

Introduction

Inspired by the 2009 McGill-CREOR Conference on Performing Self and Community: Ritual and Ritual practice, we decided to produce a special volume illuminating important scholarship undertaken today on this topic. The problematic was more specifically devoted to the exploration of “new perspectives” in ritual theory and practice. Such a task is by no means limited to religious studies alone and is often important in other fields. Thus the conference and the volume share the interdisciplinary nature that ritual studies in contemporary scholarship has become. Concerning what is in store for our reader, *Arc* has made an effort to furnish the issue with a variety of topics and orientations.

So the question arises, what does scholarship on ritual have to say in the 21st Century? There are a variety of ways one can respond to this. This volume has responded in at least (but not limited to) four distinct ways. The scholars of this volume have provided: new theories of ritual, which help us to look at the phenomena of ritual with fresh eyes; new topics, certain scholars have found new discourses where there is a need for ritual study and further investigation; new issues in ritual, some of the authors are pointing out new ways to think about/through ritual; and new applications, ritual and ritual theory are not exclusive to religious studies, but can be used and appropriated to understand and facilitate other worlds beyond academia.

The first section, articles submitted by our invited scholars, Steven Engler, Barry Stephenson and Sarah F Haynes have provided us with an important contribution from their scholarly corpus and have written on important issues currently under discussion in ritual/religious studies.

Engler, who was the keynote speaker for the conference, contributes by providing his important work on Brazilian spirit possession and theory of ritual. Highlighting the problems and difficulties with applying ritual theory generally he advocates for a context specific approach. This approach pays respect to the relationship between data and theory. His particular results and conclusions testify to this approach. Abandoning preconceived understandings of ritual he is able to seize on the important relation between Brazilian spirit possession and secular activities in Brazil. Particularly

interesting is the problem Engler realizes when observing spirit possession, namely that its experience is determined by the perspective the observers situate themselves within.

Stephenson writes about the festivity surrounding Martin Luther. He provides some ethnographic work, but of a new fashion. Taking his cue from film he not only gives us a salient description of the festival (as he sought to do) but also provides an argument for the importance of film in ritual studies. Not just used as a mundane medium, but rather beyond mere data collection, a scholar can use film to “re-create” and (en)frame a particular environment. Film, Stephenson argues, is universally transcultural and requires no ability to read texts, rather the filmographer can choose to highlight certain aspects of the ritual, attempting to capture the ‘lower-senses,’ the smells (the stench!), the rawness of ritual experience.

The conjunction between the ritual of “A Beer for Martin” and Matthieu Sabourin (in this volume) is palpable. Both scholars address the conjunction between food, flesh and performance ritual. The frenzied festivity described by Stephenson parallels the chaotic excitement in Sabourin’s performance piece, “Post-Party Machine” (189). Interestingly, both attempt to address the issue of film/performance and its ability to convey the ritual experience in a more reflexive and “gritty” fashion.

Haynes discusses in her article the ritual of translating Tibetan Buddhist texts. She advocates that such a task is particularly difficult due to the multi-dimensionality of Tibetan literature. She discusses the multiplicity of aspects involved with the translation of Tibetan texts which problematize the “standard” hermeneutical approach, indicating the need for a more nuanced approach. She proposes a performative reading of the Tibetan texts. This, Haynes argues, preserves not the clarity of the text, but the *obscurity* of the text. The coded-language remains intact and one can distinguish the difference between implicit and explicit meaning. Traditional scholarship deals too often with explicit meaning, and rarely attunes itself to the “messiness” involved in translation. Questions regarding text and authority lead to the interesting idea that a text transmits its “meaning” more appropriately in certain contexts when the “errors” of translation are left to be and the meaninglessness of the statements due to mistranslation are affirmed.

Next, we have contributions from the greater academic community, those being, Mark S. M. Scott, Scott Halse and Michael Caligiuri.

Scott's article looks at mourning rituals, a field of discourse that has gone under-theorized in scholarship. His article showcases the involvement of ritual in the grieving process, illustrating how ritual benefits discourses outside academia. Scott discusses further the importance ritual has for the grieving, due to its transformative powers when understood in the subjunctive. Ritual is far from that which "smoothes" over, but is rather a new creation that affirms and attempts to reconstitute the world of a subject within the given ruptures. Thus ritual is not seen as a final, but rather as a temporary solution. Scott calls our attention to the importance of calling grieving a process, in line with the understanding of COPING, in order to grasp the latent power in mourning rituals. Scott's article is an important contribution as we begin to glimpse the transformative power in ritual that is available to us in our darkest hour of need. When reality as we know it has shattered, ritual provides the space for us to come to grips with the rupture and create our lives anew.

Halse provides us with a perspective not often discussed in a religious studies context concerning ritual: biology. Though the word reeks of reductionism, Halse warns us that we cannot jump to conclusions. There is a lot to gain from biological perspectives and a lot that studies on ritual can learn from the reductionism of various biologists and thinkers. What's important to consider for Halse, is what *kind* of reductionism. Halse's article examines areas of intersection with ritual and biology. The fact that there appears to be a difference in human rituals, as opposed to the rituals of animals, is important for religious studies scholars to understand for their work. By adopting Bernard Lonergan as the figure whose notions of human development can help us situate these reductions, we become appreciative of a critical realist perspective and the weight it has for ritual. If we can not access what is "out" there without going through the brain, what does this mean for the study or contemplation of ritual? Halse's understanding of Lonergan's positions on emergence and integration as higher levels of development helps us to realize the importance of asking questions concerning the biology of ritual and what it means for our larger epistemic frameworks. Halse's final thoughts implicate ritual as that which constitutes the sacred. Ramifications of this conclusion are particularly important in light of the impact this can have on the understanding of the human condition.

