

Media as Ritual



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I would like to complement my earlier discussion of media, which situated the operations of media within a juridical framework, with a broader discussion of media as orchestrating specific forms of post-sacral ritual. The mass media, and now social media, do perpetually position us as judges on events involving some purported transgression, commanding us to “take a position” and add our little quantum of power to whatever target is being displayed on the Big Scene (and Big Screen). This keeps us perpetually locked into oscillations kept within the Overton window and ensures our ongoing contributions to media-governing-financial complexes. But this operation is itself possible insofar as the media scales up and distributes scenes by making them “tele-,” i.e., distanced. Think about what it took to place governing, or the occupied center, on display prior to the 19th century—it was necessary organize gigantic ceremonies, festivals, pageants, etc., which could only be done on special occasions, like coronations and inaugurations. Since the invention of radio, at least, such scenes could be composed daily.

Ritual is most fundamentally commemoration and scene-setting. Scaled up scenes created through distance-abolishing communications are more abstract, in the sense of singling out a very few features of the scene for attention and vicarious participation, as opposed to the “lush” immersion in a specific community in a specific building with elaborate and tactilely experienced rituals. The scaled up scene marginalizes and reshapes, and often abolishes the local scene. The self needs to be decomposed and recomposed in order find such a scaled up scene inhabitable—much of the 20th century entailed such work on the self. Responses controlled on a scene with extensive references to previous iterations need to be rewired to be suitable for a range of distanced and filtered scenes, and the old responses must remain in our memory for generations without any guarantee that they will be replaced in a coherent way. It’s easy to see why so many mid-century scientists and spooks and eventually drop-outs got interested in experiments in consciousness. We have here a new mode of governance, one predicated on the systemic and ritually enacted deposition of the occupant of the center, but also on a new mode of distribution organized through finance, which is required if everyone’s living conditions involves buying a home, and maybe moving to another home several times in the course of a lifetime, or renting, and probably moving many more times in that case, and furnishing that home with obsolescing devices needed to plug one into the media and technological system. In other words, media as ritual, keeping in mind that ritual always means distribution from

the center, necessarily entails consumerism. The new principle of governance is that turnover at the center be accelerated while the means of domination and control be increasingly centralized, thereby intensifying the behind the scenes work of keeping in place reliable bureaucracies themselves reliably open to the influx of publicly and privately funded intelligence from the media and academy.

On the face of it, this seems to be a very demystified arrangement—in exchange for allowing themselves to be denuded of traditional appurtenances and transformed into an operational element within a machinic structure, the technologized self receives a standard of living that by most standards is higher and more secure than any available previously. That was the promise, often fulfilled, other times reasonably hoped for, and the exchange was probably, implicitly at least (the question is never posed this explicitly), for many an acceptable bargain. In this case, the bargain is utilitarian, and not ritual at all. But focusing on the media helps us to demystify this demystification. Modern mass-mediated consumerism is a cult. You receive, along with your house in the suburb, TV and automobile, badges and emblems of belonging, models to emulate, forms of movement and new modes of seeing and hearing. And in return you supply endorsements, of specific products and institutions, and of the system of consumerism itself. There's nothing yet particularly "critical" in any of these observations, at least if one is willing to acknowledge that

governance is always cultic. And there's always much that is brutal and demeaning in any mode of governance, and a dose of manipulation, self-delusion and cynicism in any cult. If we are to recognize this system as in crisis, or as having failed, we will have to do a better job of it than by contrasting it with some other order that we idealize precisely for the purpose of presenting it as superior to this one.

The emergence of contemporary algorithmic governance, as an extension, transformation and perfection of the system of mass mediated consumerism, and also as its potential transcendence, should help us to develop the analyses that might enable those who see the most to do the most good and least harm in repairing institutions. The “production of subjectivities,” which earlier generations of critical theorists alleged to be the implicit agenda of modern educational, entertainment and communication systems is now quite explicitly engaged in by the overlords of social media. Think about how rough, haphazard and wasteful mid-20th century attempts at the formation of consciousness through advertising and TV sitcoms was—we can only think about that (rather than being awed and horrified as those earlier generations of critical theorists were) because we can see the increasing precision with which your own personalized desire can be anticipated and constructed through an ongoing series of iterations drawing upon your past purchases, IRL movements, job choices, internet searches, etc., and of those of people “like you.” And what you

donate in return—what the media companies receive—is also far more explicit and precise. Ford Motor Company broadcasting a commercial on CBS in 1955 was taking a shot in the dark, hoping this publicity will marginally increase sales and ephemera like “public good will.” Today Facebook, Google, Twitter et al know exactly what they want from you: data. And this data is highly useful to them even if you don’t buy the products advertised on their sites—indeed, your refusal to buy commodities provides them with data. Indeed, “wokeness” is essentially the synthesis of the figure of the victim derived the Auschwitz theology created through the Nuremberg Trials and the figure of the consumer branded by and providing branding for the financing of turnover at the center.

