notions complicate rather than simplify analysis.

Consider also that anthropology has struggled over at least two contradictory meanings of the term *ritual*. One meaning calls to mind occasions and acts in which there is an intensification of the social structure. Ritual occurs, according to Arnold van Gennep, to whom we owe the notion of *rites de passage*, in moments of transformative possibility, danger, and suspense—in the presence, that is, of an implied peril to the social structure which may or may not be resolved by a return to the *ancien re-*

gime. Rituals of this kind, says Victor Turner, are "occasions not given over to technological routine."¹¹ But there is surely technological non-routine wherever sublimity and terror focus on artifacts. This is what moon landings are about, atomic bomb blasts, and wedding rings.

An alternative sense of ritual comes by way of Sir Edmund Leach through Emile Durkheim and Clyde Kluckhohn, among others, and refers to routinized and non-special acts, familiar and comfortable activities whose reassuring presence tells their practitioners they are at home in their culture. Such rituals are not specially marked and communicate the prevailing social values and rules of the community, reflecting Peter Berger's description of human society as "essentially and inevitably externalizing activity . . . an edifice of externalized and objectivated meanings, always intending a meaningful totality."¹²

Whereas ritual in the first, or strong, sense seeks to stabilize change and contain crisis, it has ways of accommodating and using it. This is Kafka's point in the vignette of the leopards in the temple. The second sense, however, describes a world where change is absent and unwelcome at worst, unaccounted for at best. It is in this second weak sense of ritual, through a variety of small but significant social acts, that Carey presents his prototype example of newspaper reading-and-writing for analysis. Carey's choice is illuminating because of the newspaper's place in a cultural chain of events that is identified by its unseverable links to two technologies firmly affixed to a transmission *mentalité*—printing and transportation. The daily newspaper cannot be in the reader's hands without the delivery truck, the roads on which it travels, the printing satellite, the rocket that launches it, the reporters who make use not only of roads, telephones, and laptops, but pencils and notebooks. It requires a standardized technique for transforming and conveying language—the alphabet, and years of regimented training in its use. Newspaper reading is socially embedded in other technologically saturated settings as well—the house on Sunday, the subway ride to work, the automatic coffeemaker, and all the complex family, neighbor, stranger, gender, and class relations in which all these artifacts are also implicated, and through which their meaning is constituted. Newspaper reading cannot do without the artifact in a thousand forms patterned and textured in complex and meaningful ways among citizens in complementary, competing, and overlapping networks of association.

Not only must ritual have techniques and objects (Can we imagine a king without a throne, a judge without a bench, a professor without a chair? Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi asks), but ritual

11. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 79.

12. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1969), 27.

cannot do without control, authority, or hierarchy, which Carey presents as the distinguishing mark of transmissive technology. Carey has also described ritually framed communication as "the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action." The traditional sense of ritual as the performance of a closely controlled sequence of acts or words thus embodies the notion of conformity to an authorized order. Nothing about the ritualized representation of shared beliefs is incompatible with the struggle, sometimes muted, sometimes more open, for control of those representations and the people arrayed about them. Whatever is involved in stabilizing or challenging meaning in a culture involves control.

This is not because we have too little imagination to see anything but control as the paramount fact of social life. It is because at every level of social life, to paraphrase Foucault, the problem of control is fundamentally a problem of meaning: what reality will be, how resources of meaning shall be allocated and invested, which symbols belong together and which may be torn apart, and (always) by whom. Nor is the celebration of tradition less controlling for operating in a temporal rather than a spatial frame, as Eric Hobsbawm and his colleagues have demonstrated about those traditions we call modern, and as anyone who has ever lived in a small town might attest.¹³ Hannah Arendt makes this point and argues implicitly, in my view, for technology-as-ritual by asserting that cultural stabilization requires both reification, or the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things, and remembrance. To put it another way, remembrance, which we commonly recognize as a ritual process, and reification, which we do not, are necessary to make the cultural world real and reliable.¹⁴

Analytically, it seems difficult to separate communication as transmission from communication as ritual on the basis of the categories of control or preservation. If the term *ritual* suggests a cultural frame, a compelling explanation for social reality patterned and collectively attended to and maintained in ways that may include many forms of struggle and negotiation in communicative acts that manifest and create culture, then *technology* is a term for a very large ritual domain of communicative culture, and the metaphor of transmission is too restrictive a way of thinking not only about communication, but about technology as well.

Technological practice is a social process of the same kind that communication is. In both, elements of symbolic systems are manipulated through material objects and networks of personal

13. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge, 1983).

14. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), 94–96.

and collective relations to make meanings. This is not to say that anyone anytime has unlimited power with respect to the operation of technology or the interpretation of technologically produced or embodied symbols, but only that specific artifactual expressions and arrangements do embody and signify groups located in temporal or spatial circumstances in which power, prestige, purity, and honor are always scarce resources, and that culture and history are made as such arrangements change. Uncautiously used, the term *technology* becomes a misleading shorthand to homogenize and reduce the multi-leveled polyvalent relationships of people. Nor is this an argument against critical distance and in favor of apologies for mass culture and its ideology of consumer capitalism, but only in favor of phenomenal and cultural complexity, and enough patience to discover it.