Caligiuri introduces the reader to a fascinating new field of ritual studies on-line. His article is the exploration and study into the presence of rituals found in on-line virtual communities. What is revealed through Caligiuri's analysis is the breakdown of traditional categories in which ritual previously functioned in. What happens when ritualistic activity becomes a hobby? Do rituals that appear in the virtual world have less credibility than ones in the real world? If we grant the idea that rituals *can* function in the virtual world, what does or does not differentiate "artificial" rituals from "real" ones? And if there is no distinction what does this mean for how we understand ritual? Caligiuri presents a dimension not experienced before in ritual studies that of the virtual ritual study. Can what transpires in the online world become a source of critique for the world "off-line"?

Lastly, *Arc* is honoured to publish some of the articles presented at the conference. These papers are some of the most intriguing and exciting forms of scholarship on ritual being conducted by graduate students and young scholars of various disciplines. We are happy to present articles from Nick Scott, Emma M. Brodeur, Joseph Blankholm, Christina Reimer, Matthieu Sabourin, Marissa Figlarz and Nigel Kumar.

Scott's article on automobility and sacred ritual provides a fascinating glimpse into the convergence between the sacred and the secular. Of important note is the notion of "being-moving" a new category that religious ritual has yet to deal with. Though there are ritual studies on pilgrimages and other "religious" modes of journeying, Scott provides us with the problem posed by automobility and just how vital it is to the religious world view when one takes into consideration the concrete presence it holds in modern society. He cites, Bruno Latour who explains, "mediators transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or elements they are supposed to carry. . . . Their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time."¹ If automobility has become such a mediator in our culture, notions of both religious ritual and the secular world are radically altered.

Brodeur's work provides a glimpse into a world long passed over by contemporary understanding, that being anti-ritual rhetoric. She illuminates some neglected definitions of ritual as being "thoughtless action," which had

1. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.

ideological uses for the emerging field of medical science. Her article calls for a re-examination of what ritual is and why early anatomical science held firm to anti-ritual rhetoric and continued to dichotomize itself against ritual. Her call is to urge scholars to engage in cross-disciplinary action to prevent the labeling or mislabeling of something as ritual or not ritual. Arguing that the scholarship behind closed doors is over, we need to reinvestigate one of the earliest movements that continually defined itself as *not* ritual to understand how the medical sciences evolved to be hostile to ritual today.

Sabourin's article explores the important dynamic between food and sex in performance. As an artist himself, he provides an articulation of his own art projects and the importance they hold for theories on ritual. The close proximity with the destructive and creative energies of sexuality co-mingled with the world of both discourse and food presents an interesting fusion that evokes the "messiness" involved in the "everyday" rituals of performance art. He continually plays with the first expectations of his audience and then progressively unravels and elaborates the important deception and unveiling taking place. Sabourin's analysis holds the most promise for ritual theory in that the paper is a continual affirmation and reaffirmation of "stuff," the bodily matter that is involved in our various discourses of creativity and consumption. His ability to break readers out of their expectation and glimpse a "reality" that is continually at play within our edible economies. Yet the readers only witnesses this through the clever and intelligent examples and explanations of performance rituals.

Blankholm assesses the importance of ritual performance of "boundaries" in the Jehovah Witness movement. He provides ethnographic research and illustrates many rituals found in the Jehovah Witness movement. Most important is the dual relationship these rituals have with Witnesses and the rest of society: Blankholm shows that the Witness' life is set up in configuration of constant affirmation of the interior of the community being the "Truth" and those who do not have access to this intimacy as being of "the World". We are pressed with the importance of seeing that the same ritual can have multiple intentions directed to various communities at the same time.

Reimer presents us with her research on the Purity ball an emerging phenomenon in North America. Despite the appearance of this ritual as being another rite of passage similar to the Jewish Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Reimer advocates that the ritual of the Purity Ball is a negative rite. Through this,

she suggests that sometimes one has to critically examine what is transpiring in such rituals. The growing trends on which Reimer elaborates, engages scholarship to focus on the emerging realities in our own backyards and to investigate what such movements mean for sexuality, growing up and the power that paternal authority has over the lives of adolescents.

Figlarz presents a portion of her ethnographic research in her discussion concerning the importance of the role of ritual remarriage in various aspects of Indian culture. She provides not only ground level evidence for her claims, but also discusses the theoretical aspects that take place in regards to this ritual remarriage. Highlighting the importance of recognizing the power dynamic that is continually at play and shifting in these ritual remarriages. Figlarz provides an interesting argument concerning the origin and reasoning behind these ritual remarriages which hold promise for scholarly debate and discussion.

Kumar introduces us to the ideas of S. N. Balagangadhara who presents the western world of scholarship with a problem. The convenient adoption of ritual as a category of religion, despite the emergence of secular ritual and animal rituals (as discussed in Halse's article) presents religious studies with an important challenge: Why continue to affirm rituals are a sub-category of religion? Kumar prompts the reader to think through this question by moving through the thought of Balagangadhara and introducing the notion of "configurations of learning" which have gone largely unexamined by religious scholars. Introducing the problem of cultural and educational leanings in the observer, Kumar provides a powerful critique of how religious scholars in the West understand ritual. In the end he advocates for the sake of ritual, asking that it be "liberated" from the confines of religion.

Despite the various 'assortment' of articles there are many shared concerns and themes that are evoked throughout the journal.

In the tradition of Umberto Eco, texts talk amongst themselves and we encourage the reader to read not just the articles pertaining to their field, but to inquire into those outside one's familiarity to gain the most of our composition. The articles dialogue among themselves, some respond, some challenge and others pose questions to one another. It is the task of the reader to leap into the conversation and witness the important emerging interests in the contemporary study of ritual.