I have written of this often as data exchange with the center, and as, through the conversion of assets into data, the means by which we can move into a tributary order governed in accord with the imperative to provide to each according to his needs and ask from each according to his abilities. In other words, an order of teams interfacing with other teams, all sharing a common interest in deriving new ostensives from our artificial world. Far from revising any of that here, I’m continuing that inquiry by directing attention to the problem of infiltrating distancing scenes and retrieving from them originary events in the form of disciplinary spaces. Assets are converted into data by displacing the cult of maintaining the show trial of the occupant of the center in

increasingly granular ways with the cult of singularized succession in perpetuity. Resistance in general to “donating” your data is pointless, not only because record keeping has always been built into governance and is now built into all technology in the form of memory, but because anything you, person of the right or person of the left, would ever want your ideal government to do, would require massive amounts of data. How, exactly, do you think “universal health care” would be operationalized? Or, for that matter, enabling each family to afford a private home with a single salary? That would also involve targeting very specific institutions in very specific and sustained ways. Similarly, surveillance is terrifying because government totally weaponized by private-public factions in stealth war with other factions is terrifying—and you wouldn’t be able to eliminate routine surveillance as long as the state is organized that way anyway. If you could dramatically reorganize governance, the question of surveillance would take on a different cast as well.

Thinking of the media-technological-consumerist complex in ritual terms, as a distribution of scenes at various scales that rivet attention to screens and platforms on which simulated and occasionally real sparagmos are performed allows us to pose the question of how to wrench attention away from those scenes/screens. I think the answer lies in the kind of para-data-cal forms of literacy I have been exploring in recent posts. Such modes of literacy can only be mastered by small minorities at this point,

even if there is no need to assume any essential limits on how widespread they might become. Think of all the critiques, repeated each generation with little variation, of how literacy, attention spans, self-control, etc., are diminishing due to the media. Let's assume they're all true—in that case, think of all the power and responsibility that accrues to those able to resist that trajectory and increase their levels of literacy, intelligence, attention, and self-control. They become intelligence agents, training themselves to become ever more sensitive to ripples within juridical and disciplinary systems, turning the traces of textuality detected into actionable intelligence to be supplied to infrastructures of the center. The right kind of intelligence will constrain the operations of the center, first of all by introducing the same distinction within governing institutions as you have drawn within the broader society, between those absorbed in the cults of throwing all who gesture toward centrality in the flame and those building filters selecting for occupants of the center who will select their successors.

It's good to be able to move in and out of those tele-screenic-scenes—to move from treating some “iconic” movie character as state propaganda, as a triviality, as an exaggerated focal point on which everything depends and upon which everyone must have an absolutely clear position, etc. This showcases new modes of literacy, including “media literacy,” makes the more mobile self attractive, and elicits data that make it possible to explore further

anomalies within ritual, juridical and disciplinary arenas. These various scenes at scale and at a distance presuppose the Big Scene (that everyone can see the linear progress connecting your political party, your favorite movie franchise, the pop singer you're "obsessed" with, etc.) but mostly break it up. Narrative produced within the Hollywood entertainment industry and the DC political industry don't map onto one another anymore, and when attempts are made to have them do so the seams always show and can be shown upon some para-scene. What it is imperative to resist, however mobile your scenic operations, is the desire to destroy, engulf, incinerate, the figure you see at the center. War, sure, if you are cognizant of the ritual, juridical and disciplinary implications of war-making and can mobilize the resources—but war is something different than the addiction to constant turnover at the center, replacing one hate/worship/dominating figure with another. A mark of the new officer class is that it will restore the proper relation between ritual, juridical and disciplinary (which is also the order of ostensive, imperative and declarative)—this will in itself call for ruthlessness and will be sufficient in addressing all the degeneration, dysfunction, subversion, etc., you see all around you. I propose the originary event as the model of ritual, to be fitted to all scenes, at whatever scale and across whatever distances. You will all, sooner or later, see the "utility" of placing the deferral of violence at the center.

Every new ritual (which, again, also means “economic”) order is to some extent predicated upon disowning and incorporating elements of the preceding ritual order—here, as elsewhere, the Hebrew Bible provides us with an enormously rich model. A ritual order replacing one that places the figure of the consumer and her marginal utility at its center (the consumer is the target of the advertising that all the data collection feeds into, the consumer must be prepped, the consumer is processed—at times sacrificed—through the financial system) would best put the prospective team member who will reveal the previously unseen hole in your team at the center. In other words, the entire system, from production through consumption, including all its celebrations, pedagogies and commemorations, should be predicated on making a space for he who will make the space you are making. Every team within the teaming order is following up on the implications of its latest task into the formulation of the next one and is therefore always breeding and recruiting, which means being on the look-out for someone without yet knowing who he is or what he looks like. This is part of what I’ve been calling open-source messianism. If resources are now deployed in such a way as to minimize the risk that you nevertheless want to be rewarded for (as you inflate the future earnings to be discounted against the value of your assets), resources should instead be deployed so maximize the likelihood of arrival of the unknown indispensable. Teams would make a case to other teams with whom they engage in regular transactions both that they are best able to supply the team on a scene that will

maximize that likelihood, and that others should do the same to support the space each team builds to welcome that unknown indispensable. This is an “economics,” i.e., a tributary relation to the center. Part of the value of this conception is that to maintain it you would also have to maintain an appropriately ritualized horror at the entire apparatus of the turnover center that will have been overturned at such expense and with the acquisition of a vast wealth of anthropological knowledge.

2 Comments



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Clear headed. I like the way you're framing yourself, here.



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Collapse



1 reply by Dennis Bouvard

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