How would technology look different if we thought of it as ritually embodying constitutive and regulative rules of social formation, as coding particular dimensions of the conversation about who we are and what we stand for? From a strong or weak ritual perspective, technology has but one dramatic role. That is to facilitate, organize, and otherwise mediate and provision human relationships, to elaborate the significance of communicative relationships, and to provide opportunities and codes for maneuvering and manipulating those relationships. Conventional attempts to distinguish technological from other kinds of social practice by designating functional utility as its distinctive purpose fail to the extent that such descriptions have meaning only with reference to prior, which is to say, historically and culturally fashioned notions of the world and human relationships, and of what rationality and efficiency might mean. As Marshall Sahlins writes, utility is not a quality of the object but a significance of the objective qualities.¹⁵

The point recalls the instructive arbitrariness of Martin Heidegger's claim in *The Question Concerning Technology* that the nature of a river is less violated by a wooden footbridge than a steam-powered turbine.¹⁶ This can only be true if the "nature" of the river is energy, let us say, and not boundary. But perhaps the nature of the river is to separate, which essence a footbridge profoundly violates by connecting banks, whereas a turbine is harmonious because it faithfully translates the river's energetic nature. The river cannot be consulted in any case. Only man's notion of the nature of the river, the footbridge, and the turbine can be negotiated among men. The same is true of artifacts which are interpreted both in creation and application, but not identically in every exchange.

There is no technology that does not place those arranged

15. Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 169.

16. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 16.

around it in social relations to one another, and there is thus no uncommunicative technology or technological practice. Consider the car door slammed in anger, as much a "function" of a car as the transportational possibilities that facilitate other kinds of communicative relationships. Consider the expressive drama of driving. In a car culture, how could it be otherwise? The expansive phrase "technology and culture" labels a kind of inquiry that places artifacts in a cultural context but holds on to the assumption that artifacts are inserted in culture, and of a different substance than culture is. In Western history, art and technology were once the same concept, reflected in a single term, but then divided. Art retained the association with culture.¹⁷ Technology remains culture no less, and a fully elastic dimension of it. Tools are messages about their users across time and space. Artifacts are the signs that go ahead of us even into the entirely symbolic palimpsest of outer space, where there is nothing to control with the technology available to us, just as the communicative appearance of the earliest surviving human tools on our own planet signifies the chronological beginning of civilization.

I would connect technology to ritualized communication by making more explicit the concreteness of the connection between bodies and technology. Technology is that aspect of culture we handle with our bodies, as Marx and McLuhan both recognized. Further, it could be argued that the action and interaction of bodies is the paradigmatic heart of oral culture. According to this perspective, what is most characteristic of oral culture is not that its medium is language, a notion that survives as a legacy of structuralist ideas about mind, but the body in all its expressive manifestations, including speech. Oral culture cannot go away so long as human beings have visually, tactually, and aurally perceptible, and perceiving, bodies. We have sometimes regarded technology as "opposed" to the body, and it may certainly be interpreted that way in a particular system of meaning, but technology is never not integrally connected to the body, and this may be one of the most interesting things to understand about it. The link between symbolizing minds and symbolically loaded artifacts is through bodies in any case. Shoshana Zuboff makes this explicit in her arresting and useful definition of technology as intelligence applied to the problem of the body, and in her notion of "acting-with" and "acting-on" technologies, which characterize the body's relationship to the technology.¹⁸ We can add *for the purpose of conducting social*

17. In the same way that technology was considered an art, art has been considered a technology. See Miriam Levin, "The Wedding of Art and Science in Late Eighteenth Century France," *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Life* 7 (May 1982): 54-73.

18. Shoshana Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power* (New York: Basic, 1988), 22.

relations that have significance with respect to other bodies that are present and absent. To offer a very modest example, how the television set is arranged in the home—in what room and in what position with respect to the bodies that will gather around it—helps signal what families wish to say about themselves to each other and to visitors. Such local practices are richly expressive to those who observe them.

These concerns aside, Carey has served us all, students and colleagues, and the field as a whole, in these published essays, which faithfully reflect both the medium and the message of his writing. His is the discursive art, conversation consciously opposed to a style of social science writing that fetishizes dead language stripped of the power of the personal body-based communication that speech is, in favor of a depersonalized, disembodied language that removes it from the individual body at the heart of perception and experience on the grounds that linguistic subjectivity is to be distrusted and its metaphorical resources avoided. We have learned a great deal from Carey's critical gaze at how mass media and other messages are connected to deeper structures of social life. I would not ask him to shift his gaze, and like others, will look forward to more descriptions of the view. But if we are to realize some of the implications of his sturdiest pronouncements about the ritual features of all human action in the world, I think there is a still unexplored and rewarding world of technological practice, pervasive in modern lives, to be seen up close and in ritual terms. Not that I think the explication of this world is Jim Carey's job. I do think his ideas will help make it possible.

